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# CLAREMONT

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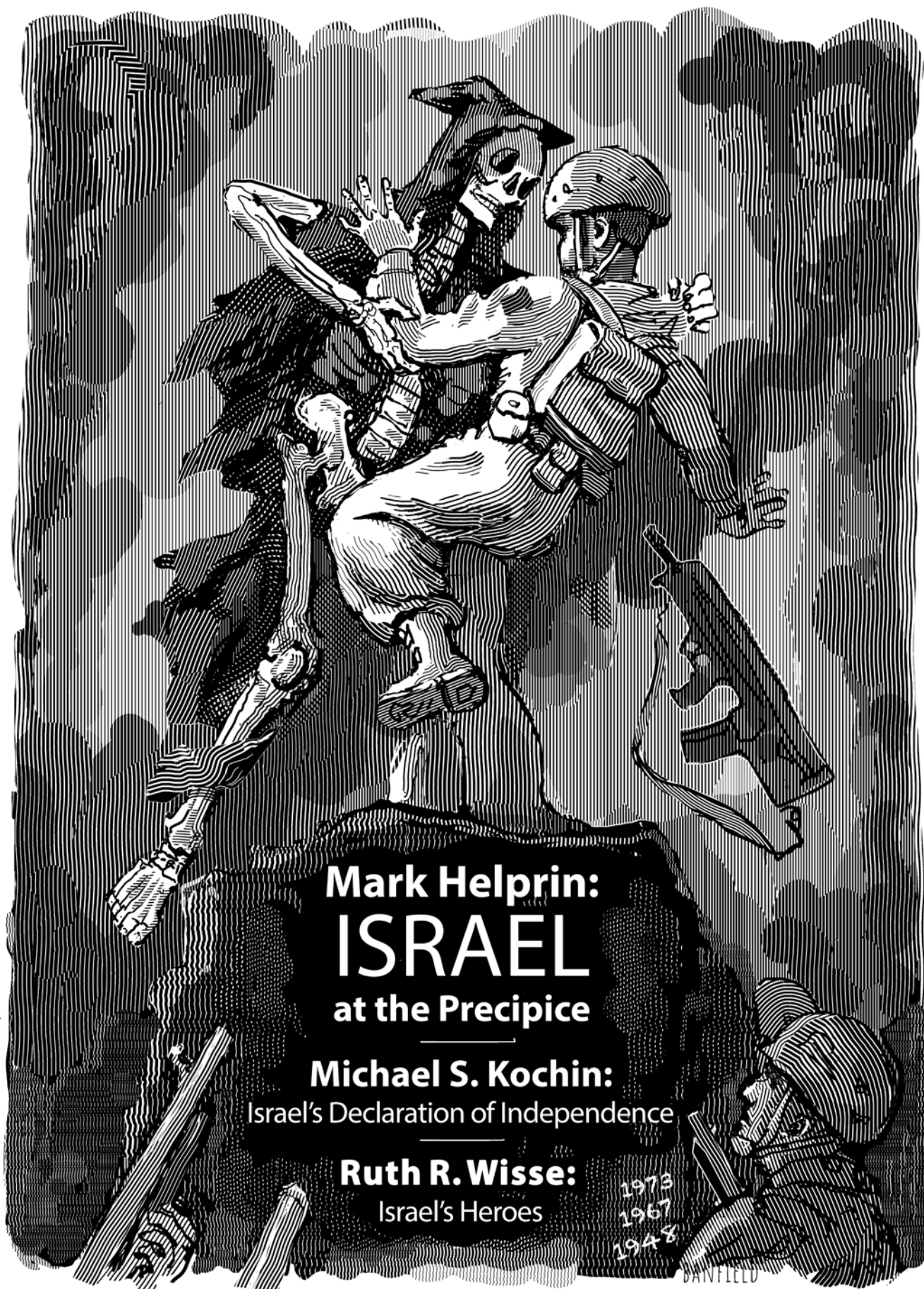
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## A HAPPY GUEST IN RUSSIA'S PAGES

