

# Fyodor Dostoevsky on the Human Condition and the Human Ambition

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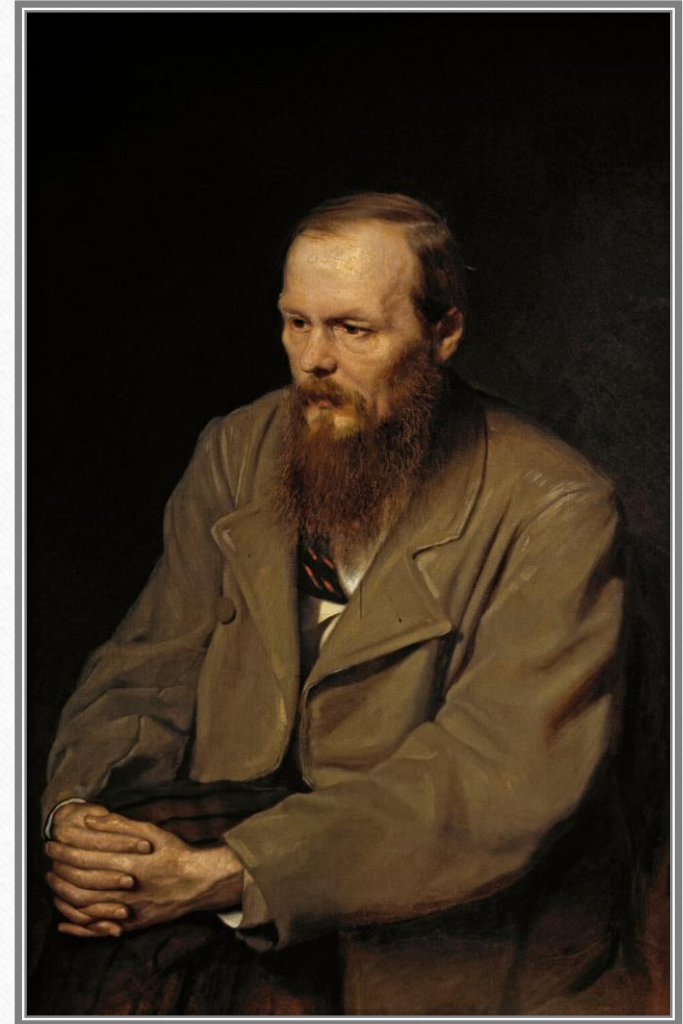
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**30.10(09.11).1821, Moscow-  
28.01(9.02)1881, St. Petersburg**

**Vasily Perov. Fyodor Dostoevsky**

1872.

The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



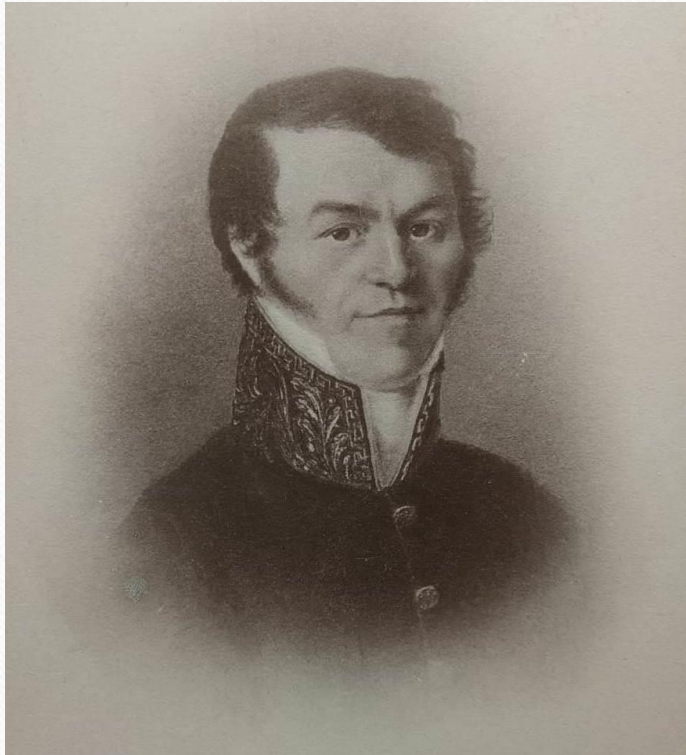


Moscow Pulmonology Institute (Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor)



