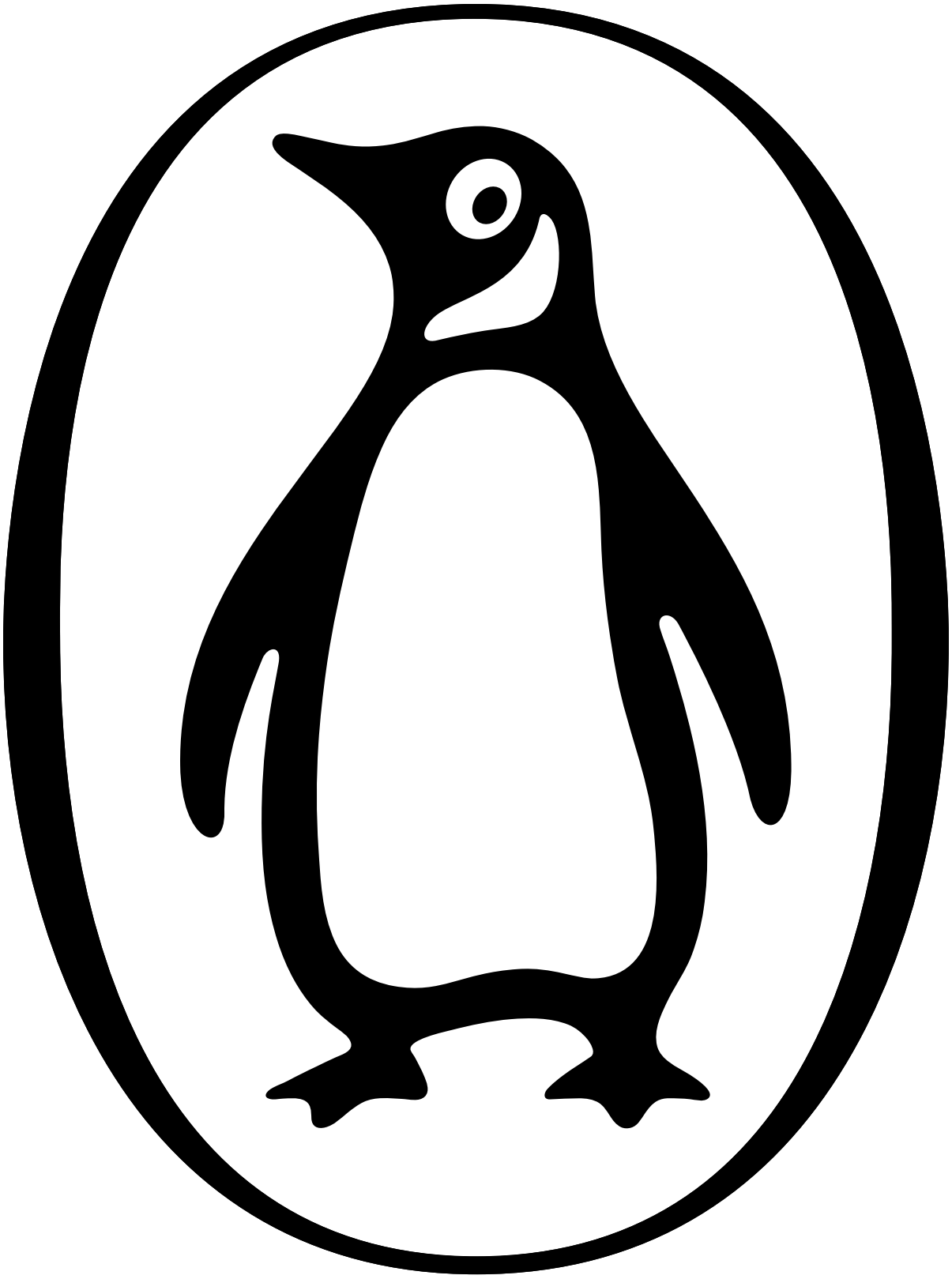
PENGUIN CLASSICS

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

POOR FOLK

AND OTHER STORIES



PENGUIN CLASSICS

POOR FOLK AND OTHER STORIES

FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOYEVSKY was born in Moscow in 1821, the second of a physician's seven children. His mother died in 1837 and his father was murdered a little over two years later. When he left his private boarding school in Moscow he studied from 1838 to 1843 at the Military Engineering College in St Petersburg, graduating with officer's rank. His first story to be published, 'Poor Folk' (1846), was a great success. In 1849 he was arrested and sentenced to death for participating in the 'Petrashevsky circle'; he was reprieved at the last moment but sentenced to penal servitude, and until 1854 he lived in a convict prison at Omsk, Siberia. In the decade following his return from exile he wrote *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (1859) and *The House of the Dead* (1860). Whereas the latter draws heavily on his experiences in prison, the former inhabits a completely different world, shot through with comedy and satire. In 1861 he began the review *Vremya* (*Time*) with his brother; in 1862 and 1863 he went abroad, where he strengthened his anti-European outlook, met Mlle Suslova, who was the model for many of his heroines, and gave way to his passion for gambling. In the following years he fell deeply in debt, but in 1867 he married Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina (his second wife), who helped to rescue him from his financial morass. They lived abroad for four years, then in 1873 he was invited to edit *Grazhdanin (The Citizen*), to which he contributed his *Diary of a Writer*. From 1876 the latter was issued separately and had a large circulation. In 1880 he delivered his famous address at the unveiling of Pushkin's memorial in Moscow; he died six months later in 1881. Most of his important works were written after 1864: *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1865-6), *The Gambler* (1866), *The idiot* (1869), *The Devils* (1871) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

DAVID MCDUFF was born in 1945 and was educated at the University of Edinburgh. His publications comprise a large number of translations of foreign verse and prose, including poems by Joseph Brodsky and Tomas Venclova, as well as contemporary Scandinavian work; *Selected Poems* of Osip Mandelstam; *Complete Poems* of Edith Södergran; and *No I'm Not Afraid*, the selected poems of Irina Ratushinskaya. His first book of verse, *Words in Nature*, appeared in 1972. He has translated a number of nineteenth-century Russian prose works for the Penguin Classics series. These include Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov, Crime and Punishment, The House of the Dead, Poor Folk and Other Stories* and *Uncle's Dream and Other Stories*, Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories* and *The Sebastopol Sketches*, and Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. He has also translated Babel's *Collected Stories* and Bely's *Petersburg* for Penguin.

