

# Money and the Russian Classics

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There are various ways to describe the type of society that developed, at least in America and Europe, over the last two centuries. One of the better known ones is the civilization of money. Different people, depending on their world view, can judge this fact differently: to deny it, however, is impossible. This is especially obvious now, when the most grandiose and stubborn attempt at liberating society from the power of money – allegedly in order to subordinate money to higher ideals – has ended in total failure.

Although the use of the word “money” here implies a more complex nexus of social phenomena (such as private property, capital, the free market, and buying and selling), money itself remains the most characteristic and clear expression of the essence of Western civilization in its fundamental economic aspect. Also, it is obvious that money plays a decisive role in social psychology.

Great writers express the social psychology of their period and nation, and the more important the writer the more marked the expression. Of course, different writers have expressed this reality in different forms and by different means. Moreover – consciously or unconsciously – each one chooses to highlight different aspects of social psychology. Still, the theme of money can be found in many of the most important works of world literature. It sometimes even takes center stage, since only by studying the role of money can an author penetrate into the life and soul of our civilization.

In terms of genre, the novel – as it developed in the nineteenth century throughout Europe – proved to be the artistic form best suited to take up the problem of money. Although the theme of money can of course be found in the comedies of Molière and Sheridan, we are more likely to think of the works of Balzac, Zola, Dickens and Theodore Dreiser when the question of money comes to mind. The social and artistic significance of these works is related to the way in which the authors treat the growth of “the world

of money," seen here as an objective historical process that is subject to a specific kind of artistic analysis. At the same time, the protest against this world of money is as old as its analysis, and it too is capable of giving rise to works of great artistic merit.

The classics of Russian literature date from the nineteenth century. Western European readers only began to show interest in Russian literature with Pushkin, and this interest reached its peak in the works Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekov.

The appearance and subsequent growth in importance of the theme of money in nineteenth-century Russian literature is closely linked to the social changes of the period, which themselves are a result and an aspect of the commercial revolution and early stages of the development of Russian capitalism. These changes came to Russia later than to Western Europe, and as a consequence there was no real development of the theme of money as a social phenomenon until the first half of the nineteenth century. Russian society of the nineteenth century was quite different from European society of the same period; or at least considerably more different than, for example, France was from Germany. During this period, the rather slippery idea of Russian national psychology played an especially important role in Russian literary works (an idea that resurfaces in the notorious notion of the "Russian soul," whatever meaning – often an ironic one – this expression might be endowed with). At the same time, Russian culture and literature of this period, perhaps more than at any other time – that is, more than in the eighteenth or twentieth centuries – was part of the stream of Western European civilization. It is within the context of this contradictory situation that we must base our analysis of the theme of money in Russian literature of the nineteenth century.

Although there are quite a few common traits between the Western European and Russian approach, the theme of money receives a somewhat different emphasis in Russian than in Western European literature. Although this generalization may be an oversimplification, I am tempted to define this difference along the following lines: Russian writers were less taken with what might be called the social structures and even social technology connected with the theme of money. In part this can be explained by the lack of development in Russia of these very capitalist structures; also, it may in part be a result of the specific characteristics of the above-mentioned "Russian soul." Russian writing of this period is marked especially by an interest in the psychological – one might

even call it the psychiatric – aspect of money (of course this characteristic can be found in Western European writing as well).

The evolution of Russian literature in the nineteenth century was extremely rapid. At the beginning of the century Russian literature was marked by both an archaic literary language and a lot of direct borrowing of literary forms and genres from Western Europe. Yet by the second half of the century Russian literature achieved real greatness; among its achievements were the heights it reached in socio-artistic analysis. In order to carry out a concrete analysis of the role of money in the classics of Russian literature, I have chosen three Russian authors of the nineteenth century whose work encompasses the period stretching from the 1820s to the 1880s. I am speaking of Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and Mikhail Saltykov, who wrote under the pseudonym of Shchedrin (1826–1889). I trust that the contemporary Western reader is well enough acquainted with the general characteristics of the works of these authors so that I can take up my subject directly.

