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RUSSIAN PICKWICKIANS

Dickens from an Orthodox Vantage

The *Road to Emmaus* staff is very pleased to present this discussion on Charles Dickens, with Vera Ivanovna Prokhorova and her former student, Natalia Novikova. Vera Ivanovna was born in 1918, the granddaughter of Moscow's last mayor before the Revolution, and spent years as a prisoner in Stalin's gulag. After her release, she became a professor of English at the Moscow Linguistic University. Her love for Dickens has touched decades of students, and we hope, will open the door for readers who have not yet discovered his books. That hers is a welcome voice to those who already treasure his works, goes without saying.

VERA IVANOVNA: As an epigraph, I would like to use the words of a young and beautiful American lady who happened to be with me in the concentration camp in 1951. The history of this lady is worth mentioning. Her mother had been a devout Communist, and accordingly, not welcome by the Tsarist government. She left Russia, but she left with the hope of coming back after the Revolution, and she did come back, bringing her young daughter with her. You may guess what fate awaited her here. They were both arrested, she as an American spy, and her daughter as somehow being an accomplice. It was quite natural that coming from America to Russia at that time was thought to be the sign of an unsteady mind, at least a deficient mind. For the KGB, the natural idea of espionage arose – that the mother and daughter were using their American citizenship as a kind of protection.

So, they became Russian citizens... and the result, of course, was a Siberian camp. It should be said that Susan – that was the name of the young lady – behaved wonderfully. Even though she was separated from her mother, she never complained of anything; this was simply part of her fate. It was a rule in the camps to separate those who were related in any way – friendship, family, ideals – in order that the “enemies of the people” should feel acutely what punishment awaited them.

Opposite: Vera Ivanovna Prokhorova.

So, she was (and is, I hope) a very nice woman. She was young and strong – in the full bloom of womanly beauty – and was sent to the wood crew to cut trees in the forest. Of course, she came back to the camp exhausted. I remember one winter evening after supper – a very scanty meal we had had, some fish soup – I had left the canteen and was walking back to the barrack where we slept. It was sunset. It should be mentioned that sunsets in Siberia are wonderful. It seems as if all the elements of nature partake in the performance. It is not merely east or west, but the Great Performance – it is heavenly. And even those who were hardened by their experience could not help but admire it.

The camp at Krasnoyarsk was the most horrid landscape – rows and rows of barbed wire, guard towers – and against the setting sun it was even more sordid because of the contrast, the beauty of the natural elements and the inhumanity of the conditions of those who lived there. And so, as I am walking from this canteen, I see Susan sitting on a bench and looking at the sunset. I came up to her and said, “Susan, you are lost in your thoughts. Are they dreams about the past or the future? Let’s hope for the best.” She looked at me and said, “Perhaps you can’t guess what I am thinking about?” I replied, “It is rather difficult.” She said, “You know, I sit here and think, “What a great writer Dickens is! Dickens is so great. He is the greatest writer in the world.”

I was so taken aback by the incongruity of the situation, the grotesque background, and the expression of such a thought, that I said, “Susan, what do you mean?” She replied, “Look around. This is Dickens. These old and young women, creeping to their holes to have some hours of rest. Dickens gives an insight into character. Through details, some subtle details, he opens the gate of the soul. Here they all share the same fate, but each is quite different. It is Dickens. He is so great. I used to think that of other authors, Gogol or Jack London. My God, for shame! Dickens is the greatest author in the world. So humane, so human, so great in his absolute insight into human nature.”

That is a kind of epigraph of what I can say about Dickens and what I can say about the camp. If in the camp (where Dickens – thank God – could never have dreamt of being) we had such images, such inspiration, it means that his greatness remained with you in the most terrible situation of your life.

Now your question is, “When did I begin to read Dickens?” It was my mother who read to me when I was five, or really, four years old. There is a complete coincidence of David Copperfield’s early childhood and my childhood. His crocodile book, the carpet, mother, the fireplace, the coziness of the family – things that you never forget, that support you all your life.

RTE: She read to you in Russian?

VERA IVANOVNA: In Russian, but she introduced me to the English also. My mother knew English very well. Sometimes she would recite nursery rhymes, and then give me Dickens in Russian and afterwards in English. She put the English into simpler forms, but in Russian read the full translation. I must say that our translations are very, very good, almost adequate. Of course, nothing can be adequate to Dickens. It’s natural. He is too great and too unique for that, but anyhow, the translations are really wonderful because those who translated Dickens were absolutely involved in the atmosphere of his time, in their love for him. They were sort of kindred spirits, and that helped them.

RTE: Were the Russian translations done in Dickens’ lifetime, or after?

VERA IVANOVNA: Soon after. The best translators are... well, who do you think, Natasha?

