ISAIAH BERLIN ONLINE

Books of 1952

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Books of 1952

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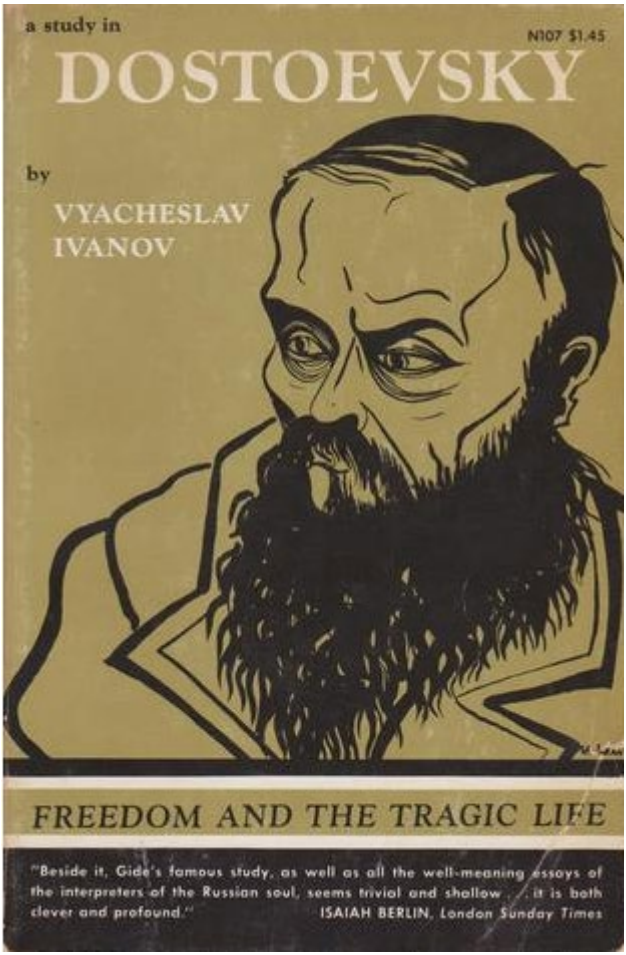

I MUST admit to having read shamefully few books of general interest in the course of the year. I have, for instance, not opened Harold Nicolson's *King George the Fifth* (Constable); nor G. M.

Young's *Stanley Baldwin* (Rupert Hart-Davis); nor Alan Bullock's *Hitler* (Odhams). Yet I have heard these three books very highly spoken of by critics whose judgment I value and trust. And I should like to have read W. Somerset Maugham's latest collection of essays, *The Vagrant Mood* (Heinemann).

Of the books I did read I place highly Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (Cape). Hemingway is a classical master; he has altered (for better and for worse) the style and the content of imaginative writing both in America and in Europe, and even in Russia. He is a figure of greater stature than the majority of those who have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the last decade or so; and this *nouvelle* is a finished masterpiece in his best and earner manner, before the decline of power which seemed to set in with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

I have also read with admiration the two first volumes of Steven Runciman's *A History of the Crusades* (Cambridge University Press). Runciman seems to me to combine genuine scholarship and imagination with a noble and dignified narrative style: his book is a history in the manner unjustly damned as 'the grand' by jealous pedants, and it puts to shame much historical production which seeks to conceal incapacity for writing behind the specious assumption that only what is crabbed and small can be precise or true or important. Mr Runciman is not without personal predilections or bias: but he is a historian in the great tradition.

Of all books of criticism I derived the greatest pleasure from a study of Dostoevsky called *Freedom and the Tragic Life* (Harvill Press), written in German a good many years ago, by the exquisite Russian poet, scholar and critic, Vyacheslav Ivanov, who died in Rome three years ago. This book, translated very competently by Norman Cameron, with a foreword by Sir Maurice Bowra, is by no means easy to read, but it is worth the effort. Beside it, Gide's famous study, as well as all the well-meaning essays of the interpreters of the Russian soul, seems trivial and shallow. In spite of being, in places, obscure and metaphysical, it is both clever and profound, and an object lesson in the avoidance of smooth classifications.

In the spate of all but worthless books and articles on Russia at present pouring from the presses there is one work of the highest quality: a noble, moving and beautifully written meditation on the past and present of his country by the Russian art historian Wladimir Weidlé, entitled *Russia Absent and Present* (Hollis & Carter). This short essay of a hundred pages is the most balanced, civilised and informative account of Russia's position in the world during the last three centuries, and a valuable possible antidote to the absurd concept of Russia as a kind of permanent anti-Europe at present propagated by serious philosophising historians and half-baked psychologists and anthropologists with a taste for fitting facts into fanciful and politically by no means innocuous patterns. M. Weidlé's pages on St Petersburg are perhaps the best ever devoted to that immortal city.

Mr Peter Quennell is an authentic man of letters, and the essays in *The Singular Preference* (Collins) are a model of elegance and of sharp and precise formulation of first-hand impressions, and great, commendably professional, skill in organising facts and judgements about persons and literary milieus.

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