POOR FOLK AND OTHER STORIES

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

AND NOTES BY

DAVID MCDUFF

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INTRODUCTION

Dostoyevsky began his literary career as a translator of French fiction and the author of some plays inspired by his reading of Schiller. As an army sublieutenant in his early twenties attempting to finance a somewhat extravagant lifestyle on a budget consisting of his army salary and the not inconsiderable allowance he received from Karepin, the trustee of his father's estate, of 5,000 paper rubles per annum (a paper ruble was roughly equivalent in value to one third of a silver ruble), he turned increasingly to literary activity in the hope of combining his recently acquired idealistic philosophical convictions with his desire for fame and fortune. Of the plays, we know only that he wrote a pair of dramas, begun around 1841, entitled *Maria Stuart* and *Boris Godunov*, and a 'Shakespearean' play modelled on *The Merchant of Venice* called *The Jew Yankel* – the titles are all that has survived of them. We have rather more information about his activity as a translator. Like the theatre, French novels were extremely popular in the St Petersburg of the 1830s and 40s. The writings of Balzac, Sue and Hugo exercised a huge fascination on the Russian educated reading public. When Balzac visited St Petersburg for three months in 1843 he was greeted with universal acclaim as a literary hero. One of Dostoyevsky's early major translation projects was a complete Russian version of Balzac's novel

Eugénie Grandet. Dostoyevsky's biographer Konstantin Mochulsky writes of this:

the translator intensified the emotional tone of the novel and did not hesitate to employ effective similes and picturesque epithets. Under his pen the story of Eugénie's sufferings is transformed into a tale of'the unfathomable and horrifying tortures' of a poor young girl whose image for some reason or other he compares with an ancient Greek statue. This first literary attempt, after the editors had abridged it by a third, appeared in *Repertoire and Pantheon.**

Balzac's influence on Dostoyevsky was profound and far-reaching. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that, without it, he might never have developed his creative talent in the direction he ultimately chose. In the character of Pére Goriot, for example, Dostoyevsky found the antecedent for a whole range of his own 'insulted and injured' civil servants, while Rastignac is in many senses a forerunner of Raskolnikov. It was while he was working on his translation of *Eugénie Grandet* that Dostoyevksy conceived the idea for a novel of his own, of roughly the same length. In reply to his brother Mikhail, who was urging him to consider a career in the theatre as a playwright, and with whom he was planning a translation of Schiller's plays, he objected that he needed money right away, and the rehearsal and performance of plays took time. 'I have a hope,' he wrote to Mikhail on 30 September 1844.