*Wonder Confronts Certainty: Russian Writers on the Timeless Questions and Why Their Answers Matter*, by Gary Saul Morson. The Belknap Press, 512 pages, \$37.95



IN 1959, THE JEWISH SOVIET POET BORIS Slutsky composed the poem “Novels of Our School Years.” It wasn’t able to be published until 1987, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the poem, Slutsky identifies not so much with Russia as with its literature. For him, Russian novels are a motherland of their own: they provide him with a moral compass. The poem (translated here by Jill Pearlman and myself) captures the argument of Northwestern University Humanities Professor Gary Saul Morson’s informative and enlightening *Wonder Confronts Certainty: Russian Writers on the Timeless Questions and Why Their Answers Matter*:

Novels of our school years,  
I am a happy guest of your pages.  
All the camps and pogroms  
I forgive thanks to these novels.  
I’m not from Kursk, Pskov or Tula.  
Still, I preserve your flame, flickering  
Or dim, in my outsider’s heart.  
Not a moth-eaten conscience,

But a tight, neat tale of Pushkin,  
The true word of Chekhov  
Kept me honest.  
If I acted cowardly, gave in,  
Fell prey to deception, it means  
I strayed from the good old novel.

Slutsky wasn’t the first artist who found his home in the pages of Russian fiction. Morson quotes another fine author and noble man, writer Vladimir Korolenko. When asked whether he considered his motherland Ukraine or Russia, Korolenko replied: “[My] homeland became, first and foremost, Russian literature.”

WHAT IS THERE IN GREAT RUSSIAN novels that provokes such a strong sense of attachment and identification? Morson, a prolific literary and cultural critic whose insights into Russian literature have benefited generations of readers, is abundantly qualified to answer that question.

This volume is vintage Morson. It addresses serious subjects with the gravity they deserve,

conveying the sense of wonder one experiences when reading great fiction. The study also exposes the follies and abuses perpetrated by the Commissars of Certainty—the radical intelligentsia (from the Russian *intelligents*) willing to die or kill for some scheme of universal happiness. The plea that resounds again and again throughout Russian novels is to avoid abstract utopias and focus on the goodness and beauty of everyday life. It is as timely a message now as it was in the 19th century—or even more so, since technological advances make it easier for today’s Grand Inquisitors to forcibly impose their idea of human bliss on the world stage. The petty tyrant of medieval Seville, whom Fyodor Dostoevsky depicts subjugating city-dwellers and interrogating Christ in *The Brothers Karamazov*, couldn’t even imagine all the means of control and manipulation available to today’s self-appointed saviors of mankind.

Russia’s peculiar historical development furnished the intelligentsia with plenty of means, motives, and opportunities to articu-



late, and more importantly to implement, their radical theories. Over the course of the last 150 years, these theories and practices have shaped the trajectory of Russia's intellectual and material history. Morson's book frames an opposition between the literary artists who attempted to make sense of themselves and their world, and the ideologues who fancied they had already explained the world and so wanted, à la Karl Marx, to change it. "It is possible to trace two traditions in Russian literature and thought," writes Morson. "One consisted of writers whose greatness lay in the literary masterpieces they produced.... The other...celebrated radical 'journalists' (in the Russian sense of makers of public opinion), especially Belinsky, Dobrolyubov... Mikhailovsky, and, above all, Chernyshevsky."

**T**HE BOOK EXPLORES INTENSE CULTURE wars waged between the artists (call them "Team Wonder") and the radical critics ("Team Certainty"). These groups embodied not just two different cultural traditions but two rather fundamental aspects of human nature—perhaps distinguished by the two sides of our brains, or simply two different approaches to the universe and its mysteries. Morson compares "certaintists" to the hedgehog, and their opponents to the fox of the fable popularized by Isaiah Berlin: "A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing." While foxes thrive on dialogue, on switching perspectives, and on looking at themselves from outside so as to learn and adapt, "for hedgehogs, dialogue can make no further discoveries because there is nothing left to discover."