NATASHA: I don’t remember their names. Actually, I believe they were rather at the beginning of this century, because the Dickens’ translations of the nineteenth century were somehow not as satisfying in terms of language. Sometimes they jar on the ear because the style is a bit outdated. But our translations at the beginning of the century and through the thirties were very, very carefully done. They involved a careful study of Dickens, and his cultural epoch. Also, the translators themselves were very good writers. They produced, if not equally good, at least significant literary works of their own.

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes. That was my mother’s time, and she loved Dickens, of course. She introduced Dickens in such a way that I felt him to be someone quite close to me. There was no difference for me between Russian authors and Dickens. For a child it was great wealth. For me it is the sweetness of my wonderful childhood... a warm fireplace, a carpet, our favorite dogs. Of course, I think perhaps Mother didn’t give me the whole of David’s child-

hood, only the happy parts. She left out some of the unhappy events, but the wonderful image of this childhood has remained with me forever and supported me through many, many ordeals. So that was my first acquaintance with Dickens.

RTE: When would that have been?

VERA IVANOVNA: It was in the 1920's before my father's death. I was born in 1918, so it was in 1921, 1922, when I was four, five, and six years old.



Vera Ivanovna with her mother and younger brother, 1927.

And somehow, as I grew I carried this remembrance with me, and I began to read whatever Dickens I could find. *David Copperfield* was first, then *Great Expectations*, then *Little Dorrit*, *Dombey and Son...* *Pickwick Papers*, of course – Mother read me *Pickwick Papers*. That was my childhood – *Pickwick Papers* – Mr. Winkle on the ice, the hunting expedition, the trial. But you always come back to Dickens every year, you know, and then you find something new. What a child can't see, a grown-up person or a young adult will see very well and feel quite keenly. Therefore, Dickens was with me from the earliest stages of my childhood, in *David Copperfield* and *Pickwick Papers*. I was absolutely over-

whelmed by the *Tale of Two Cities*, although I read it much later. I think it is the very best historical novel. It gives an insight into the true state of things. ...“Don't try to find who is more guilty...” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” “...the time of light, the time of darkness,” you remember... and this is all wonderfully revealed in the novel.



Dickens was a mythologist rather than a novelist; he was the last of the mythologists, and perhaps the greatest. He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he always managed, at the least, to make them gods. They are creatures like Punch or Father Christmas. They live statically, in a perpetual summer of being themselves. ...But all the Pickwickian events, wild as they often are, were only designed to display the greater wildness of souls, or sometimes merely to bring the reader within touch, so to speak, of that wildness ...

To every man alive, one must hope, it has in some manner happened that he has talked with his more fascinating friends round a table on some night when all the numerous personalities unfolded themselves like great tropical flowers. All fell into their parts as in some delightful impromptu play. Every man was more himself than he had ever been in this vale of tears. Every man was a beautiful caricature of himself. The man who has known such nights will understand the exaggerations of "Pickwick." The man who has not known such nights will not enjoy "Pickwick" nor (I imagine) heaven.

– G.K. CHESTERTON ON DICKENS –



In his other books you can always find something for yourself. You identify yourself with the characters, and of course you have your favorites... Agnes in *David Copperfield*, Amy in *Little Dorrit*, and poor Florence in *Dombey and Son*. In *Our Mutual Friend* you see the Secretary and Lizzie, the wonderful girl you sympathize with so much...

There is one remark that I found relevant in the critical remarks of G.K. Chesterton about Dickens's work.¹ The thing in which Chesterton is right is that Dickens doesn't merely sympathize with the character but he is his character. You can feel that he really is poor Joe, he is Florence, and Oliver... He feels Oliver acutely, for he himself had suffered so much. But, to my mind Chesterton is generally too sophisticated. His essay on Dickens is interesting to read, very interesting, but somehow it is rather far from what Dickens was. Chesterton himself was a powerful personality and therefore he was somehow – I wouldn't say handicapped by Dickens in his way of thinking – but he felt a kind of challenge in his works. That is my impression.

And Vladimir Nabokov, who is sometimes very biased – as he is biased against Dostoyevsky – in speaking of Dickens actually defeats those who call him sentimental. Sentimentality, Nabokov says, is very cheap and shallow, it has no feeling, but Dickens is always profound and sincere in his writing.²

Anyhow, that is the answer to the first question. Dickens has been with me since my early childhood, accompanied me safely to the camp where his great works found support among the people, has remained with me, and I hope will be with me to the end of my life.

RTE: Are his characters Russian types also?