# Dostoevsky's Parents Mikhail and Maria (née Nechaeva)

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Mikhailovsky Castle / Engineering School

# Paul I of Russia

Vladimir L. Borovikovsky

The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



“A human being is a mystery. It needs to be solved, and if you spend your life solving it, do not say you have wasted your time; I am engaged with this mystery, because I want to be a human being.”

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Fyodor Dostoevsky in a letter to his brother Mikhail, 1839

# *THE POOR FOLK*

“A new Gogol has come!”

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*Nikolay Nekrasov*

Vissarion Belinsky



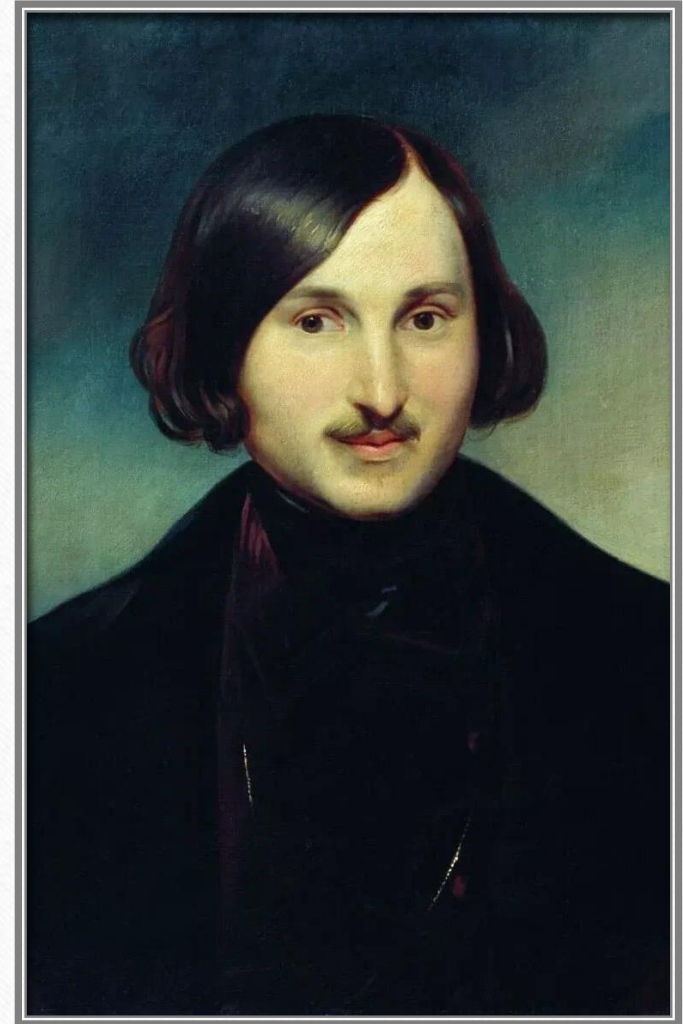
Nikolay Nekrasov



## Nikolay Gogol (1809-1852)

“The Overcoat” (1842)

- The overcoat takes places of human relations; its theft kills the petty official
- *The Poor Folk*: official uniform sold to help people in need



*The Poor Folk* (1846)

*The Double* (1846)

