

Exploring Russian Literature's Spiritual Labor: A Review of *Wonder Confronts Certainty*

Gary Saul Morson, 2023

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‘The most important thing is spiritual labour [...] Books [...] You cannot live without Pushkin or the complete works of Gorky.’

— Svetlana Alexievich

Slavist Garyl Saul Morson’s *Wonder Confronts Certainty* is an exercise in exactly the kind of spiritual labour that Alexievich claims makes life liveable. It is a book preoccupied with the relationship between literature and philosophy. More specifically, it is an exploration of Russian literature’s treatment of what Morson calls the ‘accursed questions’ concerning humanity. These questions are legion: What are the meaning and substance of life? How does one improve the life of a society? Is morality absolute or relative? To what extent do the ends justify the means? How does one bear witness to evil, to suffering?

These are not questions that lend themselves to easy or quick answers. Unsurprising, then, that *Wonder Confronts Certainty* is far from a slim volume. It is, however, exceedingly easy to read, both in language and structure. Morson’s chosen strategy for this book is to stage a Dialogue of the Dead with a multitude of Russian thinker-writers.

Morson divides the book into three sections. The first, comprising two chapters, introduces the disputants in his Dialogue. They are categorised into two camps — the great realist novelists and the intelligentsia. The former are the usual suspects: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekov, Turgenev, Gogol, and the like. The latter category, however, named not an educated elite, as it

does in the Anglophone word, but described as a ‘unique factor’ in the Russian public sphere that included only ‘those of a particular political persuasion’.¹

The second section details this category of Russian intelligentsia. Morson identifies three sub-types: The Wanderer, whose intellectual life resembled that of a serial monogamist; The Idealist, characterised by his ‘steadfast loyalty to a single ideal’² in the face of all counterarguments; and The Revolutionist, whose primary commitment was to violence, regardless of the cause in whose name it was perpetrated.

It is the third section where the timeless questions of the title are finally engaged with, although they are alluded to — even tangentially discussed — earlier as well. It is unfortunate, then, that the last section is, in fact, the book’s weakest. This is not due to any scholarly shortcoming. Morson is irreproachable in his erudition and argumentation: the treatment of the philosophical questions is detailed, nuanced, lucid, and references the works of both the disputing groups. It is simply that, being nearly halfway through the book at this point, Morson’s arguments lose their novelty and punch. One already knows, for instance, the dangers of blindly believing that ‘theory provide[s] the proper blueprint for life’,³ or of ‘denying that morality has any objective foundation’.⁴ In the great debate between the realist novelists and the intelligentsia, the former has already won.

To Morson’s credit, he does more than simply adjudicate a debate. His great skill is his ability to render comprehensible the psychology of those with whom he patently disagrees. For instance, Morson is careful to show that Marxists-Leninists, for all the violence and suffering they caused, were not indifferent to questions of morality or ethics, but that it was the morality and ethics engendered by the Marxist-Leninist ideology that allowed, even mandated, the violence wrought by the regime.

The book’s most remarkable achievement is its employment of intertextuality. Russian history and politics, in Morson’s reading, become one continuous dialogue. The reader gets to understand the inner motivations of, for instance, a terrorist not only through their own words but also through their incorporation in the great realist novels. More importantly, though, Morson does an incredible job of bringing to life the intertextuality and interliterariness that

¹ Gary Saul Morson, *Wonder Confronts Certainty: Russian Writers on the Timeless Questions and Why Their Answers Matter* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2023), p. 72.

² Morson, 123.

³ Ibid., 216.

⁴ Ibid., 217.

has characterised Russian public life. In his hands, this Dialogue of the Dead becomes a way to read the entirety of Russian history and politics from the mid-19th century onwards.

This, however, is a double-edged sword. There are more than a few instances when Morson's political-philosophical commentary reads dangerously like anti-Soviet propaganda. More than once, westerners are interpellated as an undifferentiated in-group, the normativity of whose ideological position is too easily assumed. Besides, there is more than a little masculine bias in the treatment of the title's timeless questions. Even though women do feature in the text's analysis, the answers considered are all in the tradition of masculinist philosophy. Critical insurrections and interrogation of the usual assertions are missing.

Overall, Morson's book provides a lucid and enjoyable, if sometimes repetitive, primer to the world of Russian literature and politics.