VERA IVANOVNA: My firm belief is that all of his characters are universal. That is his greatest power, that everywhere you can see heaps of Uriah Heeps. Some critics say that his idealized women are not true to life. It's

1 G.K. Chesterton. *Charles Dickens, The Last of the Great Men*. Dodd, Mead and Co., 1906.

2 Vladimir Nabokov: Twentieth-century Russian writer, American professor, and literary critic. In a lecture on Dickens' *Bleak House*, he says, *...I should not like to hear the charge of sentimentality made against this strain that runs through Bleak House. I want to submit that people who denounce the sentimental are generally unaware of what sentiment is. There is no doubt that, say, a story of a student turned shepherd for the sake of a maiden is sentimental and silly and flat and stale... Dickens's great art should not be mistaken for a cockney version of the seat of emotion – it is the real thing, keen, subtle, specialized compassion, with a grading and merging of melting shades, with the very accent of profound pity in the words uttered, and with an artist's choice of the most visible, most audible, most tangible epithets.* (From Vladimir Nabokov: *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York & London, 1980.)

wrong. I know a woman named Irina – she is just a Little Dorrit. She has sacrificed herself for her family since she was a small girl, and I can see her in Dickens. The power of Dickens is in that universal view of the human race, without borders. To quote Kipling, “There is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed nor Birth.” With Dickens, human nature is the same everywhere, irrespective of rank, race, or country.

In my life, I have associated more with Europeans: the British, French, and Germans. Perhaps Americans are more pragmatic, but so far as Europe is concerned, I think that many people throughout Christian Europe appreciate Dickens. The Christian world is so absolutely connected with what he wrote. Of course, if you are going to speak of Christianity, he is much closer to the Orthodox view of life.

RTE: Why would you say so?

VERA IVANOVNA: Because, as we have said, for Dickens there are no social differences...

NATASHA: He is democratic. Like Christ.

VERA IVANOVNA: Absolutely democratic.

RTE: I have a quote here from Nabokov about Dickens: “A great writer’s world is indeed a magic democracy where even some very minor character, even the most incidental character... has the right to live and breed.”

VERA IVANOVNA: Natasha has brought this quotation from Dickens’ preface to *Oliver Twist*... will you read it?

NATASHA: *The greater part of this Tale was originally published in a magazine. When I completed it, and put it forth in its present form, it was objected to on some high moral grounds in some high moral quarters...*

VERA IVANOVNA: Bah, sarcasm.

NATASHA: *...It was, it seemed, a coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in the pages were chosen from some of the most criminal and degraded in London’s population; that Sykes is a thief and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute.*

I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. I have always believed this to be a recognized and established truth, laid down by the greatest minds the world has ever seen, constantly acted upon by the best and wisest natures, and confirmed by the reason and experience of every thinking mind. I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the very dregs of life, so long as their speech did not offend the ear, should not serve the purpose of a moral, at least as well as its froth and cream. Nor did I doubt that there lay festering in St. Giles's, as good materials towards the truth as any to be found in St. James's.³

VERA IVANOVNA: And you know, when Dickens mentions here “high moral quarters,” it was...

NATASHA: It was Lady... (*flipping the pages*)

VERA IVANOVNA: Well, while you are looking for the lady, I remember quite well that Thackeray objected violently to Dickens introducing the dregs of society.

RTE: Thackeray was aristocratically-minded.

NATASHA: I have found her... In the introduction, which was written by someone else, it says: *Aristocratic readers were more doubtful, perhaps sensing a certain nihilism in the book. Lord Melbourne said: “I don't like that low, debasing style... I shouldn't think it would tend to raise morals”; while Lady Carlyle remarked, “I know there are such unfortunate beings as pickpockets and streetwalkers... but I do not much wish to hear what they say to one another.” On the other hand, the young Queen Victoria, though still under the tutelage of the worldly Whig aristocrats, reflected the approval of the majority of her subjects.*

VERA IVANOVNA: She was a kindly woman.

NATASHA: And an intelligent one.

VERA IVANOVNA: She had a very good tutor who chose her literature with special care. She was well read and prepared to face life.

3 St. Giles' and St. James': In Dickens' time, St. Giles was a London church in the heart of a notorious slum-land; St. James was one of the royal courts.

RTE: You began to say that you thought that Dickens partook more of Orthodoxy in his world-view than of European Christianity.

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes, now look here. Nancy, the prostitute in *Oliver Twist*, she's humane. She can sacrifice her life for the sake of poor Oliver

NATASHA: The way Sonia Marmeladova did in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.⁴

VERA IVANOVNA: So far as I know, you will never find such a thing when you take up say, Balzac. In *The Human Comedy* when they sacrifice themselves, such as Esther does, it's an outburst of passion. It's not Christian love, it's carnal. Yes, they are capable of sacrifice, but it is always love in terms of passion. Carnal love.

NATASHA: When you take up a masterpiece such as *Faust* by Goethe, there is no such thing as Christian love there. There is either passion and sin, or...