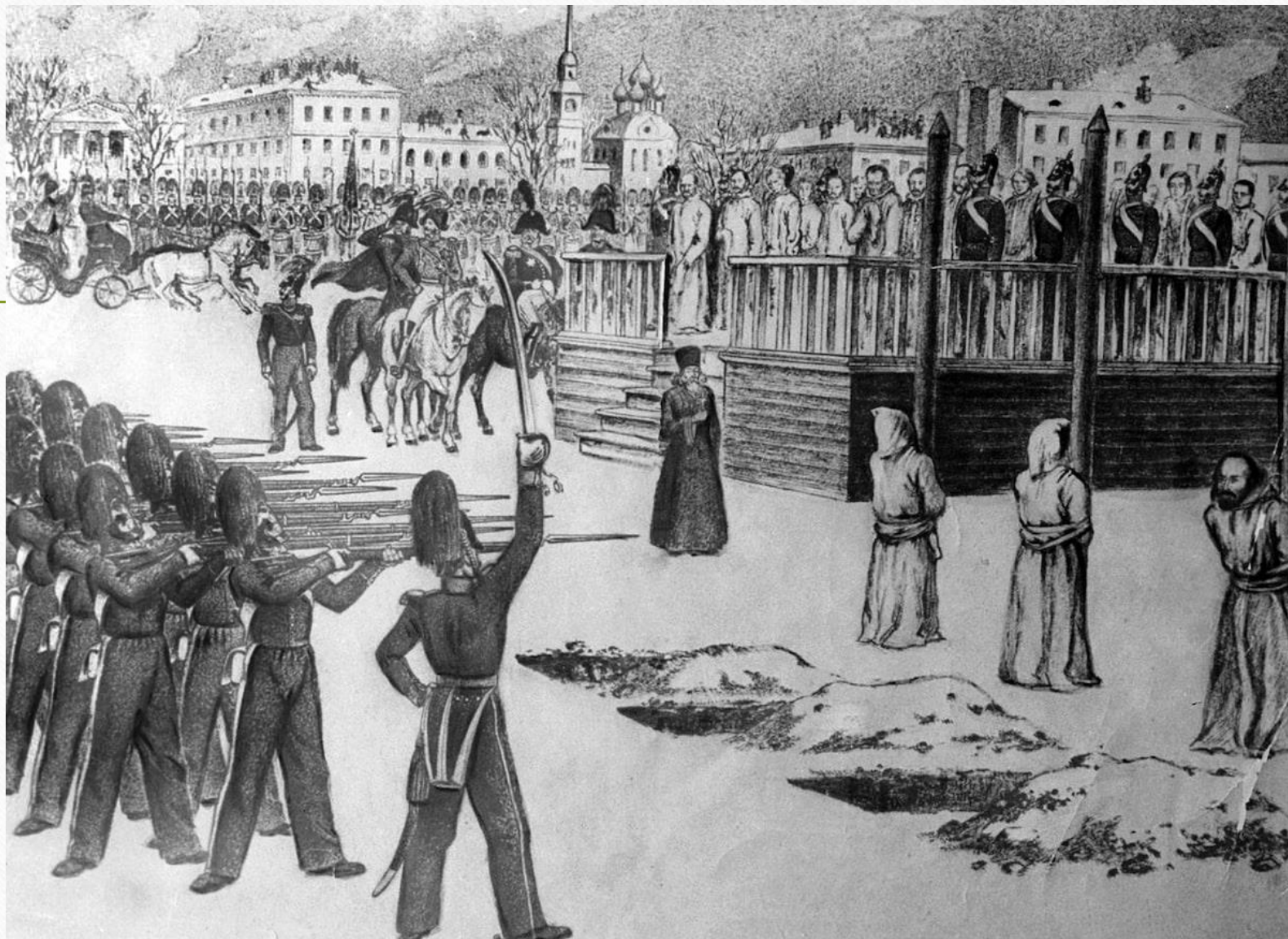
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*The Landlady* (1847)

*The Weak Heart* (1848)

*White Nights* (1848)

*Netochka Nezvanova* (1849)



## *Notes from the House of the Dead, 1854*

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My God, yes! *Humane* treatment may humanize even one in whom the image of God has long been obscured. These “unfortunates” need even more humane treatment than others. It is their salvation and their joy. I have met some good-hearted, high-minded officers. I have seen the influence they exerted on these degraded creatures. A few kind words from them meant almost a moral resurrection for the convicts. They were as pleased as children and as children began to love...

