

It is 7pm, the sun starting to set in Cabezón De La Sal, Spain in the patio next to the highway at El Reino Ecobar, Tuesday, July 25th, 2017 right before my show.

The owner is bringing out my delicious and healthy spanish black bread and vegan something or other hummus n shit, and I can tell he thinks I'm very strange. Very closed. At the moment, which stretched into hours, I was not there, but in this book, waiting for everything to pan out, either tragically or everything's great and the love story becomes not only a physical and emotional one, but a love story to God and to Russia's future in global policy exchange and the whole kaboodle thrown in. Since it's a love story, that's how it should go, especially with 19th century romantic Russian lit.

I have the black book in my hand and I can't put it down because I'm so close to the end, and I'm waiting for everything to make sense in the book and for the moral to begin to be solved.

The book was **SMOKE**.

And it never got solved.

It just ended, and everything went up in smoke. To sum it up, Turgenev's final conclusion and point in the book is that everything is just smoke (p. 289 in the pdf version available on Google).

If that's not existential I don't know what is.

This romantic, pastoral writer who moved to Europe to be all refined and maintain his elegance and intellect and not be dragged down by all his native troglodytes, shocked everyone with this complete annihilation of any larger hand or sense of right or wrong. It was a love story, but so real, in that both characters were weak and indecisive and basically were too insecure to value anything over money. Ok, we expect that from real life, but a book?

I don't even think Turgeneve even knew how existential this book was.

There is no God, an overarching control that will balance the world, and if not make the "right" thing happen obviously, have a reason beyond our control and immediate understanding.

Therefore, Dostoyevsky is SO not an existentialist.

I am not religious at all. I guess I'd have to call myself an atheist since I don't actually believe in God, though I'm interested in religion and relate to a lot of religious art and texts, etc. I also like

Jesus, and certain values in some religions. I feel exactly as J. Lennon put it, that God is a concept, but concepts can be pretty important and influential obviously.

I digress though. My overarching point is that there is no way Dostoyevsky was an existentialist as that man believed in God so much, reading the *Brothers K*. almost had me doing the same.

It's funny to me that Dostoyevky, just because he writes about poor people who "sin" and do messed up things, as if they're acting with no God or moral compass whatsoever, is considered existential when the point of ALL his writing is changing that character or idea by the end of the story into a perfect Christian (19th century Russian style). Case in point, most obviously in *Crime & Punishment*.

Turgenev on the other hand, this Romantic writer, has this mask of refinement and lofty, noble goals and desires, when in fact, this story is as empty as a shell.

I'm writing about this three years after my Turgenev binge, so my memory isn't as sharp as I'd like it to be, but *Rudin* is a little in the same vein, though I think *Smoke* is a more intense and impactful book. After reading *Smoke*, I had an urge to share and three years later I have the time to actually formulate some thoughts.

Those who mistakenly refer to Dostoyevsky as an existentialist (did they not read to the end of *Crime & Punishment* or a single page of *Brothers K*?) should read Turgenev's *Smoke* or *Enough: Notes of A Deceased Artist* for the closest thing to 19th century Russian existentialism I've come across.

Dostoyevsky was a religious man (or at least was at the time of almost all his works), and religion is existentialism's antithesis if there can be one.

You could distill a lot of his works to a battle between existentialism and love/Russian orthodoxy. Indeed, existentialism is granted a large role, that of the antagonist, but it is always defeated with undoubtable victory, the most potently illustrated in the *Brothers K*, Dostoyevsky's most defining work.

People like books because it makes them think all of life can be contained in a book, gives them the illusion that life is simpler than it is; impossible to capture the intricacies and level of fucked up complexity of reality.

Turgenev is so existential he didn't even become that way or know he is. He was just born it. His personal life story exemplifies it. He's so existential he doesn't even know what that means or why Russia thought he was so.

Dostoyevsky is literally the opposite. All of his books show the conquering of existential dread with religion.

So, I hope after reading this, the next time you hear Dostoyevsky in the same breath with existentialist writers, you will say "No! Have you read *Smoke*?"

Thank you.

SCREENSHOTS DURING MY READING ENCLOSED BELOW

On, Grigory Mikhailovich, what are you saying? Does human nature change? 'In cot and burial plot the same.' Or perhaps..." Here Potugin bent over even lower. "Perhaps you are afraid of falling into her hands. It's a fact - there's no avoiding falling into someone's hands."

Litvinov gave a forced laugh.

"You think so?"

"There's no avoiding it. Men are weak, women are strong, Fate is omnipotent. It's difficult to reconcile oneself to a colourless life; it's impossible to forget oneself completely. There lies beauty and affection; there lies warmth and light. How can one resist? And you'll run there like a child to its nanny. Then, of course, inevitably come cold, darkness and emptiness. And it ends with your losing the taste for everything and ceasing to understand anything. First, you won't understand how it's possible to love, then you won't understand how it's possible to live."