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The sociological study of the works of Alexander Pushkin, which dates from the 1920's, clearly reflects the social concerns of Russia of that period. Indeed the Russian scholar Dmitri Blagoy entitled his 1929 study of Pushkin "The Sociology of Pushkin's Works." Sadly, the person and works of Pushkin suffered not a little at the hands of the purveyors of a vulgar application of the Marxist method: ignoring the extremely subtle and complex artistic texture of Pushkin's work, the authors of these books and articles sought only to uncover the class biases that he supposedly expressed. I can only hope that my own book, *Muza i Mamona. Sotsialno-ekonomicheskiye motivy u Pushkina (The Muse and Mammon. Socio-Economic Themes in the Works of Pushkin, 1989)*, has in some way remedied the situation; that is, freed the sociological analysis of Pushkin's works from a vulgar and primitive approach.

Pushkin's works reflect the way in which the educated Russian nobility of the 1820s and 1830's was influenced by both the philosophy and culture of the Enlightenment and by Adam Smith's political economy. Of course these two forces exhaust neither Western influences on him nor, more importantly, account for all the content of Pushkin's works. Pushkin, in a celebrated quote from his

"novel in verse," *Eugene Onegin* – a book that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher brought with her on one of her Kremlin visits – says of his young aristocratic hero that "our deep economist had his diploma in Adam Smith." Using the light tone characteristic of his youth, Pushkin expresses (in verse!) one of the fundamental truths of Smith's economic theory: gold (like money) does not play the pivotal role in the growth "of the wealth of nations"; that role is played by "a simple product," that is, the ceaseless production of basic material goods. This statement has been the subject of a significant amount of commentary, including one made by Marx in "The Critique of Political Economy." At the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, stands Vladimir Nabokov, who tried to uncover – in his own annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin* – the historico-cultural background of this line of verse. I of course cannot agree with everything he has to say on the subject; in particular, his statement that this line reveals the influence on Pushkin of the French physiocrats. But this disagreement is merely a matter of detail.

There are, in "Eugene Onegin," a host of other socio-historical allusions, many of which are connected with money. Among them is the question of "agrarian reforms." For Onegin – as a progressive landowner – this reform implies support for a change from the system of *barshchina* (in which serfs were compelled to provide labor on the landowner's property) to a form of cash payment (the so-called *obrok*). In the course of this discussion the names of such Western European thinkers as Jean-Baptiste Say, Jeremy Bentham, and Jacques Necker are mentioned. In other works Pushkin makes mention of the works and person of Madame de Staël.

Although "The Covetous Night," Pushkin's tragedy of Shakespearean depth, concerns intense passions and personalities, its plot revolves around the power of money, i.e., the phenomenon and pathology of the hoarding of money. Complex allusions link it with Molière's "The Miser" and Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." The characterization of Baron Philippe, whose life is reduced to the hoarding of a life-destroying treasure, is one of Pushkin's greatest achievements as a psychologist. Philippe is not only miserly but also proud and decisive; tormented by pangs of conscience, freakish in his half-madness, simultaneously an ascetic and a Sybarite. It is typical that the theme of money allows the writer to create such a character.

The action of "The Covetous Night" supposedly takes place in the Middle Ages, although Pushkin's depiction of the period is

rather conventional. The case is different in the short story "The Queen of Spades," which was published in 1834 (even those who have not read the story are probably familiar with its content thanks to Tchaikovsky's opera). Here the theme of money receives a more direct treatment and in a contemporary setting. The story's protagonist is a young army officer so obsessed with the idea of getting rich quick that he ends by committing a murder (although an involuntary one). He has often been compared with similar heroes, contemporary with Pushkin's, who appear in the novels of Balzac and Stendhal. The situation described by Pushkin also anticipates many aspects of Dostoevsky's novels. Indeed there are direct references to both "The Queen of Spades" and "The Covetous Night" in several of Dostoevsky's works.