VERA IVANOVNA: ...Passion, sin, repentance, and forgiveness! But you know, you can't compare Esther to Sonia Marmeladova or Nancy. Esther has nothing. She

is in love with Lucien and she is ready to sacrifice everything for his sake. She commits suicide just not to belong to another man. There is heroic action in Lucien fulfilling his word by returning to prison after seeing Esther's grave, but there is nothing Christian in it. There is no love. There is again the tormented passion that lives on even after its object is dead.



Charles Dickens.

4. Sonia Marmeladova: A young girl forced by poverty into prostitution in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.



“I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now,” continued the girl aloud; “for those who would have fetched you, if I had not, would have been far more rough than me. I have promised for your being quiet and silent; if you are not, you will only do harm to yourself and me too, and perhaps be my death. See here! I have borne all this for you already, as true as God sees me show it.” She pointed, hastily, to some livid bruises on her neck and arms; and continued, with great rapidity: “Remember this! And don’t let me suffer more for you, just now. If I could help you, I would...”

– NANCY FROM *OLIVER TWIST* –



RTE: What about *Les Misérables*, particularly in the beginning where the priest meets Jean Valjean, the escaped convict? There seems to be some altruistic love there.

VERA IVANOVNA: That's right. But he is a priest.

RTE: Yet doesn't altruism play out in Jean Valjean himself? Through the priest's charity Jean Valjean becomes a respectable generous benefactor to others.

VERA IVANOVNA: Well, I wouldn't say that Jean Valjean was so Christian in his attitude towards life. He reformed in a way, I think. I'm not quite sure about his actions because they were kind of an act of gratitude, in the nature of such things. Again, he sacrificed himself for Cosette, but it was human.

Now, in *Oliver Twist*, Nancy, the prostitute who loved Bill Sykes, knew that she would be killed – the suffering of young Oliver led her to that sacrifice. She is the sister of Sonia Marmeladova in her humility, in her meekness, in her gentle nature. The important thing is that Dickens appreciated these qualities in her. That is the thing. This sacrifice is not so personal, passionate or subjective, it is purely Christian.

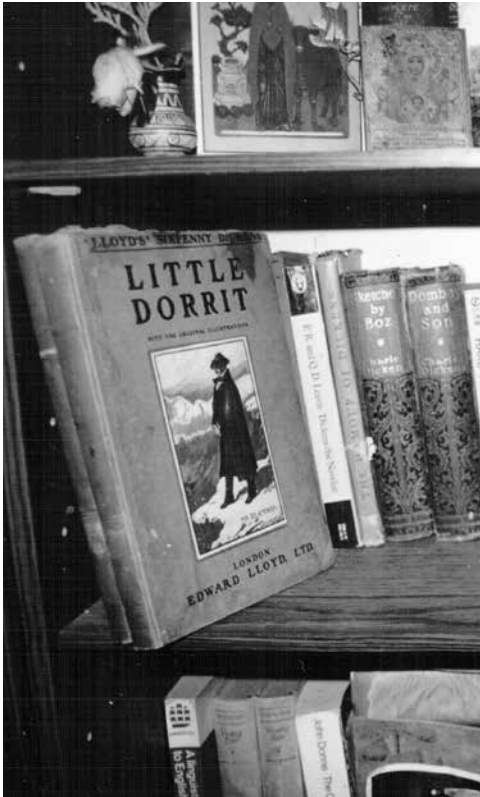
NATASHA: Maybe you ought to say that Dickens' insight is so deep that he describes people on a totally different level than these French writers. No matter how excellent they are they describe the fight of the flesh, and duty, and God – these things. It is always very tense and very passionate, because you either have to mortify your body or you have to totally reform your consciousness. The things that Dickens writes about are much deeper, and Dostoyevsky does the same. That is why we see the link. It strikes us as an immediate likeness between Nancy and Sonia. You wouldn't think about any French heroine in that way.

VERA IVANOVNA: In French literature there is so much hypocrisy. In *The Charterhouse of Parma* by Stendhal, Clelia gave a kind of oath that she would never see Fabrizio again, and so she met him only at night. They were lovers, without light. So...

RTE: ... she never saw him.

VERA IVANOVNA: That's right.

NATASHA: You can see in all of these the love of a woman towards a man, or a man towards a woman. In Dickens it is just Christian love. Little Dorrit's attitude towards the people around her – her sister's children, her parents, are good examples. Pip in *Great Expectations* as well – his response to Estella who is morally unequipped to return his generous love. They are completely different types of relationships although the intrigue is just as present.



Vera Ivanovna's bookshelf.

depraved characters such as Svidrigailoff in *Crime and Punishment*, who, knowing what terrible things he has done decides to commit suicide, but before he does, he repents and helps Sonia.

NATASHA: The virtues that are so well described in Dickens are also close to the Russian heart, as Vera Ivanovna said. The democratic or classless feeling that we are all human beings; that is the important thing.

VERA IVANOVNA: What they seek in life is different.