The road to hell is paved with certainties. Since we do see through a glass darkly in the affairs of this world, it remains reasonable to avoid fake clarity and abstract formulas that can't possibly do justice to life's complexity and unpredictability. It was these demonic certainties of the intelligentsia that great Russian authors exposed—convincingly, to many, though not to the intelligentsia itself. The *intelligents*, despite the inadequacies of their outlook, persisted in becoming more self-righteous, intolerant, and violent. They embraced first anti-tsarist terrorism, then the 1917 revolution with its stated goal of constructing a socialist utopia. Morson's comparisons between the insights of novelists and the follies of the intelligentsia justify the harsh judgment pronounced in 1909 by the essayist Mikhail Gershenzon: "In Russia an almost infallible gauge of the strength of an artist's genius is the extent of his hatred for the intelligentsia."

A book like this, which argues for the relevance of thousands of small things and resists

sweeping pronouncements of certainty, can't be reduced to one message. Morson eschews grand theories about "what must be done" (the obsession of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Vladimir Lenin). Instead he focuses on negative examples of what must be *avoided*: dogmatism, myopia, and what Mikhail Bakhtin called "theoretism," i.e., "the belief that abstractions are more real than experience." The book's main argument is presented in chapters with revealing titles: "What Is Not to be Done?" "Who Is Not to Blame?" "What Don't We Appreciate?" "What Doesn't it all Mean?" Reading through Morson's lively narrative, an attentive reader is bound to acquire a wisdom that prefers not to blame, not to imagine that it knows what to do, not to reduce complex life experience to abstractions, and not to suffocate with certainty what should remain a subject of wonder.

**W**HILE EXPERIENCED AND THOUGHTFUL readers remained skeptical of Chernyshevsky's wooden prose, Russian intelligentsia (university students in particular) consumed it avidly. One such enthusiast was none other than Vladimir Lenin, who upbraided his one-time friend Nikolai Valentinov for claiming that "it would be difficult to imagine anything more untalented, crude, and at the same time pretentious" than Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to Be Done?* "Do you realize what you are saying?" Lenin roared, "I declare that it is impermissible to call *What is to Be Done?* crude and untalented. Hundreds of people became revolutionaries under its influence.... He completely transformed my outlook." Lenin won the day, of course: it was Chernyshevsky's devotees who came to power after the October Revolution and thrust on Russia a dubious deliverance from the bondage of tsarism and into the realm of Chernyshevsky's utopian dreams.

Why and how does one gravitate toward Team Wonder or Team Certainty? Morson astutely explains: "Ideologies seduce with clarity; novels teach complexity." Unlike social theory, "wisdom, by its very nature, cannot be formalized." By contrast, "in all utopian thinking, evil derives from a single cause, which the utopian thinker knows how to eliminate." Consequently, "while theoretism engenders intolerant enthusiasm, wisdom leads to 'gentle irony.'"

But certainty can be irresistible. No less a luminary of American libertarianism than Ayn Rand admired Chernyshevsky just as passionately as Lenin did. In the words of Wellesley College Literature Professor Adam Weiner, author of *How Bad Writing Destroyed*

*the World* (2016), "Rand was raising Chernyshevsky from the dead in the graveyard of bad ideas. She would resurrect his rational egoism...and, most importantly, his image of the fictional hero as uncompromising revolutionary 'rigorist,' or, as Rand put it, 'the extremist.'" It was Rand's certainty that so shocked Whittaker Chambers, who heard in her writing echoes of the same thundering dogmatism he had encountered as a spy in the Soviet underground. "Out of a lifetime of reading, I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained," wrote Chambers in a review of *Atlas Shrugged*. "Its dogmatism is without appeal.... It supposes itself to be the bringer of a final revelation."

