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Encounters with the Prophet: Ivan Pavlov, Serafima Karchevskaia, and “Our Dostoevsky”

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In his biography of Dostoevsky, Joseph Frank suggests that the writer’s distinctive talent resided in his integration of larger ideological and cultural issues into the lives of his protagonists without reducing his stories to mere allegories or his characters to simple stereotypes. For Frank, this quality of “felt thought” lent a distinctive quality to Dostoevsky’s fiction.¹

This was certainly true for the two protagonists of my story, who identified closely with characters in Dostoevsky’s novels and grappled by way of those characters, both through their engagement with the author as writer, person, and symbol; and through their own lives, self-definition, and relationship. One was a man, one a woman; one an atheist, the other a fervent believer. Both were carried by the tides of their time to St. Petersburg, where they married, and one of them, physiologist Ivan Pavlov, became famous (so the other, Serafima

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1 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), xv, 477.

Karchevskaia, destroyed most of her papers to preserve her privacy *from* posterity).

Dostoevsky spoke deliberately to people like Ivan and Serafima, advocating passionately for religious faith (which he insisted was the only basis for a reliable morality), the wisdom of the folk, and Russia's unique historical mission—and so against the secularism and scientism of the “people of the 1860s” (*shestidesiatniki*). His attitude toward the populists of the 1870s was more complex, but, to the degree they shared the *shestidesiatniki*'s values, also quite critical. In the second half of the 1870s he acquired the reputation of a principled and profoundly Russian moralist, a prophet, in disorienting times—and many people of various political hues (particularly, it seems, women) corresponded with him about their personal travails, even appearing at his apartment seeking spiritual counsel.²

Let me set the stage for our protagonists' interaction with Dostoevsky by sketching the life trajectories that brought each to his door.

Ivan Pavlov was born in Riazan in 1849, the eldest son of a priest in a family whose clerical service (along both paternal and maternal lines) stretched back four generations to the time of Peter the Great. He imbibed Eastern Orthodoxy at home, in his father's church, and at the local seminary. There he learned a routinized approach to life in order to balance body and spirit, along with the certainties of faith and the moral personality of one who governed himself and approached God through conscience and the quest for virtue. As the seminary curriculum put it, conscience was the “expression of [God's] moral law, written upon our hearts”; and the conscientious Christian enacted “the moral nature of man, his special moral virtues and obligations [*dostoinstvo*] and calling.” At the seminary, in the only formal course Pavlov ever took on psychology, this doctrine was explicated through the anatomical, physiological, and ultimately mysterious relations between body and spirit.³

2 On Dostoevsky's visitors, see, for example, Igor Volgin, *Poslednii god Dostoevskogo: Istoricheskie zapiski*, 4th ed. (Moscow: ACT Zebra E., 2010), 393.

3 On Pavlov's early years, see Daniel P. Todes, *Ivan Pavlov: A Russian Life in Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17–29. For seminary doctrine on conscience and psychology, see the published text and detailed course notes of Pavlov's instructor: N. F. Glebov, *Psikhologiia* (Riazan: Tip. Gub. Pravl., 1863), and Gosurdarstvennyi Arkhiv Riazanskoi Oblasti, *fond 1280 opis' 1 delo 412* (unpaginated file).

Like many youth of his generation, Pavlov was influenced by the profound changes in Russian society in the 1860s and by the essays of the *shestidesiatniki*, particularly his favorite author, Dmitrii Pisarev, to reject religion for science and modernization. Breaking bitterly with his father, he quit the seminary and headed for the sparkling center of Russian science, St. Petersburg University. There he studied physiology with the brilliant and politically reactionary experimental physiologist Il'ia Tsion. In an unforeseeable calamity for Pavlov, however, student demonstrators brought Tsion's career to an abrupt end in 1875, casting his protégé into the professional wilderness. He is struggling, mentor-less, with his doctoral research when our story begins in 1879.⁴

