

## Valentin Tomberg

### THE EAST EUROPEAN CONCEPTION OF SUFFERING

#### **Editor's note:**

*Valentin Tomberg occupies the curious position of being best-known for an anonymous work. This book, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (reviewed in GNOSIS #7, available from Element Books) was published anonymously and posthumously, as the author requested. Since then it's come to light that its author was Tomberg, a Russian of Baltic German extraction. Born in St. Petersburg in 1900, he lived in Estonia after World War I, where he wrote and lectured on Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. During World War II he converted to Roman Catholicism and subsequently lived in England, where he died in 1973. This essay, reprinted with the kind permission of Lindisfarne Press from Tomberg's *Collected Essays* (forthcoming in 1995), was written around 1931.*

A few years ago a large American film magazine addressed its readers with a call to take part in a competition for new ideas for films. Among the various conditions the applicants had to fulfill there was one in particular which, if not adhered to, would make any idea unusable. This was the stipulation for a "happy ending." Every film story had to end happily, otherwise it could not hope for success --it would not suit the taste of an American audience. Similar requirements for a similar competition were made by another American magazine, only there it was a question of stories, of "true" stories! It was not only required that the stories be true, but they must also have a 'happy ending,' because the American reader cannot bear stories, which, although true, have an unhappy end.

These examples shed light on the American's relationship to suffering. Suffering is for the American something, which has no right to exist. It should be eliminated from life. And if it continues to be there, if it still haunts the dark corners of life, this has to be because civilization is not yet advanced enough. There will come a time, however, when the progress of civilization will put an end to suffering. Human beings will then be materially secure. They either will all be healthy, or if they experience sickness, they will be entirely free of pain by means of anesthetics, narcotics, etc., and will so enjoy a long life. As long as this has not yet been achieved, one should be ashamed of pain as one is ashamed of the necessary lower life processes of the body. For the presence of suffering is senseless; it is something to be ashamed of.

This view is presented by the American author Prentice Mulford (1834-1891) in a form which is the practical consequence of the denial of suffering. In his two works, *The Scandal of Dying* and *The Scandal of Living*, he postulates with vigor the *scandalous* character not only of suffering, but also of the extreme form of suffering, death. And with a strong impulse to concentrate on the "positive," completely *ignoring* suffering, he saw the possibility of eliminating pain and death.

This willful pursuit of absolute "positivity," by which suffering shall be eliminated -this is the deeply seated motivation of Americans, the key to the secrets of America.

However, one of the secrets of existence is the fact that everything essential has its polarity somewhere. Every being has its antipode, every ideology its counter-ideology, every culture its opposite culture. So also does Americanism have its antipode within mankind. Simultaneously with the arising of American culture, there arose its polarity in another place on earth. This is the culture developing in East Europe.

Russianism and Americanism are polar opposites. And hardly anywhere else does this polarity show itself so clearly as in their conceptions of suffering. For as suffering is negated in America, so is it affirmed in Russia. An expression of this "wisdom of suffering" can be found in the works of that excellent representative of Russian spirituality Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky.

The great literary work of Dostoevsky brings certain views to expression. All his works are means for placing before mankind, vividly and clearly, certain truths which were deeply rooted in his soul. And these truths which Dostoevsky had to present to mankind were not merely his personal convictions. Rather he made conscious the wisdom which is anchored in the depths of the Russian folk soul by putting it into words. Now these truths consisted in a specific conception of *suffering* and of *guilt*.

Suffering is for him something that should not be avoided. It is valuable. And every man who suffers gains something from that suffering. It gives a man more worth. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the *starets* Zosima kneels before Dmitri Karamazov when he realizes what sufferings are in store for Dmitri. The holy man kneels before the undisciplined, passionate young person because he has reverence for his future suffering.

And something further is in this wonderful deed of Zosima's. It contains in addition an expression of gratitude on behalf of all men for everything Dmitri will suffer. For every sufferer--even a criminal--suffers for all men. All mankind *is* sick, and this common sickness comes to crisis in a particular individual through whom the burden is removed from the others. Just as in an abscess all the poison in the organism is concentrated in one place so as to free the organism as a whole from poison, so every sufferer -yes, even he who is overcome by the dark forces of evil, who is possessed of evil represents a place within humanity where poison is concentrated for the benefit of all. Therefore the gratitude of Zosima was appropriate, for in Dmitri, the "poisonous matter" of the Karamazovs was coming to a head.

