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Joseph Frank, 1918–2013

Great musicians, it is said, do not choose their calling—music chooses them. Reading and rereading the works of Joseph Frank, it seems the spirit of modernity itself chose him to be its voice among literary critics. He was a perfect fit for the age when the brute force remaking the world was animated by a titanic struggle of ideas and artistic effervescence.

How else to explain, then, that Frank's debut in *Scholastic*, bore an impossible title, one he used to chuckle about, "Prolegomena to All Future Literary Criticism"? The year was 1935. Frank was seventeen and an orphan. Born Joseph Nathaniel Glassman, he lost his father at the age of five; William Frank, his stepfather, who adopted him and his younger brother, Walter, and with whom he lived in wealthy Manhattan Beach in Brooklyn, died when he was a teenager; soon thereafter, he lost his mother, Jennifer Frank (née Garlick). Somewhere on the Lower East side of New York, there was still his Yiddish-speaking grandmother who was taking care of Walter, but Joseph was already on his own, finishing Erasmus High School and preparing to enter New York University (NYU). A mere decade later, while he worked as a reporter for the Bureau of National Affairs, came entry into the big leagues: "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts" was serialized by *Sewanee Review* in 1945 (republished many times since, the last time in 1991 as *The Idea of Spatial Form*). His last book, *Responses to Modernity*, with a telling subtitle *Essays in the Politics of Culture* (2012), was published just a few months before illness claimed him. In between, there are almost three hundred essays and reviews, some in French, and a monumental biography of a Russian writer whose fictional characters come alive as they reenact the metaphysical mystery play of the modern era.

Even the stutter that Frank struggled with all his life (but this writer remembers with fondness) looks in retrospect like a mark of election. The affliction struck a child who was born with an extraordinary aesthetic talent and a gift for empathy. It forced him to develop, while still in his teens, a powerful voice as a writer of critical prose. Authoritative and subtle, uncompromising yet forgiving, the voice was so resonant and expressive that had Hollywood come calling, it would have taken an Orson Welles (with the strut of a John Wayne) to have filled the bill. The force of this voice is already present in his "Dedication to Thomas Mann," published in the *Washington Square College Review*, the NYU student journal, in 1937; it is undiminished in "Thinkers and Liars," one of his last pieces in the *New Republic* about Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, and Eugène Ionesco, and it reverberates throughout his entire Dostoevskii pentateuch, the five volumes of his unsurpassed biography of the great Russian author and prophet.

Frank's own writer's voice was the Aaron to his Moses, except that it was inflected with a natural aesthetic intelligence and its corollary—empathy. The world picture that this voice invoked was complex and "impure" in the same way that a poem for T. S. Eliot, as Frank once wrote assessing Eliot's critical legacy, had to "preserve some 'impurity' if it was to be humanly meaningful" ("T. S. Eliot's *To Criticize the Critic*," *Commentary* 42, no. 3 [September 1966]: 87). It took Joseph Frank to fish out a quotation to highlight the poet's genius while showing that Eliot's politics, which Frank despised, were contrary to Eliot's own aesthetic intuition. What better illustration can there be of the Underground Man's conviction that in human affairs two and two do not add up to four?

As a critic, Frank entered the fray in the mid-1930s when the world was rent by

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a clash among the all-too-imperfect democracies and the perfection-mongering regimes of communism and fascism. Like many in his generation, he was fascinated with Karl Marx and identified with the Popular Front politics, up to a point. As Frank recalled later, a close friend of his, the son of a prominent Menshevik, provided him with unvarnished accounts of what was going on in the USSR. This helps to account for Frank's reluctance to join the Communist Party of the USA, and he stayed out even though many of his friends counted themselves among its members (The Oral History Project: Four Interviews with Joseph Frank, conducted by Gregory Freidin and Steven Zipperstein, Spring 2010).

Nevertheless, when his NYU professor of English, Samuel Sillen, then the book review editor for *New Masses* and a recent convert to communism, invited Frank to review books for the journal, Frank did not demur and became a regular reviewer for a communist magazine, albeit one not directly controlled by the party. His first review appeared in the 1 March 1938 issue. *New Masses* was then at the peak of its circulation and attracted some of the most prominent names in American letters (among the book reviewers were Kenneth Burke, Philip Rahv, Theodore Draper, and another of Frank's NYU English professors, Edwin Berry Burgum). What attracted Frank to the journal, however, was its unequivocal antifascist and anti-Nazi stand, then central to the agenda of the Popular Front. In this regard, up to the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, *New Masses* contrasted favorably with the isolationism of much of the American press, including the left-wing *Partisan Review* and the *New Republic*.

