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Andrew M. Drozd. *Chernyshevskii's What Is to Be Done? A Reevaluation.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001. ix + 332 pp. $79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8101-1739-6.

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The Misunderstood Chernyshevskii

Andrew M. Drozd has provided an excellent commentary on Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), a novel that had an enormous impact on nineteenth-century Russia. For Vladimir Lenin, it was one of his favorite books--in fact, in 1902 he borrowed the title for his major political treatise. Today in Russia there is at least one Metro station named after Chernyshevskii, which is the one near the American consulate in St. Petersburg. But for most people outside of the former Soviet Union, Chernyshevskii is largely unknown, and consequently *What Is to Be Done?* remains an obscure title.

Drozd, following a trend that largely began in the 1980s, holds that this socialistic novel has more often than not been greatly misunderstood. Siding with a few other Western literary scholars, he argues that Chernyshevskii's novel is "much deeper, more literary, than previously thought" (p. 5). Traditionally, *What Is to Be Done?* has been categorized as an ideological treatise which advocated utopianism as opposed to scientific socialism (p. 34). Drozd presents a strong case that while Chernyshevskii's work clearly has an ideological message, it is nonetheless a work of art, and in no instance does the author promote utopianism.

Drozd argues his thesis in five chapters. In the first he addresses the question of art, describing and documenting Chernyshevskii's views on literature (pp. 20-47). This chapter argues that Chernyshevskii had very sophisticated ideas about literature and sheds light on what he might have had in mind when he wrote his novel. Following this theme, the second chapter shows how *What Is to Be Done?* qualifies as literature (pp. 48-79). "Ideational Content," the third chapter, examines the ideological message of the novel, focusing on the "women's question," love between the two sexes, theory versus intuition, materialism, and utilitarianism (pp. 80-112). Chapter 4 reevaluates the most discussed character of the novel, Rakhmetov (pp. 113-140). Drozd argues that Rakhmetov, a revolutionary ascetic, was not a positive hero and not someone Chernyshevskii thought worthy of emulation. Drozd shows how Rakhmetov was a portrayal of a real-life model, a repentant nobleman, and is used by Chernyshevskii as a parody, an antihagiography, of the "sacrificing saint," a kind of person he despised (pp. 126-129). Finally, the analysis in chapter 5 demonstrates that the novelist was not on the side of the utopian socialists, even though one of the characters is shown to be of that persuasion (pp. 141-170).

In his commentary, Drozd describes how the novelist presented many characters at different levels of political development, many of whom he did not personally agree with. Unfortunately,

many readers over the years have apparently overlooked the subtleties and the many layers of the novel and as a result have misinterpreted the author's intentions. According to Drozd, Chernyshevskii wanted the reader to think and not be told any specific answers about how to organize the future society. "Thus, rather than providing a how-to manual with a set of ready-made answers for his readers," concludes Drozd, "Chernyshevskii merely poses the question while exhorting his reader to find an answer to it. How and what was to be done are left totally unsaid by the author. Rather, Chernyshevskii invites the reader to provide his or her own answer" (p. 179).

Nikolai Chernyshevskii (1828-1889) had a hard life; he paid a heavy price for his radicalism. After his arrest on 7 July 1862, Chernyshevskii was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in the Tsarist capital of St. Petersburg. While awaiting trial, he wrote *What Is to Be Done?*, which was his swan song to the revolutionary movement. By an incredible bureaucratic snafu, the novel was approved for publication by the Tsar's censors.[1] In the period March-May 1863, the work was serialized in the magazine *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) and became an instant success among Russian youth. Afterwards, Chernyshevskii was sent to the Siberian labor camps. His period of exile came to an end after two decades, when he was permitted to move to Astrakhan, where the Volga River flows into the Caspian Sea. Four months prior to his death he was allowed to return to his hometown of Saratov.

Drozd, in his overview of how the novel was written and published, cautions that there are many ambiguities about the nature of the writing and the motives of the government for approving it for publication (pp. 6-9). Since the writing appeared in installments, it is unlikely the censors were caught off guard. Possibly, the government calculated that Chernyshevskii had no talent as a fiction writer and would ultimately prove to be an embarrassment to the radical movement. Whatever the case may be, the author had to write in a way that masked his radical message, which makes the task of interpretation all the more difficult. The government also did not allow Chernyshevskii to review and edit the proofs. Given this background, it should come as no surprise that the novel's meaning is subject to debate.

The novel basically follows the motif of a lovers' triangle (pp. 39, 79), but defies literary conventions because it avoids the typical tragic ending. An eclectic work, idiosyncratic, dialogical, and perhaps a harbinger of postmodernism, the novel combines elements of a conventional love story, an adventure, diaries and personal letters, and narrations that mimic the genre of the life of a saint as well as that of the "virtuous prostitute." It also reflects influences from Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) and even medieval literature. According to Drozd, "Chernyshevskii quite consciously subverts many of the plot devices and themes of his literary predecessors" and thus the novel is "anything but a model of stylistic purity" (p. 63). There is a "deliberate clumsiness" in the writing with the goal of "exposing the triteness of different plots," which is Chernyshevskii's argument for "an expansion of the boundaries of art" to include "some variety" (pp. 38, 64-65). In other words, *What Is to Be Done?* is a literary work, not simply a political treatise nor a blueprint for advancing radicalism.

