

VLADIMIR ODOEVSKY

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Odoevsky, Vladimir Fedorovitch (1804-1869) was a nineteenth-century romantic and Gothic fiction writer, pedagogue, musicologist, amateur scientist, and public servant. A Russian thinker with encyclopedic knowledge whom contemporaries dubbed “the Russian Faust” (a character in one of his novels), he was mentioned in his day in the same breath as Pushkin and Gogol. He is perhaps best known for the philosophical fantasy *Russian Nights (Russkie nochi)*, published in 1844. In 1824-5 he edited, with Wilhelm Küchelbecker, four issues of the influential periodical *Mnemosyne*. Its purpose was to champion Russian literature and German philosophy at a time when everyone else seemed fascinated with French ideas. Odoevsky contributed works such as “The City Without a Name” (1839) to Nekrasov’s influential magazine *Sovremenik*. In 1823 he founded a group called “Lovers of Wisdom” (*Lyubomudry*, a literal translation of the Greek word “philosophy”). Propounding ideas of philosophic realism, the group was dissolved soon after the Decembrist uprising in 1825, even though the group’s pursuits truly were only philosophical, not political. The failed rebellion deeply affected Odoevsky, because – like the poet Pushkin – he had many friends among the Decembrists, including his cousin, the poet and guards’ officer, Aleksandr Odoevsky (1802-1839),

and the writer Wilhelm Küchelbecker (1797-1846), both of whom were imprisoned and exiled after the uprising.

A Slavophile, Odoevsky believed in the decline of the West and of the future greatness of Russia. He met regularly with other Slavophile thinkers, such as I. V. Kireevsky, A.I. Koshelev, Mel'gunov, Shevryev, Pogodin (the last two were professors at Moscow State University), and the young poet Venevitinov.

In the 1830s Odoevsky was preoccupied with political questions, anti-slavery, anti-Americanism, Russian messianism, the innate superiority of Russia over the West, and criticisms of Malthus, Bentham, and the Utilitarians. The novel *Russian Nights* contains a mixture of these ideas. Odoevsky proposed a revealing sub-title, which his editor later rejected: "Russian Nights, or the Indispensability of a New Science and a New Art." Throughout the novel the main characters grapple with topics such as the meaning of science and art, logic, the sense of human existence, atheism and belief, education, government rule, the function of individual sciences, madness and sanity, poetic creation, Slavophilism, Europe and Russia, and mercantilism.

Odoevsky also cherished music and musicians, composing chamber music as early as his teens and writing critical appraisals of composers such as Glinka. He was devoted to the history and structure of church singing and collected notational manuscripts to preserve them for future generations. As he wrote in one of his letters: "I discovered the definite theory of our melodies and harmony, which is similar to the theory of medieval Western tunes, but has its own peculiarities."

Odoevsky excelled the most in the genre of the short story, particular ones geared toward children. Two stories rank among the best in children's fare: "Johnny Frost" and "The Town in a Snuff Box." Generally, Odoevsky's fiction reflects two main tendencies. First, he expresses his philosophical convictions imaginatively and often fantastically. His stories typically move from a recognizable setting to a mystical realm. Secondly, he injects commentary on the shortcomings of social life in Russia, usually in a satiric mode.

Bibliography

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