NATASHA: Earlier, you began to say something about the suffering in Dickens' books.

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes. It's typically Orthodox. After suffering comes purification, then God reveals Himself. So, look at *Dombey*. You remember that only when he loses everything does he realize what love is, and comes to happiness. Happiness is not welfare, it is purity of soul. Some of us are endowed with that purity from earliest childhood, as *Little Dorrit* was, and I know such people. They are absolutely natural. Others acquire it through suffering. Again, this is a typical feature of Russian literature. Even

VERA IVANOVNA: Such as the old Jew, Riah, so superior to everyone, and yet so calm, so wise, so kind..., and you feel it, you know... or the poor boy, Joe. When he is dying he talks with the doctor and the doctor repeats the Lord's Prayer with him. "Our Father, Who art in heaven..." So, is there anyone Dickens despises because of class, or race, or any barrier invented by humanity? Never. It is each one's individual qualities that count. Even with such mean creatures as Uriah Heap, Dickens finds... I wouldn't say a justification but the reason why he has become what he is. Uriah recalls his childhood, and his father who had to crawl, to be humiliated all his life, in order to support himself. Even in this disgusting Uriah you glimpse a human being. Uriah says, "My father taught me to be 'umble."

And also, Dickens' ideal is the Christian ideal of happiness. Happiness not in terms of having money or carriages... do you remember how little Dombey says, "Father, what is money? Can it do something? Can it bring back my mother?" And Little Dorrit becomes rich and then loses everything, but she remains true to herself. She finds bliss, real bliss, in her devotion. And at the end of the novel she and Arthur walk together through the crowd of people who are all fussing and shouting, and they help everyone who needs them, and that is happiness.

...Or Agnes, who concealed her love for David. Naturally, she could have remained alone for good, but David was somehow prompted to renew his feelings. Her patience is very religious. Look also at Liza, in Turgenev's *Nobles' Nest*, who goes to the convent when she and the man she loves learn that his first wife, supposedly dead, is still alive. Although his wife is disgusting, for Liza there was no question of their divorcing or of struggling for her own happiness. She preferred to leave this world and go to a convent.

NATASHA: It was all very quiet, and without the scenes with which "going to the convent" is usually portrayed in French novels. It was in God that she sought support.

VERA IVANOVNA: It is not in an outburst of passion, no, it is quiet determination, humility. It is the Beatitudes... "*Blessed are the meek...*"

NATASHA: After you have read enough of Dickens, you close the book, you sit alone, and you have the feeling that you have listened to the Sermon on the Mount because it is about these things that Dickens actually writes. He does write about people, and his characters are absolutely great there, but it

also might be taken as a kind of a sermon. I think that is why his books are so close to the best of Russian literature.

Many Russian writers adored Dickens, although they were quite different and might have even hated each other. Tolstoy disliked Dostoyevsky, Dostoyevsky disliked Tolstoy, Saltykov-Shchedrin, maybe, did not think about any of them... but they all admired Dickens. And strangely enough, Dickens combines the virtues they all have. He writes in such a profound and lucid way, the way Tolstoy does, and his characters are alive, as if they have just walked into the room. They are a kind of reference. As often as you do with Dickens, we do with Tolstoy – “there goes a Pierre Bezukhov” or “she’s just a Natasha Rostova,” and we know immediately what is meant.

Dickens also has the depth and the intensity of Dostoyevsky’s writing, his deep metaphysical insight into things. He gets into the core of virtues, to the place where virtues are born. He has the satirical gift that we find in Saltykov-Shchedrin... but he is not just satirical. Dickens is higher and more all-embracing.

RTE: I have something interesting here. It is a comment from Angus Wilson’s *The World of Charles Dickens*. He is discussing Dickens satirical creation of absurdly bureaucratic or overbearing institutions – Dombey and Son, the Court of Chancery, the Circumlocution office – which represented the things Dickens disliked most about nineteenth-century society:

It is notable that the two other great nineteenth-century social novelists who investigated society in the same manner, by interdependent plots, mysteries and proliferation of characters, Balzac and Dostoyevsky, both invented similar semi-conspiratorial symbols of society’s corruption. Balzac gave us the archcriminal, Vautrin; Dostoyevsky used his “scandals” – the governesses’ benevolent fete, the arrival of the revolutionary youths at Prince Myshkin’s summer villa, the visit of the Karamazov family at the monastery – to suggest that the foundations of social order were being eaten away.

VERA IVANOVNA: Of course, you see here that the same layers of society are touched upon, but the treatment is different.



“I have often thought of you,” said Estella.

“Have you?”

“Of late, very often. There was a long hard time when I kept far from me, the remembrance of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth... But you said to me, ‘God bless you, God forgive you!’ And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now – now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope – into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends.”

“We are friends,” said I, rising...