**A**LTHOUGH MORSON DOES NOT IDENTIFY it specifically as such, it seems to me that behind all this intolerance and absolutism lurks a certain degree of immaturity—a lack of social experience and wisdom. In his *Fathers and Sons*, Ivan Turgenev attributed the emergence of the Russian intelligentsia to generational warfare. Indeed, a glance at Russian history reveals the intelligentsia's persistent need to act like rebellious children, challenging both state and family authorities. Morson calls this tendency "anti-rule," noting that 22% of socialist revolutionary terrorists were children between the ages of 15 and 19. Writing about "Heroism and Asceticism" in a series of essays on the Russian intelligentsia titled *Landmarks* (1994), Sergei Bulgakov denounced what he called "spiritual pedocracy." For the revolutionaries, wrote Bulgakov, "the ideal of the Christian saint, the ascetic, has been replaced...by the revolutionary student."

Dostoevsky was well aware of this "infantile disorder" in Russian culture. His *Brothers Karamazov* presents a parody of opinionated ignorance in the person of a 13-year-old boy, Kolya Krasotkin ("Kolya" is the diminutive of Nikolai, the first name of Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Mikhailovsky, among others). Kolya is a natural leader, but he lives mostly in his head. Without much guidance from his doting mother, he falls under the influence of the ideologue Rakitin. Parroted in the mouth of a boy, Rakitin's ideas sound comical. Once the boy grows up to join the army, the navy, or the secret police, however, the joke will no longer land in quite the same way. Kolya's interlocutor, Alyosha Karamazov, concludes with a comment that captures Dostoevsky's own attitude: "I am only sad that a charming nature such as yours should be perverted by all this crude nonsense before you have begun life."

Novels rarely offer recipes for universal salvation. They capture small discoveries



and might prompt slight adjustments in a few hearts, which nevertheless can be a great boon to humanity at large. Along with other great novelists, Leo Tolstoy prompted his readers to reorient their vision and recalibrate their system of values: What matters is the person suffering here and now, rather than some distant scheme. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy's Pierre is transformed when he realizes that "everything near and commonplace" once seemed "insignificant and limited" because he "had equipped himself with a mental telescope and gazed into the distance" so that "things seemed to him great and infinite only because they were not clearly visible." It is this need to replace our mental telescope with the microscope, clarity with wonder, that Russian novelists articulate so forcefully.

**W**RITING WHEN THE MICROSCOPE and telescope were both new discoveries, John Milton made a similar plea. In *Paradise Lost* (VIII.172-4), the archangel Raphael admonishes Adam against trying to decipher all God's "wondrous Works": "Heav'n is for thee too high / To know what passes there; be lowly wise: / Think onely what concernes thee and thy being." In *Landmarks*, the philosopher Semen Frank highlighted the dangers of the "telescopic" way of approaching the world: "The abstract ideal of absolute happiness in the remote future destroys the...vital sensation of love for one's neighbor.... Great love for future humanity engenders great hatred for people." But such appeals, writes Morson, "ran counter to the prevailing Russian ethos."

The intelligentsia's telescopic myopia was as disturbing as its intolerance of criticism and opposing points of view. "Nothing in Marxism is subject to revision," Lenin declared. "There is only one answer to revisionism: smash its face in." This attitude, which Morson calls "willful non-knowing," is the zeal of a neophyte who views disagreement as religious apostasy, meriting destruction or, in current parlance, "cancellation." Still today, certainty can lead quite naturally to absolutism.

Certainty comes in all shapes, however. Morson provides a telling example from Anton Chekhov, whose short story "Gooseberries" features two brothers. One of them, Nikolai, finds happiness in the gooseberries which he grows on his own patch of land. The other brother, Ivan, is disgusted with the happy, gooseberry-gulping Nikolai. Ivan fulminates against "happy" people, selfish in their joy, exhibiting no empathy for the rest of humanity. But this angry self-righteousness becomes intolerable in its own

way. Morson writes: "Ivan...has grown as obsessed and narrow as Nikolai, albeit in the opposite direction." A frontal attack on another person's position opens the doors to a monological, rather than dialogical, view of the world. One's sense of wonder is replaced with certainty.