I am finishing a *novel* of the same dimensions as *Eugénie Grandet.* It's rather an original piece of work. I'm at present copying it out, and I shall probably have had a reply concerning it by the 14th. I'm going to send it to *Notes of the Fatherland.* (I'm satisfied with my work.) I may get 400 rubles for it, and therein lie all my hopes.

The first draft of the novel, *Poor Folk*, was completed in November 1844. Three major revisions followed – one in December of that year, and two more in February and April 1845. This work of polishing, revising and rewriting seems to have possessed an almost religious significance and urgency for the writer. 'And now, on the subject of bread and butter!' he wrote to Mikhail on 24 March.

You know, brother, that as far as that is concerned I depend upon my own strength. But whatever may happen, I have vowed to myself that even though doing so may kill me, I will remain firm and refuse to write to order. Writing to order crushes and ruins everything. I want each of my works to be distinctly good. Look at Pushkin, at Gogol. Neither of them wrote a great deal, yet they are both awaiting monuments. And now Gogol commands 1,000 silver rubles per printed sheet, while Pushkin, as you know, was able to sell one of his poems for a gold sovereign. But their fame, particularly that of Gogol, was bought with years of poverty and hunger… Raphael painted for years, polishing his work and licking it into shape, and the result was a miracle: gods were created by his hand. Vernet takes a month to complete a picture…

This invocation of great names is significant: in his dissatisfaction with the form of his novel Dostoyevsky is expressing what he consciously perceives to be the discontent of a truly great artist, one who will rise above the crowd of common 'feuilletonists' and survive into posterity. Here, too, we can detect the vanity and incipient megalomania which was to cause him such trouble later on. The 'hopes' of which he wrote to Mikhail were powerful ones indeed, compounded of immense personal ambition and a struggle against a poverty that was, to some extent at least, self-imposed, and came to assume a life-or-death quality. Later in the same letter we read:

I am seriously pleased with my novel. It is a strict and shapely work. There are, however, terrible defects… The time is near when I have promised to be with you, dear friends. But I shall not have the means to do that – the money, in other words… I hope to save the whole situation by my novel. If my project does not succeed, I may hang myself.

And further on:

In a feuilleton published in *The Invalid* I have just finished reading about the German poets who have died of hunger and cold, and in madhouses. There have been twenty of them so far, and what names! It all still fills me with terror…

Dostoyevsky's friend and room-mate, D. V. Grigorovich, urged the writer to submit the manuscript of *Poor Folk* to the poet N. A. Nekrasov for evaluation, in the hope that Nekrasov would in turn show the work to the celebrated, highly influential and much feared literary critic Vissarion Belinsky. The story of how this came about and of what followed is contained in Dostoyevsky's *Diary of a Writer* for 1877 – more than thirty years after the event:

I was living in St Petersburg, having relinquished my post at the Palace of Engineers a year earlier without really knowing why, with the vaguest and most imprecise ends in view. It was May 1845. At the onset of winter I had suddenly begun *Poor Folk*, my first tale, having written nothing before that time. Having finished the work, I did not know what to do with it or to whom I should give it. I had absolutely no literary acquaintances whatsoever, except possibly for D. V. Grigorovich, though he too had written nothing before that time apart from a single short article entitled 'The Organ-Grinders of St Petersburg' in a certain symposium. I believe he was at the time preparing to leave for his country estate for the summer, and was staying temporarily in St Petersburg with Nekrasov. Dropping in to see me one day, he said: 'Bring your manuscript' (at that time he had not yet read it); 'Nekrasov is intending to publish a symposium next year, I'll show it to him.' I brought the manuscript along, saw Nekrasov for a minute or two, and we shook hands with each other. The thought that I had brought my work to him made me feel embarrassed, and I soon left, hardly having exchanged a word with the poet. I had little thought of success, and this 'party of *Notes of the Fatherland*', as it was usually described at the time, inspired me with fear. For several years I had been reading Belinsky with enthusiasm, but I found him stern and intimidating, and – 'he'll make a laughing-stock of my *Poor Folk*,' I sometimes used to think. But only sometimes: I had written the work with passion, with tears, almost – 'can it really be that all those moments which I have experienced with my pen in my hand as I