– PIP AND ESTELLA, *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* –



RTE: How does it differ?

VERA IVANOVNA: Well, they regard it from different angles. Dickens could see that there was something really good, even in a criminal. The same thing is revealed in Balzac's novel, but in a different way. It is a manner of presentation.

NATASHA: With Balzac, it is a very precise, profound characterization of a certain social level, whereas with Dickens it is more the Christian idea of love, forgiveness, suffering. Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, writes on a metaphysical level rather than on a personal Christian one. In his novels we find the conflict of *ideas*. What he writes cannot be completely described on the social level, or even in terms of personal virtue. Nor is it merely philosophical. In some way he grasps this metaphysical reality because he is not concerned with problems of people, but rather of ideas, more so than Dickens or Balzac.

RTE: Here is another quote from Wilson about Dickens and Dostoyevsky:

...Jo [of Bleak House] is perhaps with Mr. Toots, Dickens' most sublime divine idiot – he has indeed that curious power we find in Dostoyevsky's Myshkin; we are convinced at once that he is simple and that he is wise... Indeed the idea of what Dostoyevsky was later to paint as the divine idiot is as important a part of Christ's beatitudes as it is of Dostoyevsky's; and the existence of divine simpletons in Dickens' works is perhaps one of the chief reasons why Dostoyevsky admired the so much.

RTE: Are we touching on the Orthodox idea of the holy fool?

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes, of course, the fool is very kind, and actually saintly in his kindness. The poor boy, Barnaby Rudge, do you remember? He was considered an idiot, but he was really kind, brave, simple, modest; he was great. He followed people, tried to comfort them and be of use. All the while, his social level was extremely low.

RTE: When we talk about holy fools, it is usually about someone who rather consciously follows the Gospels, like Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The*

Idiot. Would you put Barnaby in the same class, or is he more of a natural simpleton, one of the “blessed ones”?

VERA IVANOVNA: Natural, completely natural. Of course, his mother taught him Christian values, but with Barnaby, Dickens quite convincingly gives an insight into a person who has no intellectual power, as opposed to Lord Chester in the same novel, who claims to be so noble, so generous, but is, in fact, a mean coward. And with Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* there is a different opposition. Barnaby would never be able to formulate his ideas, which Prince Myshkin could do quite well. Myshkin expressed his views on life, on people – he tried to bring them home to those he spoke with – but Barnaby was just what he was.

RTE: But they had the same nature.

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes, it is man as he is; that is Dickens. His writing is devoid of any class distinction or coloring. He was far above these writers who disliked each other’s interpretations and feelings. They were

very often class biased, race biased (even Dostoyevsky), but Dickens was absolutely pure in his attitude. Look at Jo, Nancy, Barnaby, Riah, it was so.

NATASHA: Yes. Dostoyevsky couldn’t see a Jew or a Pole without making a nasty remark about them.

RTE: Why do you think that was?

VERA IVANOVNA: Biased, he was simply biased.



Illustration of Pickwick Papers by “Phiz” (Halbert Browne), 1836-1837.

RTE: You've talked about democracy, meekness, and Christian love. Are there other themes that you see in Dickens?

VERA IVANOVNA: Oh yes, purification through suffering. At the end of *Great Expectations*, Dickens leaves us to wonder about the possible union of Pip and Estella. She suffered a great deal, and finally came to understand that the things she had considered to be the greatest in the world: fortune, elegance, rank, were unimportant. We should remember also that she was the daughter of criminals. Her father and mother were criminals and she was cruel, absolutely ruthless, but it was through suffering that she came to realize that everything she considered to be an ideal was mere nonsense – ashes. Everything was futile. We leave her, Dickens leaves her, with that. She hasn't yet come to the final purification. When they go off together, she is only beginning to realize her great fault in not having appreciated Pip's love, and the real value of life. This value is what a pure heart and a pure conscience can give. Not only love for this or that man or woman. No, just for people, for those who surround you.

Agnes in *David Copperfield*, who has never had her love for David returned, says, "Well, I'm not unhappy." She teaches girls, she tries to be useful, you know, and it's very, very natural, just like the Russian attitude. It reminds us of those heroines of Russian novels – Dostoyevsky and Turgenev and Tolstoy's Princess Mary in *War and Peace*. Princess Mary's eyes revealed her luminous soul; that was the greatest thing.

RTE: Of course, there is also the wonderful bit at the end of *Pickwick Papers* where Mr. Jingle and Job Trotter repent.

VERA IVANOVNA: They repent, that's it. Without repentance there is no happiness... a person is lost. We always find comfort in reading about Dickens' heroes, because there isn't splendour in the romantic sense. Oh no. Dorrit, she's *little* Dorrit. No one noticed her. That is the thing.

