

# The Death of George Sand, Fyodor Dostoevsky

## The Death of George Sand

The type for the May issue of the Diary had already been set, and it was being printed when I read in the newspapers of the death of George Sand. She died on May 27 (June 8 by the European calendar), and so I was not able to say a word about her passing. And yet merely reading about her made me realize what her name had meant in my life, how enraptured I had been with this poet at one time, how devoted I was to her, and how much delight and happiness she once gave me! I write each of these words without hesitation because they express quite literally the way things were.

She was entirely one of our (I mean our) contemporaries – an idealist of the 1830s and 1840s. In our mighty, self-important, yet unhealthy century, filled with foggy ideals and impossible hopes, hers is one of those names that emerged in Europe, ‘the land of sacred miracles,’ and drew from us, from our Russia which is forever creating itself, so many of our thoughts, so much of our love, so much of the sacred and noble force of our aspirations, our ‘living life,’ and our cherished convictions.

But we must not complain about that: in exalting such names and paying them homage, we Russians served and now serve our proper mission. Do not be surprised at these words of mine, particularly when said about George Sand, who is still, perhaps, a controversial figure and whom half, if not nine-tenths of us, have already managed to forget; yet she still accomplished her task among us in days gone by. Who, then, should assemble around her grave to say a word in remembrance if not we, her contemporaries from all over the world?

We Russians have two homelands: our own Russia and Europe, even if we call ourselves Slavophiles (and I hope the Slavophiles won't be angry at me for saying so). We need not dispute this point. The greatest of all the great missions that the Russians realize lies ahead of them is the common human mission; it is service to humanity as a whole, not

merely to Russia, not merely to the Slavs, but to humanity as a whole. Think about it and you will agree that the Slavophiles recognized that very thing, and that is why they called on us to be more rigorous, more firm, and more responsible as Russians: they clearly understood that universality is the most important personal characteristic and purpose of the Russian.

However, all this needs to be explained much more clearly: the fact is that service to the idea of universality is one thing, while traipsing frivolously around Europe after voluntarily and peevishly forsaking one's native land is something utterly opposed to it, yet people continue to confuse the two. No, this is not the case at all: many, very many of the things we took from Europe and transplanted in our own soil were not simply copied like slaves from their masters as the Potugins always insist we should; they were inoculated into our organism, into our very flesh and blood. There are some things, indeed, that we lived through and survived independently, just as they did there in the West, where such things were indigenous. The Europeans absolutely refuse to believe this: they do not know us, and for the moment this is all to the better. The essential process – which eventually will astonish the whole world – will take place all the more imperceptibly and peacefully.

Part of that very process shows clearly and tangibly in our attitude toward the literatures of other peoples. For us – at least for the majority of our educated people – their poets are just as much ours as they are for the Europeans in the West. I maintain and I repeat: every European poet, thinker, and humanitarian is more clearly and more intimately understood and received in Russia than he is in any other country in the world save his own. Shakespeare, Byron, Walter Scott, and Dickens are more akin to the Russians and better understood by them than they are by the Germans, for example, despite the fact that we have not a tenth of the translations of these writers that Germany, with its abundance of books, has.

When the French Convention of 1793 bestowed honorary citizenship au poète allemand Schiller, l'ami de l'humanité, it did something

admirable, grand, and prophetic; yet it did not even suspect that at the other end of Europe, in barbaric Russia, that same Schiller was far more 'national' and far more familiar to the Russian barbarians than he was to France, not only the France of the time but subsequently as well, all through our century. This was an age in which Schiller, the citizen of France and l'ami de l'humanité, was known in France only by professors of literature, and not even known by all of them, and not known well.

But he, along with Zhukovsky, was absorbed into the Russian soul; he left his mark on it and all but gave his name to a period in the history of our development. This Russian attitude to world literature is a phenomenon whose extent is scarcely found among other peoples anywhere in world history. And if this quality is truly our distinctively Russian national trait, then surely no oversensitive patriotism or chauvinism could have the right to object to it and not desire, on the contrary, to regard it primarily as a most promising and prophetic fact to be kept in mind as we speculate about our future.

Oh, of course many of you may smile when you read of the significance I attribute to George Sand; but those who find it amusing will be wrong: a good deal of time separates us from those events, and George Sand herself has died as an old woman of seventy having, perhaps, long outlived her fame. But everything in the life of this poet that constituted the 'new word' she uttered, everything that was 'universally human' in her – all of this at once created a deep and powerful impression among us, in our Russia at the time. It touched us, and thus it proved that any poet and innovator from Europe, anyone who appears there with new ideas and new force, cannot help but become at once a Russian poet, cannot but influence Russian thought, cannot but become almost a Russian force. However, I do not mean to write a whole critical article about George Sand; I intended only to say a few words of farewell to the deceased by the side of her fresh grave.

(June 1876)

The End