Although Hermann, the protagonist of "The Queen of Spades," has the rank of nobleman and serves in a privileged regiment garrisoned in the capital, he is by origin (his father was a German citizen who entered the service of Russia) and by psychology closer to the middle class. While entreating the old countess to reveal to him the secret of the three cards (the key to quick money), he simultaneously – and openly – criticizes the extravagances and superficiality of her aristocratic descendants, who do not know how to use money the way it ought to be used – that is, as capital. Hermann says of himself: "I know the value of money," and in another place characterizes his defining traits as "calculation, moderation, and industriousness," which are, in some sense, the principles of the "Protestant ethic."

Just as in the Western European novels of the time, Hermann associates great wealth with power. Like Balzac's Rastignac, whose aim is to "conquer" Paris, so, apparently, it is Hermann's aim to "conquer Petersburg." Yet in "The Queen of Spades" and many other of Pushkin's works – and even in his correspondence – of the 1830s, we see the theme of money associated with another quality: that of freedom. Pushkin's dependence on the Czar's court and on Petersburg society – a dependence that, in the final analysis, was the cause of his ruin – had in large measure a material foundation: Pushkin was himself without wealth or a substantial income. This important fact of Pushkin's personal biography naturally influenced his art. Pushkin could see that in the new, commercial world only money could guarantee the independence and creative freedom necessary to both the poet and thinking individual.

Dostoevsky wrote his most important novels in the years between 1865 and 1880, a period that saw a rapid increase in the role of money in Russian society. This period also saw the application of Alexander the Second's reforms (serfdom was abolished in 1861), an intensive expansion of the railroads, the appearance of the first large stock companies, and the introduction of banks. Although these material and social factors form the historical background to Dostoevsky's novels, they play no direct role. None of his works, not even his journalistic writing, could be considered a description of post-reform Russia. In Dostoevsky the world is described from a humanistic, philosophical, and psychological point of view.

In order to understand Dostoevsky's view of money, we must first keep in mind his socio-political views. Dostoevsky was a severe critic both of West European capitalism and socialism. He favored a "third way" for Russian society, which was to be based on Christian ideals and the profoundly humane nature of the Russian people. He saw the embodiment of capitalism in the vulgar, soulless, and cruel French bourgeois; as for Socialism, he believed its ideals were best expressed in the idiotic utopias of Charles Fourier (with which, in his youth, Dostoevsky was taken) and – at home – in the terrorism of the Russian populists.

One of the most important themes in Dostoevsky's novels is the conflict between the lust for money, that is, the passionate desire for rapid enrichment, and conscience, the inner striving of the human being for the good. Dostoevsky shows how the lust for money is depraved and destructive, even when it is subjectively motivated by so-called higher aims. This theme and this conflict can take various forms and give rise to a dizzying variety of situations. This can be seen in such different novels as "The Idiot," "A Raw Youth," "Crime and Punishment," and "The Gambler." In fact it can be argued that Dostoevsky uses the theme of money as one of his most important tools for his profound analysis of the human soul (an analysis that in some sense anticipates twentieth-century psychoanalysis).

Pushkin's themes of "money and freedom" and "money and independence" crop up in Dostoevsky's work, although here they receive a sarcastic treatment. For instance, in his travel reminiscences, entitled "Winter Notes About Summer Impressions," Dostoevsky describes the bourgeois world in which a millionaire is

free to do as he pleases; however, Dostoevsky learns, without that million it's not he who is free to do as he pleases; it is the world that is free to do with him as it pleases. In short, Dostoevsky sees freedom as too spiritual and important a quality to be linked with the possession of money.

From the bourgeois point of view, the most obvious and "pure" manner of enrichment would seem to be by means of money lending (indeed here money grows by a spontaneous and so to speak mystical process). This theme of usury and the usurer appears in many of Dostoevsky's works. There are professional usurers, such as Luzhin (a philosophizing usurer) in "Crime and Punishment"; there are, so to speak, potential usurers, often dreamy and half-mad, like Ganya Ivolgin in "The Idiot." Rodion Raskolnikov's murder of the old pawnbroker – which is carried out for specifically "intellectual" reasons – is the central strand of the plot of the novel "Crime and Punishment." Also, although very far from the cynicism of Ganya in "The Idiot," Arkady, the young and sympathetically drawn character in "A Raw Youth," is equally obsessed with the idea of becoming a millionaire and thinks of usury as the most natural path to such riches. He even has vague thoughts of using the money to help people. The somewhat confused plot of this novel (probably not Dostoevsky's best one) contains an important theme: it shows how Arkady's youthful, half-delirious – although thankfully still innocent – desire collapses under the weight of events that reveal to him the real essence of humanity.