The values of one's early years are not easily—and perhaps never completely—cast off, and Pavlov's letters of the time show him struggling earnestly to replace religious sources of certainty with those of his new secular faith. He sought to replace the omniscience and wisdom of God with a knowledge of equally deterministic natural law, and the soul's aspiration to godliness—and God's inevitable judgment after death—with a firm and systematic secular sense of virtue, of *dostoinstvo* ("moral obligations"). Two other lifelong keywords, the negative *sluchainost'* ("chance, randomness") and the positive *pravil'nost'* ("regularity, lawfulness"), captured that struggle—the horror of chance and the unforeseen and his quest to overcome them with the certainties of personal morality, a highly structured daily schedule, and scientific law.

Six years younger than Pavlov, Serafima Karchevskaia grew up in a close, devoutly religious family in the Crimean port city of Berdiansk. Her adored father, a naval officer, died when she was young, and in his memory she thereafter had intimates address her as he had, as "Sara." The swiftly changing cultural currents of reform-era Russia influenced her very differently than they had Ivan. Serafima came of age after Karakozov's fateful shot at the tsar and after the suppression of Ivan's favorite journals, when Lavrov and Mikhailovsky were expounding the populist doctrines that would dominate the 1870s. The populists, too, believed in science and positive knowledge—materialism and anticlericalism remained in vogue among the vanguard youth—but they emphasized the importance of individual conscience and rejected as elitist the *shestidesiatniki's* single-minded scientism. Privileged, educated youth in an

4 Todes, *Pavlov*, 30–58.

impoverished country, they insisted, must discharge their moral debt to the folk by helping to enlighten the peasantry and relieve their suffering.

Like many of her peers, Serafima never warmed to Pisarev, and she remained deeply religious. Progressive youth of her generation shared with Ivan's a commitment to women's liberation, and, against her mother's wishes, she traveled to St. Petersburg in the fall of 1877 to enroll in the pedagogical courses at the city's first women's gymnasium. Lacking intellectual self-confidence and possessed of decidedly moderate instincts, she never rejected the traditional model of womanhood exemplified by her mother, but she also wanted to live life on a larger canvas and to discharge her moral debt by teaching peasants how to read. In St. Petersburg's student circles, her relative cultural conservatism set her apart. Offended by the young men's "very crude attitudes toward us young girls," she was puzzled when one medical student referred to the girls as "common property" and was repelled when a sophisticate explained what that meant. Most difficult and isolating was the atheism of many of her fellow students. "I fell into a whirlpool of nonbelievers," she later recalled, and, considering herself less intelligent than many of them, she sought reassurance in prayer at St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral.

Among those aggressive atheists was Ivan Pavlov, whom she met in 1878 through a mutual friend. Shortly thereafter, their circles merged into a "Society of Cheap Apartments" that enjoyed the city's beauty and cultural offerings as best they could on a tight budget. Ivan wooed her awkwardly but ardently. By March 1880 the couple could not avoid contemplating their future, since Serafima would soon be completing her studies and returning home.⁵

Dostoevsky was at this time intervening forcefully in the pressing ideological, political, and spiritual issues of the day in his *Diary of a Writer* and his novels *The Adolescent* and, especially, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Ivan and Serafima read and discussed when it was serialized in *Russkii vestnik*. "Our Dostoevsky," as Pavlov referred to him, provided a mutually respected point of reference as they grappled with their feelings and beliefs about a set of related, sensitive subjects that was very important for them as a couple headed, perhaps,

5 For Serafima's early years, see Todes, *Pavlov*, 72–74; on their courtship, *ibid.*, 74–81. The citation concerning the "whirlpool" is from her manuscript autobiography: S. V. Pavlova, *Vospominaniia*, at the St. Petersburg filial of the Russian Archive of Sciences (ARAN), *fond 259 opis' 1 delo 169, list 396*. Such archival locations are given below as ARAN 259.1.169: 96.