So, there are great moral qualities in Dickens, and moral qualities, purity of soul, have always been appreciated in Russia. No matter what they said, even those who pretended not to appreciate this purity – like Nabokov – they all did appreciate it.

He sets up an example we can really live by. To me it seems so naïve of some critics to say, "There are no such girls as in Dickens." Why?? In Dickens' own life there was his sister-in-law Georgina, who, while I am

absolutely sure they had no love affair, raised all his children. Dickens' wife, Kate, was, I suppose, rather silly and hysterical... it wasn't her fault, but it was her sister who remained to help him. Later English literature reflects the loss of that purity and faith – take Galsworthy for example – there is no God there. Absolutely no God.

RTE: Yes, it's masterful writing, and yet you feel that there is a ceiling over *The Forsyte Saga* that blocks out light and air.

NATASHA: Yet it was one of the first well-constructed serials.

RTE: A masterpiece, and TV soap operas have been unsuccessfully trying to imitate it ever since, but Galsworthy is bleak because there is no God. As a result there is a vein of unspoken despair.

NATASHA: That is also why I don't like Chekhov, he has no God. He's got a very good eye for different traits in people, and for some psychological problems, but he has no feeling of God.

VERA IVANOVNA: He believes in a happy future. Can you tell me why Chekhov is so popular in the West?

RTE: Perhaps because he has more of a European tone and story line, and is easier to understand than the intense relationships of Turgenev or Dostoyevsky. Over the past decades people have more and more turned to the simply written romance novels or "slice-of-life" adventures that don't demand close attention.

NATASHA: It's what I call a kind of psychological layer – intriguing on a mental level, but it doesn't get any further.

RTE: Sometimes people don't want to get any further. That isn't what they are reading for.

NATASHA: Love stories, break-ups, walking out... that sort of thing.

RTE: It is not that they wouldn't appreciate the classics if they tried them, but Western life-styles often don't allow the time and attention that even popular classics like Dickens' require. People almost have no time to breathe, much less to reflect, so you don't read for meaning and insight into life, you read for news, entertainment, and escape. You read to relax. Now, many

people leave school without even being exposed to the great writers, their taste has been formed towards lighter and inferior writing.

NATASHA: Strangely enough, literature has taken two different lines as we are discussing it now: literature that has God in it, and literature without God. In addition, the literature of today has become either high-brow or low-brow. Low-brow for those who have no time to think about things, and high-brow for sophisticated people who want to train their brains. But it isn't about God. It's not literature with God.

RTE: You mean reading so that you can be a sophisticated thinker, not so that you can gain insight into our common life, or your own soul, or even be entertained in the deeply satisfying way that Dickens does?

NATASHA: Yes. It's to make your brains work, to pass the exams. It is a sort of linguistic analysis like Wittgenstein or Russell – more or less the English way of discussing things, but in their attempt to untangle the problem they forget that it is only in God that most things can be overcome. This knowledge is part of one's spiritual path, part of spiritual progress, and Dickens did know this because he was brought up on English literature like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

VERA IVANOVNA: And there is always a way out. Do you remember little Emily, the beautiful girl seduced by Stilforth in *David Copperfield*? She never married, but she found her place in life. She helped people. So, she devoted her life to love, to those whom she could save from the situation she had been in. Again, there is no despair there. But when a person loses faith in the higher ideal, in God's ideal, he is lost.

In *Bleak House* Lady Dedlock was lost but she repented, she ran through the mud to the grave of the father of her child, whom she had deserted. She loved him, and it was because she had deserted him that he had degraded so completely. But in that outburst of repentance she leaves everything, and she dies there. And Lord Dedlock, who knew nothing of this, her husband who was such a haughty aristocrat, pardons her, and says, "Let her come back in any state. I love her." At this moment, he too is saved.

NATASHA: That is one of the ways in which Dickens was a real democrat. The lives of aristocrats were just as good material as those of the middle-class and the poor.

VERA IVANOVNA: Yes, Dickens mocks Lord Dedlock, he ridicules him, but at the moment of trial, when he is put to trial, he wins the battle with Satan and is saved. Salvation is in love, in forgiveness... that deeply humane attitude towards those around you. That is happiness and bliss. You know that no matter what is missing from a blissful life – scanty food or a lack of any fortune – you can still be happy. So that is a deeply Christian writer...

NATASHA: And without imposing his Christianity outwardly on anyone. You wouldn't know it when you are reading about prostitutes, pickpockets, thieves... all ugly characters. You don't think about him as being Christian, that there was this lofty Christian ideal behind it all, but when you close his books you immediately feel it. Whenever I think about Dickens' writing I feel a sort of beating in my mind: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven."

VERA IVANOVNA: And you know, this idea of self-sacrifice is in almost all of his books. You remember the *Tale of Two Cities*. Sydney Carton dies on the scaffold in the place of Lucy's husband because Sydney loves her, but his love is not passion. He might have won her love afterwards, if her husband had been executed instead.