**O**NE MIGHT ASK WHETHER MORSON, in his focus on the attitudes of the intelligentsia, exhibits the same type of oppositional dogmatism, a kind of anticertainty certainty. If the book has a fault, it is an unyielding antitheoretism which reduces the complexities of the Soviet regime to the bad intellectual habits of a coterie of intellectual Bolsheviks. Morson wrote an excellent book on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'* (1987), in which history is presented as a complex tapestry and not reduced to the whims of Napoleon or other historical personages. Despite these insights, he is willing to reduce Soviet history, including the revolution, industrialization, and the earth-shattering confrontation with Hitler's Germany, to the outcome of a few intellectuals' schemes as carried out by the likes of Lenin and Stalin.

This one-track focus sometimes leads Morson to neglect important aspects of Russian history. There were other forces at work in Soviet politics besides philosophy. The Gulag prison system, for example, was not exclusively a clearinghouse for the ideological grudges of party leaders. Gulags were economic enterprises, too: they produced lumber, gold, oil, and precious metals. They also hosted various engineering and construction projects, which employed a great number of prisoners. Andrei Tupolev and Sergei Korolev, founding fathers of aviation and rocket science, spent several years designing and constructing planes and rockets in the labor camps. These constructions were mass enterprises with hundreds of forced laborers involved.

"What economic considerations would dictate converting experienced engineers, technicians, and scientists into manual laborers in the 'north pole of cold?'" asks Morson. But, in fact, there were many such considerations. Both Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Dimitri Panin, whose camp memoirs Morson quotes frequently, worked as engineers in various prison enterprises. As prisoners, they were forced to work for meager food, though Panin managed to publish scientific articles once he was released. From a ruthlessly exploitative perspective, to arrest thousands of engineers and send them to Siberia or Kazakhstan—

where half of them died, while others did quality research for free—made a lot of economic sense. Even debilitating manual labor had grim financial advantages: in permafrost, people lasted longer than did expensive Western equipment. Often it was these sorts of cold calculations that motivated Stalin, not some species of "theoretism." As Panin himself observed, Lenin modeled his party on the principles of organized crime, rather than Marxist theory. Stalin, too, was driven by the cruel pragmatism of the Mafia boss rather than by, or at least in addition to, the idealism of a Russian *intelligent*.

**T**HIS IS NOT TO JUSTIFY OR EXCUSE Stalin. It is rather to guard against monocausal theories and preserve the openness that Morson himself advocates to the many ways that history unfolds and the strange paths it travels. Too singular a fixation, even on real evils, can leave one blind to other nuances and complexities that invite our attention. For example, Morson writes that "Westerners find it hard even to comprehend that in Soviet ethics compassion, pity, and kindness were vices.... Soviets taught [children] to overcome the impulse to compassion.... It is reluctance to kill that became immoral." But this overbroad presentation of Soviet education, as some sort of finishing school for cannibals, makes one wonder where all the heroic dissidents quoted in the book might have come from. More than any one ideology, it is access to unrestrained power that turns people into monsters.

*Wonder Confronts Certainty* is a richly detailed book, filled with insights into the Russian literary tradition. Its excesses invite one to ask, though, whether there is a limit to the advocacy of wonder itself—whether it becomes a kind of certainty all its own. Even efforts to expose lies, overstatement, or self-righteousness can fall victim to the same defects. Morson's eloquent warning is applicable to us all: "Given human difference and the plurality of viewpoints, wisdom consists in learning to see the world from the perspective of others. By intellectual as well as emotional empathy, we can bring discrete positions into open-ended dialogue. When we do, we enrich ourselves and the world." That is an ongoing effort, requiring constant self-scrutiny and searing moral honesty. In carrying on that effort and elevating its greatest exponents in the Russian tradition, Morson has certainly enriched the world.

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