By the end of 1938, unhappy though he was with the existing order of American capitalism, Frank broke with his Red book-review outlet. His last piece came out on 29 November 1938. There may have been other factors that precipitated the break, but the change of mind was prompted, no doubt, by his studies with another of his NYU instructors, the strongly anticommunist philosopher Sidney Hook and, perhaps even more meaningful for Frank, the course he took with the American historian Henry Bumford Parkes, the author of *Marxism: An Autopsy* (1939). Along with them, Frank found prescriptive Marxism dead, its historical calculus—the ends justifying the means—odious, and its sacrifice of the arts on the altar of political expediency unacceptable. Russia, the birthplace of Fedor Dostoevskii and Vladimir Lenin, now ruled by Iosif Stalin, was Exhibit One on both counts, as was, of course, Germany, beloved by Thomas Mann, whom Frank deeply admired, and now ruled by Adolf Hitler. Parkes's *Marxism: An Autopsy*, offering both a profound critique of Marxism and a vaguely socialist statist program for humanizing capitalism, became a vehicle for Frank's profession of a new and liberal social and philosophical creed. "An Economic Basis for Liberal Values," as Frank called his long and sympathetic review of Parkes's book, failed to find a publishing venue in New York; Frank turned toward the South, where Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate, two Southern Agrarians, lent him a sympathetic ear.

Completed before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Frank's "An Economic Basis for Liberal Values" was published many months later in 1942, in the last issue of *Southern Review* to come out during the war years. By then, Frank, exempted from military service because of his severe stutter, was already busying books at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where he relocated for personal reasons after a short stint at the University of Wisconsin. While in Washington, he managed to proceed with his education, if under informal circumstances, with philosopher David Baumgardt, then a consultant for the Library of Congress, whom he befriended in the Library stacks. The former holder of the Hegel Chair at the University of Berlin and an expert on Franz von Baader and Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, Baumgardt became Frank's informal tutor and introduced him to a circle of other exile writers and scholars who were then residing in Washington, D.C. The entry into this enchanted

circle allowed Frank to continue his studies of great continental writers and thinkers. Soon he was hired—on the strength of his *Southern Review* publication—as a labor reporter by the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA). At the BNA, he had to turn out copy on a weekly basis, explaining in plain English the complex new labor regulations and statutes issued by the Roosevelt administration. The work was challenging, Frank was good at it, and before long he was promoted to editor. Recalling his stint at the BNA (1942–50), Frank viewed his “day job” as enormously valuable, especially for his growth as a writer.

By the time “Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts,” appeared in *Sewanee Review* in 1945, Frank’s critical stance had been fully formed. It combined the intellectual tradition of western liberalism, including a search for social justice and thus elements of Marx, with a commitment to abiding ethical and aesthetic values rooted in western individualism, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and, significant for Frank, modern literature and art. As far as he was concerned, modern art—an autonomous sphere of human activity—had as much to say about the human condition as religion, politics, philosophy, and economics. A historical-materialist conception of art, went the main thesis in *Spatial Form*, missed the very essence of modernism, its remolding of *time*-bound human experience in all of its moral, aesthetic, and existential complexity into a *spatial* construct. *Spatial Form* thus echoed “An Economic Basis of Liberal Values,” providing, in a manner of speaking, an aesthetic basis for the expression of liberal, humanistic values in literary criticism, a belief in their abiding efficacy. In Frank’s vision, what holds together the disparate, sometimes mutually exclusive, elements of the world picture is his faith in the power of art and ideas, coupled with his instinctive humanity—appreciation for human suffering, frailty, and contingency. Therein lies the pathos of the sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons*, so important for *Spatial Form*, or the condensed colloquialism of Dostoevskii’s “pity for man.” Lack of this “pity for man” was unforgivable. “It is unseemly,” Frank once chided a historian and a biographer whose work he admired, “even for a social psychologist to kick a man when he is down” (“The Birth of ‘Russian Socialism,’” in Frank, *Through the Russian Prism*, 1990, 223).