NATASHA: Dickens is a Christian writer in that very Orthodox sense. Strangely enough, he, being English, is also a very Russian writer. Maybe there was recognition of that element in the idea of joining the Anglican Church and the Orthodox Church at the beginning of the century. I don't know why this idea of reunion between the churches sprang up at all, but probably it was something that Dickens had caught the spirit of much earlier. But apart from Orthodoxy and Anglicanism having some outward similarities (and I don't think they are really that close), Dickens gets so deeply into this Christian idea that he comes very close to the Orthodox pre-schismatic ideal, so to speak. In the Russian idea, there is also much of this classless feeling, an intrinsic democracy.

RTE: Are you speaking of Russia before the Revolution?

NATASHA: Certainly.

RTE: Why? You had a class system: serfs until 1861, aristocrats and industrialists, peasants working on the land and in factories...

NATASHA: That is the sociological view, but the idea already existed on a deep psychological level. I think that is why the Soviets could start building their classless society; it had been a spiritual part of the Russian world-view for centuries.

RTE: I know an American Orthodox abbot who has his young monks read Dickens. He says that he gives them Dickens because he has to “make them human before they can be spiritual.”

VERA IVANOVNA: And did the American monks read them?

RTE: Yes, they did. Every year after Christmas and before Great Lent, each was assigned a Dickens book to read. Or something else equally good, but it was almost always Dickens.

As an aside, in America we have survey courses of world literature in high school, where you might read one story by Chekov, another by de Maupassant, then something by O. Henry. Students may read a chapter or two of Dickens, but rarely are you asked to read an entire novel. When I first came to Moscow, I mentioned to a Russian acquaintance that I was reading *Our Mutual Friend*. “It’s fantastic,” I said. “Have you ever read it?” She looked at me in surprise, and said, “I read it when I was twelve.” Many Russians seem to have a deeper and earlier love for English literature than the English or Americans do.

NATASHA: It is very much due to the fact that there were such good translators. We were all brought up on English literature. We all read Charlotte and Emily Bronte. Every little girl read *Jane Eyre*...we used to play “Jane Eyre.” And, of course, we were made to read Dickens. I think I was also ten or twelve, as soon as I could understand, relatively speaking. Of course, you wouldn’t make a child read translations if they weren’t particularly good. But Dickens’ Russian translations!

...I also adored *Tom Sawyer* in Chekovsky’s translation. It is inspired writing, and just as good as Mark Twain. When I was able to read Mark Twain in English, I saw that Chekovsky was just as great, with the same sparkling humor and all those wonderful tricks they played... It was wonderful literature for children translated into very good Russian.

RTE: In his autobiography, *Speak Memory*, Nabokov also acknowledges Dickens as one of the first authors he encountered. He said, “My father was an expert on Dickens, and at one time read to us, children, aloud, chunks of Dickens, in English, of course.” Later, he recalls when he was eleven or twelve, his father reading *Great Expectations* to the family on rainy evenings in the country.

RTE: What are your favorite Dickens’ novels?

VERA IVANOVNA: *David Copperfield*, *Pickwick Papers*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. And you?

RTE: *Pickwick Papers* for me, and *Our Mutual Friend*.

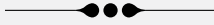
VERA IVANOVNA: Yes, of course *Pickwick Papers*. Pickwick is a kind of foundation of everything. You don’t think of *Pickwick Papers*, you are born with it.

RTE: Are there any of Dickens’ novels that you don’t like?

VERA IVANOVNA: I would say that *Hard Times* is the only one I don’t like; there is squalor, and no light. Also, *Barnaby Rudge* is difficult.

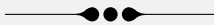
I think that you could even put Dickens on television, but he needs a very good director, a clever producer, and then good actors. Some of the films made of Dickens’ novels were wonderful. I saw *David Copperfield* long ago. Later I saw *Our Mutual Friend*, but there was absolutely nothing there. I’d like to see the old *Pickwick*.

Of course *Pickwick* is the most favorite. It comes with your childhood. Mr. Pickwick is a hero of your childhood. So, it would be wonderful to introduce Dickens to children and adults through a good film. I am sure that the human race is becoming tired of horrors and violence, and that Dickens’ hour will strike. I’m perfectly sure of this because he embodies the best of humanity, the features that are common to us all. It is a great mistake to think that his characters are extraordinary. We just have to learn to see them again, and to appreciate them as did my Susan in the camp. ✦



We are now ready to tackle Dickens. We are now ready to embrace Dickens. We are now ready to bask in Dickens... All we have to do when reading... is to relax and let our spines take over. Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week. But I think Dickens will prove stronger.

– VLADIMIR NABOKOV ON DICKENS' *BLEAK HOUSE* –





Charles Dickens