wrote that tale – can it really be that all that is a falsehood, a mirage, an infatuation?' This thought came to me only occasionally, of course, and it would be immediately supplanted by my customary anxiety. On the evening of the day I delivered my manuscript, I made a rather long journey on foot to see one of my old companions; we spent the entire night talking about *Dead Souls* and reading it together for the umpteenth time. Such meetings were quite common among young men at that time; two or three would gather together, and one of them would say: 'Let's read some Gogol together, gentlemen!' Then they would sit down and read, all night, most likely. In those days a great many young men were instilled with a certain kind of feeling, and seemed to be waiting for something. I did not arrive home until four o'clock in the morning; it was a St Petersburg white night, as bright as day. The weather was fair and warm, and upon returning to my lodgings I did not go to bed, but opened the window and sat near it. Suddenly the doorbell rang, quite unexpectedly, and there were Grigorovich and Nekrasov, rushing to embrace me in complete ecstasy, both of them practically in tears. The evening before they had gone home early, taken my manuscript and begun to read it to see what it was like: 'We'll know after ten pages,' they had said. But, having read ten pages, they decided to read another ten, and then they sat up all night until morning reading aloud, one taking over from the other when either was tired. 'Nekrasov was reading aloud the part about the death of the student,' Grigorovich told me later when we were alone, 'and suddenly I saw him reach the passage where the father runs along behind his son's coffin; his voice broke several times, and suddenly he could restrain himself no longer, slapped his hand down on the manuscript, and said: "Oh, if only I were he!" This about you, and so it went on all night.' When they had finished (seven printers' sheets!) they decided as one man to go to see me immediately: 'It doesn't matter if he's asleep, we'll wake him up – *this* is more important than sleep!' Later, when I had grown accustomed to Nekrasov's character, I frequently experienced surprise at the memory of that moment: his temperament was so closed – anxious, almost, so cautious and uncommunicative. Thus, at least, he always seemed to me, so that the moment of our first meeting was truly a manifestation of the very deepest emotion. On that occasion they stayed with me for half an hour, and for half an hour we discussed God only knows how many things, understanding each other in half-words, with exclamations, hurrying; we talked about poetry, and about Gogol – with quotations from *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls* — but mostly we discussed Belinsky. 'I shall take your

tale to him today, and you will see – I mean, what a man he is, what a man! You will make his acquaintance, and you will see what a soul he has!' Nekrasov said enthusiastically, shaking me by the shoulders with both arms. 'Well, now you can sleep – go on, sleep, we'll leave now, and tomorrow you will come and see us!' As though I could have slept after their visit! What ecstasy, what success, and, most important of all, the feeling was dear to me, I remember it clearly: 'Some people have success, they are praised, greeted, congratulated, yet these men came running in tears, at four o'clock in the morning to wake me up because this was more important than sleep… How wonderful!' That was what I was thinking; how could I have slept?

Nekrasov took the manuscript to Belinsky that very same day. He held Belinsky in veneration and, I believe, loved him all his life more than anyone else. In those days Nekrasov had not yet written anything on the scale he was soon to achieve, a year later. Nekrasov turned up in St Petersburg at the age of about sixteen, completely alone.

His writing career began from practically the same age. Of his friendship with Belinsky I know little, except that Belinsky divined his talent from the very beginning and may have exercised a powerful influence on the tenor of his poetry. In spite of all Nekrasov's youthfulness and the difference in their ages, even at that time there probably passed between them moments and words of the kind that leave their mark for ever and bind two people irrevocably to each other. 'A new Gogol has appeared!' Nekrasov shouted, as he entered Belinsky's study holding the manuscript of *Poor Folk*. 'With you, Gogols grow like mushrooms,' Belinsky observed severely, but accepted the manuscript all the same. When Nekrasov called back to see him in the evening, Belinsky greeted him 'in a state of downright excitement': 'Bring him here, bring him here at once!'

And lo and behold (this must have been on the following day), I was taken to see him. I remember that I was most struck by his external appearance, by his nose, his forehead; for some reason I had imagined him