*here and elsewhere, translations from Dostoevsky's fiction are by Constance Garnett*

...the highest use a human being can make of their personality, from the fullness of the development of the self is akin to destroying this self, giving it over completely and entirely to each and every person, unselfishly and fully. This is the greatest happiness. This is the paradise of Christ. ... However, as I see it, trying to achieve this great goal is utterly pointless if, once this goal is achieved, everything fades away and disappears, if a human being is to have no life upon achieving this goal.

It follows that there is future life in paradise.

What it is like, on what planet, in what center, maybe in the ultimate center, that is, in the bosom of the universal synthesis, i.e. God? – that we do not know. ...

But if human beings are no longer human beings, what will their nature be like? ...

This is a mingling of the complete “self,” the knowledge of and synthesis with everything. “Thou shalt love everything as thyself.” ...

NB. Thus, everything depends on this: whether Christ is taken as the ultimate ideal on earth, i.e., everything depends on Christian faith. If you believe in Christ, you believe you will live forever. ...

Christ has entirely entered humanity, and human beings strive to transform into the self of Christ as their ideal. Having achieved that, human beings will see clearly that everybody who has reached the same goal on earth has become part of their ultimate nature, i.e. Christ. ... We shall be persons while unceasingly merging with everything

....

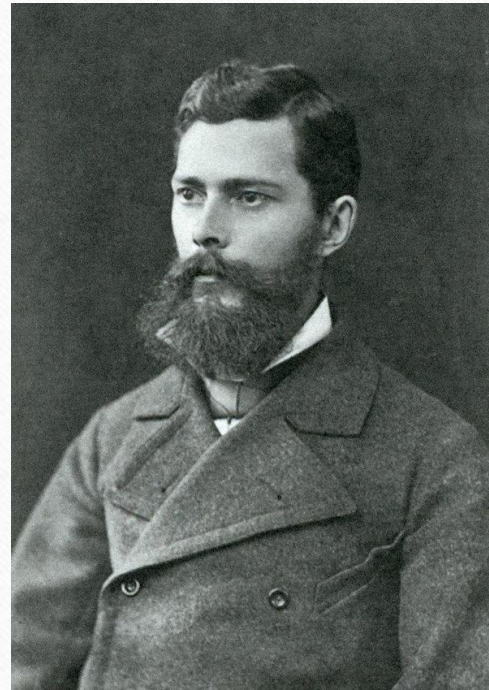
# First marriage (1857-1864)

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**Maria Isaeva (née Konstant) (1824-1864)**