The theme of gambling (in this case: a roulette wheel at a German casino) is central to the novel "The Gambler." (As is well known, Dostoevsky himself was at one time a compulsive gambler.) The protagonist of this novel offers, so to speak, a condensed sociological portrait of the lust for fast money that can be observed at a gambling table. He asks: in what way is gambling worse than any other way of earning money, including trade?

It is interesting to note the important role played, in several of Dostoevsky's works, by the name Rothschild in connection with the themes of usury and rapid enrichment. The Rothschilds, of course, were a famous family of bankers and financiers, who played an important role in the economic and political life of Western Europe throughout the nineteenth century. In "The Idiot" Dostoevsky uses the term "King of the Jews" to designate Rothschild (he had in mind the head of the Parisian branch of the family, Baron James Rothschild), a humorous and grotesque label

first thought up by Heinrich Heine. In "A Raw Youth" Dostoevsky calls the concept of rapid enrichment and the use of wealth for power "the Rothschild idea."

In all probability Dostoevsky had only a vague idea about the actual financial operations of the Rothschilds and of the world of banks, paper transactions, and stock markets. More likely, the accumulation of wealth was associated, in his mind, with the gold-crammed trunks of the covetous knight. However, he sensed that Rothschild was the embodiment of a new, bourgeois type of wealth, and understood that the power of money held a clear advantage over the old system of wealth, as it was based on time-honored privileges and the possession of lands and people.

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Like Dostoevsky, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin came of age as a thinker and writer in the 1840's. Both men emerged under the powerful influence of the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, whose political ideas were similar to the socialists'. However, during the long reign of Alexander the Second (1855-1881), Dostoevsky and Shchedrin developed along widely divergent paths. To a large extent, Saltykov maintained his faith in the socialist ideals of his youth. Happily, this faith in no way hampered the development of his broad artistic talent. Although he did not sympathize with terrorist methods, he was nevertheless closely associated with the leaders of the movement of revolutionary populism. As a writer, Saltykov was an important innovator in terms of literary genres and styles. He created the Russian satirical novel, a form that not only allowed for, but in fact encouraged, the presence of pungent socio-political commentary. All these factors are relevant for an analysis of the theme of money in his works.

It is important also to mention that Saltykov, like Pushkin and Dostoevsky, not only wrote fiction and poetry but also was an experienced and capable social and political commentator who edited a monthly journal for many years. It was by this means that he expressed his socio-political views in a direct form.

It is known that Saltykov was interested in Marxism. Indeed in his satirical tale of 1885, "Neighbors," there is a hint of the direct influence on him of Marx's theory of capital and surplus value (evident in his depiction of the origin and increase of inequality in property ownership). However, Saltykov was more influenced by



the populist understanding of capitalism and of its particular development in Russia: this analysis denied the progressive nature of capitalist development and expressed revulsion at capitalism's negative effects both on the city and the countryside. Yet at the same time Saltykov was undoubtedly not in accord with the populist belief that Russia could avoid the capitalist road altogether.

Absorbed as he was in the specific events and problems of Russian life, Saltykov was of the opinion that his literary work would be of little interest to the West European reader. One of Saltykov's contemporaries reports that Saltykov said the following: "For the French I'm a seventeenth-century writer; the things I mock are no longer even a curiosity for them." And in part he was right – but only in part. It is true that the object of analysis of Saltykov's art was the social relations exhibited by late feudalism and early capitalism, which for his contemporary West European reader was indeed in the past. Yet, for this very reason, Saltykov's analysis throws into relief many of the specific characteristics of Russian life, which in turn can help us understand the events of twentieth-century Russia.