for marriage—faith and religion, reason and science, intimacy and morality. For Serafima, Dostoevsky provided a touchstone, an authoritative and reputable source of support for her as an intimidated believer. For Ivan, he provided both a powerful expression of the emotional and intellectual issues with which he was grappling and also the terms in which he needed to justify himself to Serafima as a reliably good man.⁶

We cannot know when they first discussed Dostoevsky, but it was apparently the deep personal resonance for both of them of *The Adolescent* that brought him to the center of their emotional lives. Ivan first referred to that novel in the “journal” with which he courted Serafima from afar during the summer of 1879. In one of his essays for it, “The Critical Period in the Life of a Rational Person,” he self-confidently preached the gospel of systematic scientific work as a bridge across the treacherous waters of the “critical period” between youth and adulthood, as a means of preserving youthful intellectual pleasures and passions in a mature form that facilitated continued intellectual development while contributing meaningfully to knowledge and society. A shorter second essay provided an implicit counterpoint to “The Critical Period,” revealing himself to Serafima as introspective and chronically uncertain. She had apparently shared her own self-doubts in earlier letters, and he now confided that he, too, was a *samoed*—“a person who consumes himself.” “One part of him eats, the other is eaten.” He had just finished Dostoevsky’s *The Adolescent*, an “enormous work” featuring just such a protagonist. Generalizing freely from his own experience (as he would throughout his life), Ivan explained that in the *samoed*, thoughts and wishes constantly opposed one another, every idea elicited a contrary one, every joy the realization that this result of mere chance (*sluchainost’*) would inevitably be followed by equally random misfortune. When the *samoed* dared to believe something—in his work, about people, or life—he immediately began reflexively to undermine that belief through counterarguments and a compulsive recognition of the paucity of his knowledge: “He devours his happiness, weakens his working idea.”

“What creates such people?” he wondered. “Nature, organization? Perhaps.” But those were the province of some future physiology and psychology.

6 Pavlov refers to “our Dostoevsky” in a letter of [February] 3, [1881], published in A. D. Nozdrachev, E. L. Poliakov, K. N. Zelenin et al., eds., *I. P. Pavlov: Pervyi nobelevskii laureat Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Gumanistika, 2004), 2:161.

Clearly, though, the *samoed's* plight was rooted in the hypocrisy of contemporary life, in which children were taught to read and listen carefully and to love wisdom, but then were chastened for speaking “an unacceptable truth.” Similar experiences throughout life reinforced the torturous inner world of the adult *samoed*, “undermining his every joy, his every idea.”⁷

In March 1880, Serafima helped organize a literary evening in which Turgenev and Dostoevsky were featured to raise money for needy students. Dostoevsky read a passage from *The Adolescent* in which the mother of an adolescent girl, Olya, describes their travails as pious new arrivals of meager means in St. Petersburg and the callous, offensive, and exploitative encounters that led to her sensitive daughter's suicide. Serafima later recalled that when “The Prophet” spoke, “his face was completely transformed, his eyes flashed with lightning, which burned the hearts of people, and his face shined with the inspiration of a Higher power!” Identifying with Olya and so deeply moved by the writer's powerful, empathetic portrayal of her own emotional turmoil, she determined to confide in him.⁸

Serafima would always refer to the encounters that followed as “the most important moment in my religious life.”⁹ She told the story this way in her manuscript autobiography:

Shortly after the literary evening, she and two other deputies visited Dostoevsky's apartment to thank him. The author greeted them warmly and, to mark the occasion, gave each his photograph, which he inscribed in common Russian fashion with the recipient's first name and patronymic. When Serafima's turn came and she supplied the name by which her intimates addressed her, however, the author turned cold. “He looked at me unkindly” and wrote, not the expected “To Sara Vasil'evna,” but rather the curt “To Miss Karchevskaia.”¹⁰

7 Ivan Pavlov, *Popalsia: Ezhenedel'noe izdanie sluchainogo proiskhozhdeniia, neopredelenogo napravleniia, s trudno predvidimoiu budushchnostiu* [1879], in ARAN 259.2.1299: 29–31.