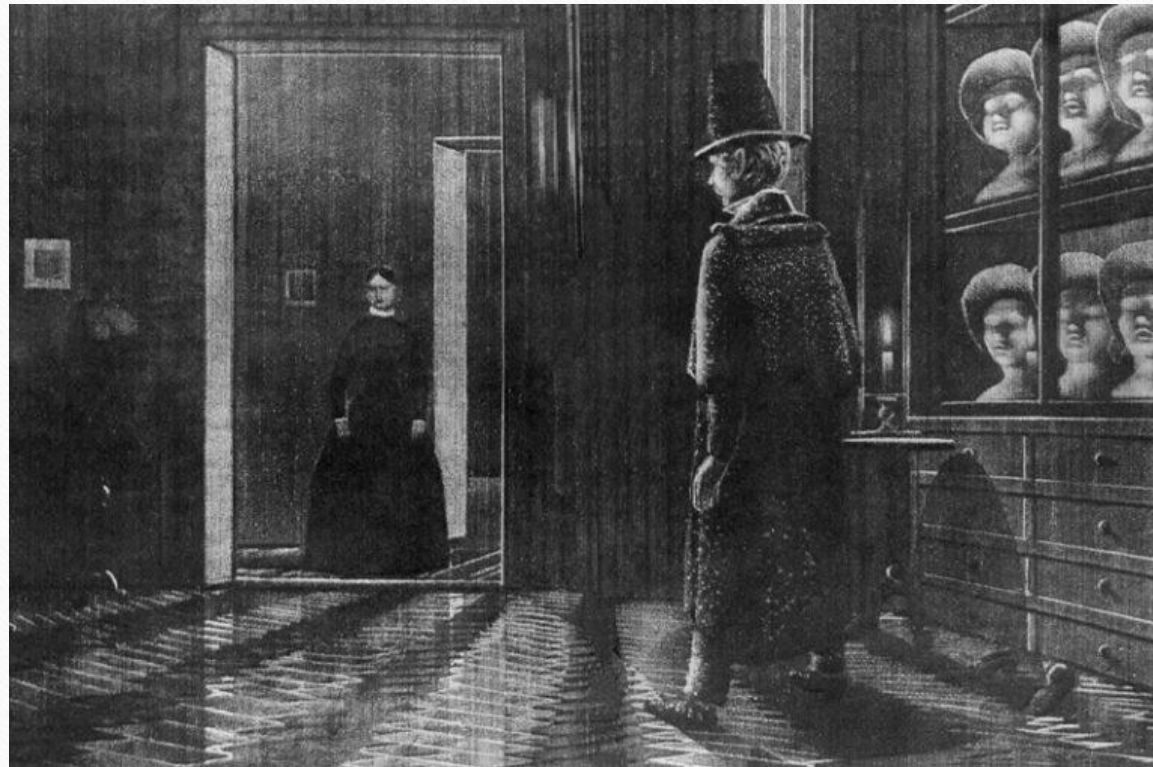


**Pavel Isaev, Dostoevsky's stepson (1847-1900)**



# *Notes from Underground* (1864)

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Dmitry Pisarev  
Nikolay Chernyshevsky  
Auguste Comte

Human beings are rational and utilitarian,  
guided by considerations of usefulness

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**[Man] will at once be transformed from a human being into an organ-stop or something of the sort; for what is a man without desires, without free will and without choice, if not a stop in an organ?**

The Underground Man

Power, power was what I wanted then, sport was what I wanted, I wanted to wring out your tears, your humiliation, your hysteria--that was what I wanted then!

I am convinced to this day that it was just because I was ashamed to look at her that another feeling was suddenly kindled and flamed up in my heart... a feeling of mastery and possession. My eyes gleamed with passion, and I gripped her hands tightly. How I hated her and how I was drawn to her at that minute! The one feeling intensified the other. It was almost like an act of vengeance.

...by then I was incapable of love, for I repeat, with me loving meant tyrannising and showing my moral superiority. I have never in my life been able to imagine any other sort of love, and have nowadays come to the point of sometimes thinking that love really consists in the right--freely given by the beloved object--to tyrannise over her. Even in my underground dreams I did not imagine love except as a struggle. I began it always with hatred and ended it with moral subjugation, and afterwards I never knew what to do with the subjugated object. And what is there to wonder at in that, since I had succeeded in so corrupting myself, since I was so out of touch with "real life"...

Where are the primary causes on which I am to build? Where are my foundations? Where am I to get them from? I exercise myself in reflection, and consequently with me every primary cause at once draws after itself another still more primary, and so on to infinity. ... [H]e [the man] has found a primary cause, the foundation, that is, justice. ... Spite, of course, might overcome everything, all my doubts, and so might serve quite successfully in place of a primary cause, precisely because it is not a cause. – The Underground Man

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, **to which everyone gives the name of God** – St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*

The Positive faith sets forth directly the real laws of the different phenomena observable, whether internal or external; i.e., their unvarying relations of succession and resemblance, which enable us to foresee some as a consequence of others. It puts aside, as absolutely beyond our reach and essentially idle, all inquiry into causes properly so called, first or final, of any events whatever.

[Freedom] throughout in obeying without hindrance the laws applicable to the case under consideration. When a body falls, it shows its liberty by moving, according to its nature, towards the centre of the earth... ...every vegetative or animal function is said to be free, if it is performed according to the laws applicable to it, without any hindrance from within or from without. ... If human liberty consisted in obeying no law, it would be even more immoral than absurd, as making all regulation impossible, for the individual or for the society. ... No mind can refuse its assent to demonstrations which it understands. ... The will admits of a liberty similar to that of the intellect, when our good instincts acquire such ascendancy as to bring the impulse of affection into harmony with its true purpose, overcoming the antagonist motors.

Auguste Comte. *The Catechism of Positive Religion*

**Thank you for your attention!**

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