In his novel "The Golovlyovs," Saltykov described the fall of a landowning Russian noble family caused by its inability to adapt to the new conditions of economic life. Porfiry Golovlyov, whose nickname since childhood has been "Little Judas" and is the last representative of his clan, is an obsessive personality and an alcoholic: the only thing he is good at is usury. Himself ruined, he is out to ruin the neighboring peasants. Also, carried away by the incantatory magic of intricate calculations, he sits for hours trying to figure out how much money he would now have had if his mother had not taken for herself the hundred ruble gift given him at birth by his grandfather but instead had deposited it in the bank in his name. The possibility of transforming everything on his land into cash is but another product of his warped imagination: in fact the farm goes bankrupt.

Apparently Saltykov himself, a nobleman of ancient lineage, had no illusions about the economic future of his class. Still, he neither loved nor respected the rising Russian bourgeoisie and described, with caustic humor, its primitive greed and vulgarity, its cruelty, cowardice, and abject servility to the ruling power. Saltykov, who to some extent overlooked the positive traits of the Russian middle class, painted a collective portrait of a rather repugnant band of con men, rip-off artists, plunderers of the national patrimony and exploiters of the people. This Russian bourgeois is depicted as a

vulture by nature, ready to feed on anything, even the good, for the sake of a fast buck. This is not the image of the Western European bourgeois, who wins his place in society by dint of hard work and professionalism (although, as Saltykov venomously remarks, "not without some drinking of blood"). His Russian colleague makes his way by means of insolence, deception, and pay-offs; and he is even prepared to resort to crime if there's good chance he'll remain unpunished. From the foregoing – although Saltykov himself made no such exact statement – it can be inferred that the Russian bourgeoisie is not the class to which society at large ought to tie its hopes for a better future.

Saltykov's preferred object of satire was the Russian intelligentsia – all its bureaucrats, men of the free professions, professors and writers. It is thanks to Saltykov that the word "liberal" – which until this time had a completely positive connotation in the Russian language and, more importantly, in popular opinion – came to denote negative human and social qualities: cowardice, indecision, a lack of principle, etc.

It is no surprise that Saltykov became the favorite writer of the Russian Marxists. As early as 1897 one of them, Mikhail Olminsky, conceived a project of compiling "A Shchedrin Dictionary"; a vast collection of Saltykov's sayings on every possible aspect of social life. Especially appealing to the Marxists were Saltykov's characterizations of the leading classes and of "educated society." Recalling the period stretching from the 1890s through the first decade of the twentieth century, an early Marxist wrote: "His hate for so-called cultured society and for the liberals, his scorn for compromise, his merciless unmasking of all illusions about the possibility of harmonizing the various interests of society . . . all of that was understood and cherished by us. Through Saltykov's tales we entered a workers' world that was an illustration of Marx's teaching about the intransigence of class conflicts. . . ."

Unfortunately, many aspects of Saltykov's caricatured portrait of the Russian bourgeoisie corresponded to reality. The Russian bourgeoisie was young and inexperienced and therefore lacked the economic and political organization enjoyed in Western Europe. In the mind of the masses, the "bourgeois" type could be accurately personified in such varying images as the hated boss of a business with a ten or twelve-hour work day, or in a rich peasant (*kulak*), a thieving merchant or a usurer. Saltykov himself wrote that this kind of bourgeois was seen as the direct descendent of the old oppressors.

It seems to me that in Saltykov we can find a partial explanation for the relative ease with which the revolutions of the beginning of the twentieth century overturned not only the autocracy but also succeeded in liquidating capitalism and destroying the market economy and the first growths of liberal democracy.

Saltykov's works, with their great influence on the Russian intelligentsia, perhaps even helped to create the strongly anticapitalist mentality that prevailed among the intellectuals in the twenty or thirty years that led up to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The current rebirth of the market economy often (and perhaps inevitably) takes on primitive and caricatured forms. In Saltykov's works one can probably find personalities and situations that are similar to personalities and ethical standards found among the Russian *nouveau riches* of the 1990s. Such is life in a troubled society under a new-born market economy.

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