8 On this event, see *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva F. M. Dostoevskogo 1821–1881* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 1995), 3:392. Serafima's various accounts of these encounters differ slightly. I am using here the autobiographical drafts in S. V. Pavlova, *Detskie rasskazy, skazki, fragmenty*, ARAN 259.1.171: 250–251, 261–267. For the passage that so moved her, see Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 171–77 (pt. 1, chap. 9, sec. 5).

9 Draft letter from Serafima Pavlova to [Evgeniia Sikorskaia], ARAN 259.1.171: 254.

10 This inscribed photograph remains among her papers at the Memorial'nyi Muzei-Kvartira akademika I. P. Pavlova in St. Petersburg.

Mystified by the bad impression she had somehow made, but determined to consult him about her spiritual struggles, she mustered her courage and returned to his apartment. He again rebuffed her coldly. Returning yet again, she was ushered to his study, where the writer “politely but dryly invited me to sit.” Launching into a confession of her crisis of faith, she discovered the reason for his hostility: “When I said that I had been raised in a religious, Eastern Orthodox family, Fyodor Mikhailovich exclaimed, ‘Eastern Orthodox? Then why are you named Sara?’” When she explained, he sprang from his seat “grabbed me by both hands and said: ‘How could you exchange such a marvelous, pure Orthodox name for a Yid name!’ After this clarification his face was transformed and his attitude toward me became gentle and attentive.”

Relieved to be on the right side of The Prophet’s anti-Semitism, she poured her heart out and “for the first time in my life understood my own religious beliefs.” She confessed her dislike of the Old Testament—“the history of a foreign and unlikable people [and its] ... cruel, vengeful God”; explained her belief in “Jesus Christ for himself ... for his complete gentleness and humility, full of the fire of truth [and] unlimited love”; and then raised her main problem: Was she guilty of excessive pride? Was she right to insist upon her religious faith in the face of so many intelligent critics?

This, as she surely knew, was music to Dostoevsky’s ears. He encouraged her to stand her ground and assured her that, although she might waver temporarily amid life’s confusions, she would “always walk the radiant road of faith.” Complimenting her on her “truly Russian” attitude toward the Bible, he invited her to return. During their final meeting, he explained that uncertainty was necessary to true faith; thereafter, she writes, “I ceased fearing my doubts.”¹¹

So goes the narrative in her autobiography. A very private person, she apparently shared little of the content of these sessions even with her intimates (including Pavlov). Responding decades later to a query from her sister, she added a detail that, perhaps—to whatever extent we can read between the lines of a long-distant memory—reveals another dimension of that encounter:

As for “The Grand Inquisitor,” I lived through an entire drama while seated across from F. M. and hungrily catching his words; only then did I understand the great significance for divine faith of the struggle with doubts. Many who believe in the power of the intellect often fall into errors, making

11 Pavlova, *Detskie rasskazy*, 261–67.

compromises with their conscience, and only a few exceptional people who believe only in reason and the power of science remain exalted people; and the purity of their life resembles that of the sons of God, and God will take them to Himself, since, despite their lack of faith, by their deeds they were creations of His will! It is truly so.¹²

Serafima seems here to allude to a question she posed to Dostoevsky, not about her own crisis of faith, but about that of her ardent suitor, Ivan Pavlov. She attributed her own vacillations to a lack of self-confidence and intelligence, not to any great belief in reason and science; nor would she have identified with the corrosive, sophisticated logic of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. That, rather, was the language of Ivan Pavlov. So, she may be alluding here to another very personal question that she posed to Dostoevsky, or simply reflected upon in his presence: If, as he insisted, faith in God and immortality was necessary to a reliable morality, could a young atheist prove dependably good and moral—a suitable life companion for an Orthodox believer? If so, Dostoevsky's affirmative response would have proven profoundly reassuring and memorable.