It is thus with all suffering. Suffering is never merely a "personal problem" for one individual; it is the concern of all mankind.

This, then, is the first thesis of Dostoevsky's conception of suffering:

*Every sufferer suffers for all*

Now there exists one kind of suffering which is deserved: that which is inflicted as punishment, or is the result of aberrations. And then there is a suffering which--like birth pangs--heralds the dawn of something new. A person suffers because of his crime, or

suffers through the greatness of what is passing through his soul. There is a difference between suffering the bitter dregs from the cup of passion and the pain of sacrificing something lower so that something higher may arise.

Dostoevsky shows how these two types of suffering become one. He shows how every punishment can be transformed into the birth pangs of a higher life. Every punishment is unjust, is a martyrdom, so long as the person has not recognized his guilt. If he has recognized it, however, it is already an awakening to a higher life, and then the punishment is no longer punishment, but rather the process of birth, in pain, of a higher man. Justice can only exist when the guilt has been recognized and the punishment is freely willed. When this happens, however, there intervenes a process of grace from the spiritual world, and then justice becomes irradiated by the light, which begins to shine from within the man. As the moon by day vanishes in the sunlight, so the just reprisal vanishes in the eclipsing light of the sun of grace, which always shines in the depths of humaneness.

And so the second thesis could be formulated thus:

*Every punishment can be transformed into sacrifice, into the birth pangs of a higher man.*

Such insights are only possible when one has an intense feeling for the belonging together of all men, the unity of mankind. Out of this feeling another fundamental insight of Dostoevsky's arises: that every crime has in its background many more guilty people than one would think. The whole is responsible for all its parts. So, for instance, all the brothers Karamazov were guilty of their father's murder. Dmitri *wanted* to do it (though he did not). Ivan *knew* of the plan and did not prevent it. And Alyosha *was unable* to prevent it; that was his fault. The murder itself was done by the hand of the lackey Smerdyakov, but the forces which moved his hand belonged to the others.

And so it is in every community. Many are guilty when one man sins. In the future development of conscience, it will be necessary to take not only one's own deeds, but also those of others, into the sphere of one's conscience. The conscience can extend itself, it can awaken into its complete scope when a man becomes conscious of this fact: you are a member of the whole. And the vivid experience of this fact leads us to the recognition of the third thesis proposed by Dostoyevsky:

*of one individual's crime, many are guilty.*

If mankind is a whole, not only physically but also morally, and if it follows that the suffering and guilt of the individual concern the whole, then the question arises: how is it with the light-filled, the good, the true? [If the gloom, pain, and sin of all are the concern of all, must not the same be true of happiness, blessedness, goodness? Does not the unity of mankind also comprise the unity of everything that prospers?

In putting this question, we direct our attention to the most significant, the most central, of Dostoevsky's insights. For we are actually asking about the nature of that

power which can inwardly transform punishment into sacrifice, which creates the value of suffering, which makes it possible for all to bear the guilt of all.

Now this power is just as much there for all men as suffering and guilt are there for all men. This power, which makes all suffering holy, which can transform every punishment into sacrifice, which *is* the sun of the conscience, the light "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" - this power is Christ. Christ is for Dostoevsky neither a dogma nor an ideal. He is *actually present* where ever suffering is felt *in* such a way that one wishes to kneel before it, wherever punishment all at once, through the miracle of inner transformation, begins to shine as a sacrifice for all men. When light falls on hidden tendencies of your own soul that make you co-responsible for things and deeds you would immediately have turned away from -then Christ is present. And this is the final and most central thesis of Dostoevsky's "wisdom of suffering":

*All suffering can be experienced as the breath of Christ's spirit in human souls.*

Dostoevsky's relationship to suffering is as characteristic of Russia as Mulford's relationship to it (as something senseless) is typical of America. For just as it is natural in America to negate suffering, so it is natural in Russia to affirm *it*. A "happy ending" is for Russian spiritual life -- yes, even for the Russian destiny --just as foreign as the Russian tendency towards self-torment is for the American. Dostoevsky's works have no "happy ending," but through the clouds of suffering and passion that surround his characters, there radiates often the light of that Being Who is *the key to the secret mystery of the affirmation of suffering*.