Frank’s magnum opus on Dostoevskii was thus preordained, indeed overdetermined. Already in college Frank was “really passionate about Dostoevskii,” as his NYU professor Sidney Hook remarked to him, then a young book review contributor to *New Masses*, after a class discussion (Interview with Steven Zipperstein and Gregory Freidin, Stanford, 2010). Then came his critique of Marxism, his postwar immersion in French existentialism, his admiration for Albert Camus, whose side he took in the famous polemic between Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the realization of the deep ideological and aesthetic kinship between one of Russia’s great writers and the most recent iteration of the clash of ideas precipitated by modernity.

In 1948, Frank was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to go to France. He spent two years there, attending the Sorbonne where, among other subjects, he studied Hegel with Jean Hyppolite. But most important for him, he appeared regularly at the informal Collège philosophique founded by Jean Wahl, where he met his future wife and lifelong intellectual interlocutor, the mathematician Marguerite Straus. The Collège philosophique, along with the informal discussion circle that Marguerite introduced him to and that included Alexandre Koyré, as well as the cafes and *caveaux* of St. Germaine-des-Prés, served Frank as a sounding board for the ideas animating European politics since the dawn of modernity and now resonating with the early salvos of cold war.

In those days in Paris, Dostoevskii loomed ever larger: from Camus’s oft-repeated debt to the great novelist (see Ray Davidson, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky*, 1997) to the explosive popularity of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, a self-consciously

Dostoevskian indictment of Marxist dialectic that sold half a million copies in France in the two years following its controversial publication there in 1945. No surprise then that the subject of Frank's first Gauss Lecture at Princeton University in 1955 was "Existentialism and Dostoevsky." He pursued the association further in the doctoral dissertation he wrote for the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, "Dostoevsky and Russian Nihilism: A Context for *Notes from the Underground*" (1960).

But Frank's big "Dostoevskii" evolved, after a long germination, into something other than a scholarly study of the writer's thought or formal device—into a full-fledged critical biography of the author. What was to be volume 1 of the 5-volume sequence, *The Seeds of Revolt*, came out in 1976 two decades after Frank had begun teaching comparative literature and directing the Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton University. A genre as capacious as the novel, biography allows one to embrace historical context, ideas, and psychology, along with all manner of human contingency. And just as Dostoevskii's novels recapitulated his own commitments and dramatized the ideological and metaphysical conflicts of his age, so Frank's biography of the great Russian was called forth by Frank's own life, his own commitments, and the historical struggles of his own age. Neither author turned toward fiction and biography by accident: for both, only art (and critical biography is the novel's closest cousin) was capable of giving these disparate elements a coherent and human form. Reading Frank's *Dostoevsky* is to hear the challenge and response of two giants, towering like sentinels, each over his own century. No better tribute to a critic is possible.

This is how, then, to borrow a phrase from Frank's *Idea of Spatial Form*, "the time world of history becomes transmuted into the timeless world of myth," or to paraphrase W. H. Auden's tribute to W. B. Yeats, a great man of letters becomes his admirers. The mark that Joseph Frank's legacy left on the study of Russian literature and culture in the larger Euro-American context is indelible and deep.

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Gale Stokes, 1933–2012

For well-nigh two decades after World War II the communist regimes of eastern Europe kept western scholars at arms' length. Predictably, given its semi-independent stance, Yugoslavia was one of the first to relax this attitude. And Gale Stokes was one of the first to take advantage of the change. It was a fitting symbol of incipient détente, because after graduating from Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York, Gale had served for nine years as an officer in the United States Air Force. He then decided to turn swords into, if not plowshares, then scholarship. He enrolled at Indiana University where, after completing a Master's degree, he read for a PhD. His chosen area was the Balkans and his advisor the widely respected Charles Jelavich. Given the latter's expertise in Yugoslav affairs it was not surprising that Gale chose to specialize in Serbian history. Thus, with the help of a Fulbright-Hayes dissertation grant, Gale and his devoted wife, Roberta, headed to Belgrade for eighteen months in 1967–68.

In Belgrade Gale worked mainly in the Serbian state archives and in those of the influential organization, Matice Srbska. His focus was on Serbian politics in the mid-nineteenth century, and his labors bore fruit in his first book, *Legitimacy through Liberalism: Vladimir Jovanović and the Transformation of Serbian Politics* (University