to be quite different –'that terrible, that fearsome critic'. He greeted me in a manner that was thoroughly solemn and reserved. 'Oh well, I suppose that's the way it has to be,' I thought; but it seemed that a minute had not passed, before everything was transformed: his solemnity was not that of an important personage, a great critic greeting a 22-year-old beginning writer, but was instead prompted, as it were, by the feelings he wanted to pour out to me as soon as possible, and by the solemn words he was in extreme haste to address to me. He began to speak ardently, with burning eyes: 'Do you understand?' he asked me in his customary falsetto. 'Do you understand what you have written?' He always shouted in a falsetto when he was in the grip of powerful emotions. 'You have merely described it indirectly, with your artist's intuition; but have you pondered on the meaning of this terrible truth to which you have directed us? It cannot be that with your twenty years you can have understood this. Why, this unfortunate clerk of yours – why, he has worked so hard in the service and brought himself to such a point that he does not even dare to consider himself unhappy, out of humility, and views the slightest complaint as practically tantamount to free-thinking, does not even dare to acknowledge his right to unhappiness, and, when a kind man, his general, gives him a hundred rubles, he is completely shattered, annihilated with amazement that "Their Excellency" could have taken pity on one such as himself – not "His Excellency", but "Their Excellency" as it is expressed in your tale.* And that torn-off button, that moment when he kisses the general's hand – why here is no longer compassion for this unfortunate man, but horror, horror! In this very gratitude of his there is horror! It is a tragedy! You have touched the very heart of the matter, you have pointed to the essential in one single flash. We publicists and critics merely reason, we attempt to elucidate all this in words, while you, an artist, represent the very essence in a single line, a single instantaneous image, so vivid that one feels one could touch it with one's hand, that the most unreflecting reader could instantly understand everything! There is the secret of creativity, there is the truth of art! There is devotion to the artist's truth! Truth has been revealed and proclaimed to

you as an artist, you have inherited it as a gift; so value your gift and remain loyal to it and you will be a great writer!…'

All this he said to me on that occasion. All this he later said to many other people besides, people who are still alive now and are able to bear testimony that it was so. I left his house in a state of intoxication. I stopped at the corner, looked up at the sky, at the bright day, at the people going past, and felt with my entire being that a solemn moment had occurred in my life, that my life had been subjected to a change of fortune that would affect it for ever, that something entirely new had begun, but such a thing as I had not envisioned even in my wildest dreams. (I was a terrible dreamer in those days.) 'Am I really so great?' I wondered in embarrassment and a kind of timid ecstasy. Oh, don't laugh, never again did I think I was great, but then – how could I endure what I had been told? 'Oh, I will be worthy of these praises, and what men, what men!' I thought. 'There are men for you! I shall endeavour to earn their praise, I shall make every effort to become as noble as they are, I will be "loyal"! Oh, how frivolous I am! If Belinsky only knew what worthless, shameful things there are in me! Yet people still say that these *littérateurs* are proud and vainglorious. While the fact is that these men are to be found only in Russia, they are alone, but they, they alone possess the truth, and truth and goodness will always be victorious and triumphant over sin and evil, we shall prevail; Oh, let us go to them, with them!'

All these things passed through my mind; I remember that moment with the fullest clarity. And never subsequently have I been able to forget it. It was the most heavenly moment in my whole life. When I was serving my term of penal servitude, the mere recollection of it was enough to keep my spirits up. Even now I remember it each time with ecstasy.

The rest of the story surrounding *Poor Folk* and the beginning of Dostoyevsky's career as a professional writer has been told by his

biographers, and is too well-known to need recounting. Suffice it to say that Belinsky was mistaken in supposing the young writer to be an artistic mouthpiece for his own social and political views. For a time, while he enjoyed Belinsky's support, Dostoyevsky indulged in a bout of euphoric joy at his own success. This euphoria, which at times bordered on the manic, gave rise to some rather odd letters written to Mikhail. One, dated 16 November 1845, contains the following passage:

> Really, brother, I do not think my fame will ever again reach such an apogee as it has now attained. On all sides I am accorded incredible respect, there is a fearful amount of curiosity about me. I have made the acquaintance of a vast number of the most honoured members of the establishment. Prince Odoyevsky has asked me to favour him with a visit, while Count Sollogub is tearing his hair out in despair. Panayev told him that a talent had appeared which would trample them all into the mire. Sollogub went running to visit everyone and, dropping in on Krayevsky, suddenly asked him: 'Who is this Dostoyevsky? Where can I *get hold of Dostoyevsky*?' Krayevsky, who never minces his words or spares anyone's feelings, told him in reply that 'Dostoyevsky does not wish to do you the honour of favouring you with a visit.' It really is so: the miserable little aristocrat has now mounted his high horse and thinks he can crush me with the lavishness of his flattery. Everyone receives me as though I were a living wonder. I cannot even open my mouth without it being repeated in every corner that Dostoyevsky said this, Dostoyevsky is going to do that. Belinsky loves me as his very own son…

When *Poor Folk* was finally published in the *St Petersburg Almanac* for January 1846, its reception by the critics was far less positive than might have been expected after the furore of interest and publicity that had been whipped up by Belinsky's sudden enthusiasm. To make matters worse, *The Double*, the 'St Petersburg Poem' that constituted Dostoyevsky's second major prose work, also received adverse reviews – though Belinsky praised both works in his *Notes of the Fatherland* article. The contrast between the initial sense of triumph and the bitter disillusionment that followed set the key for the whole of the writer's torn and conflict-ridden biography.