The couple became engaged shortly thereafter, but they postponed their marriage for a year so he could complete his doctoral thesis, while she taught peasants in the countryside. In an intense correspondence during their separation, they discussed the issues of faith, reason, science, morality, and intimacy in the context of Dostoevsky's work, especially *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Since Serafima destroyed her half of the correspondence after her husband's death, we have only the faint echo of her voice in his replies.)

In several letters, Pavlov confessed to identifying uncomfortably with Ivan Karamazov, whose harsh rationality and inability to make a religious leap of faith condemned him to nihilism, spiritual disintegration, and mental breakdown. (In at least two of her replies, Serafima clearly encouraged him to elaborate on this theme.) Ivan confided: "The more I read, the more uneasy my heart became. He bears a great resemblance to your tender and loving admirer." Karamazov's "basic nature, or at least his given state, is the same as mine. Obviously, this is a man of the intellect The mind, the mind alone has overthrown everything, reconstructed everything. . . . And the person was left wooden-headed, with a terrible coldness in the heart, with the sensation of a strange emptiness in his being." Reason brought Karamazov its rich satisfactions—"recall the Great

12 Pavlova, draft letter to [Sikorskaia], 254rev.

Inquisitor and such great flights of moral thought”—“yet what a [sorry] life” he led.¹³ Pavlov described his own plight by citing Karamazov’s confession that he would gladly surrender the pleasures of reason for the comforts of faith: “I would give away all this superstellar life, all the ranks and honors, simply to be transformed into the soul of a merchant’s wife weighing eighteen stone and set candles at God’s shrine.” Yet, as for Karamazov, a combination of his nature and life experiences rendered this impossible.¹⁴

Pavlov implicitly disagreed with Dostoevsky’s view that the basic problem was “the triumph of reason.” It resided, rather, in “our very nature” and so raised an important challenge that was unfortunately beyond the limitations of currently “paltry science”—understanding “the human type.”¹⁵ Human psychology constituted “one of the last secrets of life, the secret of the manner in which nature, developing by strict, unchangeable laws, came in the form of man to be conscious of itself”—and, to some extent, free.¹⁶ Returning to this subject a few weeks later in another reflection about *Brothers Karamazov*, he added: “Where is the science of human life? Not even a trace of it exists. It will, of course, but not soon, not soon.”¹⁷

In the same spirit, he took up throughout his letters Dostoevsky’s notion that no reliable morality was possible without religious faith. “I myself do not believe in god,”¹⁸ he reminded Serafima, but the religious language of his letters both captured his own struggle for secular replacements and reassured her that he shared her basic values and goals. “Unshrinking rationality and a commitment to truth,” he wrote, was the basis of his struggle for personal virtue, for *dostoinstvo* (“moral obligations”). “It is for me a kind of God, before whom I reveal everything, before whom I discard wretched worldly vanity.”¹⁹ A disciplined approach to scientific research could provide both spiritual satisfaction and (Dostoevsky

13 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia [October] 7, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1 [unpaginated file].

14 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, [September] 17, [1880], and [September] 13, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1. In the novel, not Karamazov himself but his creation, the “gentleman visitor” (the devil), makes this statement.

15 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, [October] 7, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1.

16 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, [September] 28, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1.

17 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, [October] 7, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1.

18 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, Wednesday, [September] 11, [1880], in Nozdrachev et al., *I. P. Pavlov*, 116.

19 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, Saturday, [September] 20, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1.

notwithstanding) a robust, ethical connection to other people. One must work by a strict schedule with a definite plan and constantly struggle, as did a believer, “with circumstances and with one’s own weaknesses.” The usefulness of scientific research, and its interest to others, guaranteed that it was “vital”—that is, it joined the researcher to a community and served humanity. Thus, it was both moral and a proof against nihilism.²⁰