Although most scholars do accept it as a novel, they are uncertain of its classification. As Drozd explains, "Numerous labels have been proposed: socialist, sociophilosophical, sociopolitical, philosophical-revolutionary, historical-political, utopian, intellectual, and so forth" (p. 49). Drozd is inclined to think of *What Is to Be Done?* in terms of the German literary categories of *Erziehungsroman* (novel of education) and *Bildungsroman* (novel of formation) (p. 49). He views the work as a story of personal development because of its portrayal of Vera Pavlovna, whom, rather than Rakhmetov, he regards as the main character or

the "organizing pole" (p. 49). The story captures Vera's social, political, and philosophical growth and maturation, both through the narrative and through a series of dreams that are interspersed with it. Through Vera's story the novel addresses the "women's question," which was being hotly debated in Russia at that time.

A difficulty in defining the lessons of the novel is determining what views of the characters are personally endorsed by Chernyshevskii. Drozd seems to believe that the narrator in the novel is linked to the author (pp. 68, 132, 135) and that there is a detachment between the narrator and the main characters (p. 77). Thus, the characters are not mouthpieces of the author (pp. 75-79). But it is not simply a matter of listening to the narrator to understand Chernyshevskii's point of view. The narrator is in some instances a prankster, and full of irony. For example, the narrator makes it known that he sometimes speaks in double-talk and is not always to be trusted (p. 69). Sometimes the narrator voices agreement with certain characters, but a careful reading will often show that "his approval is flagellation" (p. 72). Drozd suggests that the author "baits and forces his readers into a misreading of the novel" in order "to demonstrate that art should be free" (p. 47). Of course, another factor to be considered is Chernyshevskii's desire to be enigmatic on account of the censors reading over his shoulder.

A long-standing controversy of *What Is to Be Done?* is the scene depicting Vera's fourth dream. In the novel, the dream presents the imagery of the Crystal Palace, and it becomes a utopian vision of the future of Russian society after the revolution. According to W. J. Leatherbarrow, the Crystal Palace, embodying "the new spirit of scientific optimism and heroic materialism," was for Chernyshevskii "a symbol of the secular paradise on earth that man would achieve through socialism."[2] In the same vein, James H. Billington classifies *What Is to Be Done* as "the picture of a new social order."[3] However, Drozd argues that the fourth dream in the novel does not correspond to Chernyshevskii's personal views, but is simply the imaginings of a character who is undeveloped in her socialist thinking (pp. 165-170). Many readers have viewed the novel as advocating utopian socialism, but Drozd makes a convincing argument that such an interpretation is a gross misreading. Although Chernyshevskii had at one time been sympathetic to utopian socialism, such was not the case by the time of his arrest (p. 146). Traditionally the novel has been viewed as advocating materialism, utilitarianism, and rationalism, but Drozd argues that these were not Chernyshevskii's views (pp. 89, 97, 101-112).

Drozd's position runs counter to Fyodor Dostoevskii's interpretation of *What Is to Be Done?* , which raises interesting questions. Was the author of *Notes from The Underground* and *Crime and Punishment* simply guilty of smearing an author who was down on his luck? Was Dostoevskii's underground man, as he stuck his tongue out at the Crystal Palace and ranted against the "man of action" revolutionary, ridiculing viewpoints that Chernyshevskii did not in fact advocate? Was Raskolnikov, the murderer in *Crime and Punishment*, proving Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream a nightmare, even though Chernyshevkii himself did not believe in the particular dream anyway? Dostoevskii was not ignorant of the literary scene in St. Petersburg and he certainly kept himself abreast of the aesthetic and ideological concerns of his contemporary writers, so what is to be done with Drozd's interpretation? If there is a sequel, one hopes that Drozd will devote more attention to Doestoevskii's reaction to Chernyshevskii's novel.

Also, what about the many admirers of *What Is to Be Done?* who viewed the fourth dream favorably? Did they, too, misread the novel? During the 1920s, the revolutionary years of the Soviet Union, "Chernyshevskian aesthetics" was a frequent theme in Russian literature. Many of the artists and architects living in the New Russia

dreamed of a future socialist society that would feature a "Crystal Palace" type of imagery.[4] Even Emma Goldman regarded Vera Pavlovna as worthy of emulation and established a sewing co-op in New York based on what she read in Chernyshevskii's novel (p. 13). How ironic if many people acted on the writing in ways that were alien to Chernyshevskii's true thinking. Of course, when an author is universally misunderstood, one has to consider whether or not the work in question has failed.

Andrew M. Drozd's *Chernyshevskii's* What Is to Be Done?*: A Reevaluation*, which was originally his dissertation,[5] is a worthy contribution to the study of Russian literature. Any future serious study of Chernyshevskii will need to address Drozd's analysis. It would be good if a publisher would issue a new English translation of *What Is to Be Done?* in order to gain it a wider audience. Such a new edition should include an introduction drawing heavily from the rich insights provided by Drozd. Although many may now triumphantly think that the questions raised by Marx have been answered, *What Is to Be Done?* is also important because of the feminist issues it raises. In certain respects, Chernyshevskii was able to foresee developments that would take place in marriage and the family, and this could certainly be a topic for further study. In the meantime, an affordable paperback edition of Drozd's book is a must, as it would make for excellent required reading in Russian Studies at the graduate level. Also, his book serves as a superb example on how to do literary criticism.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 190.

[2]. W. J. Leatherbarrow, *Dostoevskii and Britain* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 8.

[3]. James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966, 1970), p. 527.

[4]. See Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, "Architectural Discourse in Early Soviet Literature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): pp. 477-495.

[5]. Andrew M. Drozd, "Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?*: A Reevaluation" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1995).