Likewise, *Poor Folk* itself, far from being the impassioned outpouring on the theme of social evils which many contemporary critics believed it to represent, was the cornerstone of Dostoyevsky's fictional art, a carefully wrought narrative work which both displays its roots in European fiction (the epistolary novel of Smollett, Rousseau and Goethe, the *drame dialogué* of Walter Scott, the moral-social universe of Balzac) and points forward to the peculiarly Russian works of the author's maturity.

Of the other prose pieces included in the present volume, *The Landlady* (1847) reflects Dostoyevsky's lifelong love of the novellas of the German romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, and also anticipates Annensky, Blok and the 'Silver Age' of Russian poetry (many Symbolist poets were influenced by the tale), while *Mr Prokharchin* (1846) and *Polzunkov* (1847) show the author striving for a narrative compression to equal that of the short stories of Pushkin – though with vastly different artistic means. In these extraordinary and terrifying character sketches, where the very texture of existence itself is called into question, we look forward not only to the monologues of Marmeladov and Svidrigailov, but also to the short stories of Kafka. Dostoyevsky was seldom as'modern' as he is here.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text used for the present translation is identical with that contained in *F. M. Dostoyevsky, Polnoye sobranie sochineniy v tridtsati tomakh (Editions, Journalistic Writings, Letters and Notebooks*), 30 vols, Izdatel'stvo "Nauka", Leningrad, the first four volumes of which were published in 1972.

POOR FOLK

A NOVEL

Oh, those storytellers! They can't rest content with writing something useful, agreeable, palatable – they have to dig up all the earth's most cherished secrets!… I'd forbid them to write, that's what I'd do! I mean, have you ever known the like? A man reads… and finds himself reflecting – and before he knows where he is, all kinds of rubbish come into his head. I'd forbid them to write, truly I would; forbid them to write altogether![*]

Prince V. F. Odoyevsky

April 8

My precious Varvara Alekseyevna.

Yesterday I was happy – inordinately, impossibly happy! For once in your life, you stubborn girl, you have done as I asked. In the evening, at about eight, I woke up (you know, little mother, how I like to sleep for an hour or two after the completion of my duties). I had found a candle and

some paper, and was sharpening my pen, when suddenly I happened to raise my eyes – and I will tell you that my heart fairly gave a leap! So you had guessed, after all, what it was my poor heart desired! I saw that one tiny corner of the curtain at your window had been pulled up and hitched onto the pot of balsams, precisely, oh, precisely in the way I had hinted you might do it when we met that time; I at once fancied that I saw your little face at the window for a moment, that you were looking down at me from your little room, that you were thinking about me. And oh, my little dove, how disappointed I was when I simply could not discern your charming little face properly! There was a time, little mother, when I, too, had good eyesight. Age is no joke, my darling! Even now my eyes seem to swim all the time; you do a bit of work of an evening, write a bit, and the next morning your eyes are all red, with the tears streaming down your face so you're ashamed to be seen by strangers. But anyway, in my imagination your smile fairly shone, my little angel – your kind, affectionate little smile and in my heart I had exactly the same sensation as that time I kissed you, Varenka, do you remember, my little angel? Do you know, my little dove, I even fancied that I saw you wag your finger at me up there! Did you, you mischievous girl? Please give me a detailed account of all this in your letter without fail. Well, what do you think of our little arrangement concerning your curtain, Varenka? It's charming, don't you think? Whatever I am doing – sitting at work, going to bed or waking up, I know that you are up there thinking about me, remembering me, and are yourself well and in good spirits. If you've lowered the curtain, that means: 'Good night, Makar Alekseyevich, it's bedtime!' If you've raised it, that means: 'Good morning, Makar Alekseyevich, did you sleep well?' or 'How are you today, Makar Alekseyevich? As for myself, thanks be to the Creator, I am well and happy!' Do you see, my little darling, what a skilful arrangement this is? You don't even need to write me letters! It's clever, isn't it? And what's more it was my idea. I'm rather good at these things, Varvara Alekseyevna, don't you agree?