When Dostoevsky died in January 1881, Pavlov hurried to his apartment to pay his respects, and he returned the next morning to join the mourners who accompanied the writer’s coffin to the Alexander-Nevskii Lavra. Describing all this to Serafima, he observed that Dostoevsky’s spiritual exemplar, Aleksei Karamazov, had become a model for youth. A few days later he reported on the eulogies, dwelling upon Suvorin’s surprising revelation that Dostoevsky had planned a sequel to *Brothers Karamazov* in which Aleksei becomes, as Pavlov put it, a “Russian socialist,” a revolutionary of a new type, drawing upon uniquely Russian traditions: “Did you think, my dear, that our Dostoevsky could become such a socialist, a radical!” He concluded that “so many people at his grave decided, pledged, to be better, to resemble him. As have we, my dear Sara!”²¹

Serafima’s inner life thereafter is largely hidden from us, but she invoked Dostoevsky frequently over the next six decades as a reassuring touchstone. When her first child died, she blamed her wavering faith and drew comfort from the writer’s prophecy that she would thereafter walk the true path. His photo adorned her wall alongside those of her children, and his wisdom played a central role in the autobiographical narrative she composed from the 1920s through the 1940s. Few of her letters survive, but among them is this passage to close friends during Easter 1931: “Christ has Arisen. For me, in these words resides our entire Orthodox faith, which became infinitely dear to me after my instructive conversations with Dostoevsky . . . How he understood the human soul and penetrated the dark, unconscious depths.”²²

20 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, Wednesday, 8 a.m., [September] 17, [1880], and Friday, [October] 3, [1880], in ARAN 259.2.1300/1.

21 Ivan Pavlov to Serafima Karchevskaia, [January] 31, [February] 1, and [February] 3, 1881, in Nozdrachev et al., *I. P. Pavlov*, 156–61 (“Russian socialist” on 160; “As have we” on 161). Volgin devotes much of his *Poslednii god Dostoevskogo* to a discussion of Dostoevsky’s attitudes that makes Suvorin’s revelation quite plausible.

22 Serafima Pavlova to Boris Babkin, March 29 [1931?], in 390/22/3/8, Osler Library Archive Collections, McGill University, Montreal.

Pavlov struggled throughout his adult life—both in and outside the laboratory—with the issues highlighted in his encounter with Dostoevsky. His research on conditional reflexes, much misunderstood in the West, was an attempt to understand, not mere behaviors, but rather, as he put it, the mysteries of “the human type,” of “our consciousness and its torments.” For more than thirty years (1903–36) he sought to develop that “science of human life” that had seemed so necessary and so distant when he corresponded with Serafima in 1880—to understand the emotional and intellectual life of animals and humans, the sources and dynamics of personality and human nature. And, as he had in those same letters, he wondered how science might reconcile the seemingly contradictory truths that humans were subject to the determinism of natural law but remained responsible for their actions and, to some extent, free.²³ His attitude toward religion evolved over time. He remained always an atheist, but the militant anticlericalism of the young ex-seminarian gave way to an increasing appreciation of the cultural role of religion as an adaptive “defensive reflex” that protected humans from the harshness and uncertainty of life. He denounced the Bolshevik suppression of religion and even subsidized the local church near his science village at Koltushi.

His final days during the winter of 1935–36 found him grappling with the same set of issues as he had during his encounter with Dostoevsky more than a half century earlier. In an unfinished essay, he addressed the relationship of reason and science to religion and faith, of the grand issues concerning science and religion to personal morality, certainty, and the life well led. He even suggested tentatively and hopefully—in a distant echo of Suvorin’s reference to Aleksei’s transformation into a “Russian socialist” in Dostoevsky’s projected sequel to *Brothers Karamazov*—that, despite its grave crimes and blunders, a Bolshevism made more reasonable and humane by the growth of Russian scientific culture might become a genuine Russian contribution to Christianity’s “greatest of all human truths, the truth of the equality of all people.”²⁴

23 On the content and methodology of Pavlov’s scientific quest, see Todes, *Ivan Pavlov*, 287–302; on his view of free will, *ibid.*, 526–27, 790–91n50.

24 ARAN 259.1a.39: 30. For a discussion of this essay, see Todes, *Ivan Pavlov*, 717–22.