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The Eternal Husband (Wiseblood Classics)

Fyodor Dostoevsky

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FROM THE INTRODUCTION by Joshua Hren In three months we will have been abroad two years. In my opinion it's worse than being exiled in Siberia -Dostoevsky to S.A. Ivanova, Florence, 1869 Dostoevsky wrote The Eternal Husband during the same period he began The Life of a Great Sinner (later to become The Brothers Karamazov). During this season Dostoevsky complained to an acquaintance, asking “How can I write when I'm hungry, when in order to get two thalers for the telegram, I pawned my trousers? But after all, she is feeding a child, what if she herself goes to pawn her last warm woolen petticoat. And this is the second day now we've had snow (I'm not lying, check the papers!).” With some struggle the author garnered an advance of 100 rubles from the editors of Dawn, where The Eternal Husband was to be published the next year, 1870. At this point in his life the former Siberian prisoner had already completed Notes From Underground, Crime and Punishment, and The Idiot. Although Dostoevsky could correctly inform his friend Strakhov that “to this day I have not learned to master my means. A Multitude of separate novels and tales are compressed together into one, so that there is neither measure nor harmony . . .” The Eternal Husband is, in the words of the great Russian critic Konstantin Mochulsky, “a chef-d'oeuvre of Russian narrative art . . . The composition satisfies all the rules of classical poetics (exposition, complication, rising action, culmination, catastrophe, denouement, epilogue) the episodes are apportioned according to a strict plan, the details seem to be measured out in advance. “ Far from the romanticized bohemian starving artist, the literally impoverished writer, depressed by The Idiot's absolute lack of success (“I feel,” he wrote “that compared with Crime and Punishment, The Idiot's effect on the public has been weaker. And consequently all my amour-propre has been aroused”), wrote his most artistically symmetrical, structurally beautiful tale. Further, as the remarkable Dostoevsky translator Richard Pevear notes, “The more spectacular ideological elements of Dostoevsky's work, such as the polemical monologue of the man from underground or the 'poem' of the Grand Inquisitor, which have drawn so much commentary from critics and philosophers, are entirely absent from The Eternal Husband. They are not of its essence, then. What is of the essence, of his 'usual essence,' is the mechanism of metaphysical rivalry and deviated transcendence. Which is portrayed here in its purest form, as a kind of duel, almost a prizefight, its rounds signified by the ringing of bells.” Answering a late-night knock at the door, a man finds himself face to face with the husband of a former lover. But he is stunned by an awful question: does the husband know of the affair? The story's antimony is embodied in the eternal husband's conflict with the eternal lover. These two rivals, these deep enemies, are paradoxically similar. Unable to tolerate one another, neither can they do without one another. This is in part because, as René Girard observes in his indispensable Resurrection From the Underground, “In The Eternal Husband the wife is dead, the object desired has disappeared, and the rival remains. The essential character of the obstacle is fully disclosed.” In the husband's eyes, because the lover fooled and ridiculed him thoroughly he contains the essence of seduction, an essence he finds absent in himself. The husband thus seeks to make himself the companion, emulator, and rival of his opponent, and we soon find that “the most monstrous monster is the monster with noble feelings.”

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