Litvinov looked at Potugin, and it seemed to him that he had never met a more lonely, desolate, hapless individual. Potugin did not shrink or submit on this occasion; pale and utterly downtrodden, with his head in his chest and his hands on his knees, he sat motionless and

was uncharacteristic for Potugin, but instead. With

"Corrupt the fiendishly proud? Proud"

Litvinov tried to failed. It was his fiancée; place. He realised this would it would be thoughts, not leave him

The way

If you come want glory.

SMOKE

for Irina as his only remaining refuge – and was angry with her. For some time Litvinov's feelings had grown daily more complex and confused. This confusion tormented and exasperated him; he was lost amid this chaos. He yearned for one thing – to set off along a road, any road, so long as he no longer went round in circles in this meaningless semi-darkness. Positive people such as Litvinov ought not to be led astray by passion: it destroys the very meaning of their lives. But nature has no truck with logic, with our human logic; it has its own logic, which we do not understand and do not recognize until, like a wheel, it runs us over.

On parting with Tatyana, Litvinov had one thing in mind: to see Irina – and he set off for her hotel. But General Ratmirov was at home; that, at any rate was what the porter told him, and he had no wish to go in. Feeling himself in no state to dissemble, he made his way to the *Konversationshaus*. Litvinov's inability to dissemble was experienced that day by both Voroshilov and Pishchalkin, whom he chanced to meet: to the one he blurted out that he was an empty vessel, to the other that he was catatonically boring. It was fortunate that Bindasov did not show up; there would probably have been a "*grosser Scandal*".* Both young men were astounded; Voroshilov

who soon abandoned what she saw as an uncouth Russian backwoodsman for the greater attractions of the European rakes she encountered. Lavretsky returns to Russia without his wife, embittered but determined to justify his existence by hard work for the social good. He meets again the nineteen-year-old Liza, whom he had known when they were children. They fall in love and, when a false rumour of his wife's death reaches them, they decide to marry. However, they learn that his wife is still alive. Liza is profoundly religious and, believing that she has committed a grave sin in daring to love a married man, she enters a convent to atone. Some years later, Lavretsky visits the convent, although as an outsider he is not allowed to speak to the nuns. Liza passes by just a few feet away from him and, obviously aware of his presence, simply drops her head and clasps her rosary beads tightly to her.

However, Lavretsky, in the epilogue to the novel, seems to have achieved some measure of contentment: he has become a good landowner, and has worked very hard at improving the lot of his peasants. Therefore, he has done something positive with his life, and has to a certain extent re-established contact with his roots and ensconced himself within his Russian family "nest".

The novel was extremely popular in Russia, because it showed the country's traditional values in a positive light. This was acceptable for all sections of Russian society, both the reactionary classes and the progressives who desired political change but believed that the fount of all wisdom was to be found in indigenous rural culture.

the Eve The genesis of Turgenev's next novel *On the Eve* (1860) – if

... was already breaking when he finished his task. It was a letter to Irina.

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THIS IS WHAT WAS in the letter to Irina:

My fiancée left yesterday: we shall never see each other again. She took with her everything which hitherto had seemed desirable and dear to me; all my plans and intentions have disappeared with her. My labours have been wrecked, my long-term work has come to naught. All my occupations have no sense or use; all that has died. My former self is dead and buried since yesterday. I feel that clearly, I see it, I know it, and I have absolutely no regrets about it. It wasn't in order to complain that I broached the subject with you... Is it for me to complain when you love me, Irina?! I simply wanted to tell you that of all the dead past, of all these undertakings and hopes which have turned to smoke and ashes, one living thing remains: my love for you. Apart from that love I have nothing left; to call it my sole treasure would not be sufficient. My whole self is in that love; in it is my future, my vocation, my shrine, my native land. You know me, Irina; you know that all phrase-making is alien and repellent to me, and that, however powerful the words may be in which I try to express my emotions, you will not doubt their

sincerity or find them exaggerated. It is not a boy who, in a moment of ecstasy, whispers unconsidered vows to you, but a man, tested by the years, who, simply and directly, almost with horror, expresses what he acknowledges to be the indubitable truth. Yes, your love has replaced everything for me – everything, everything. Judge for yourself: can I leave this everything in the hands of another, can I allow you to be at the disposal of another? You – you will belong to him; all my being, all my life blood will belong to him. And what about me? Where am I? What am I? On the margin, a spectator, a spectator of my own life! No, that is impossible, impossible! To participate, participate surreptitiously in something without which there is no point in breathing and no possibility of doing so, is a lie, is death. I know what a great sacrifice I am demanding of you, without having any right to demand it. Indeed, what can give anyone the right to demand sacrifice? But it is not out of egoism that I am acting like this: an egoist would find it easier and less unsettling to avoid raising this question at all. Yes, my demands are heavy and I'm not surprised if they frighten you. The people with whom you have to live are hateful to you; you find society burdensome, but do you have the strength to abandon that society, to trample the wreath with which it crowned you, to turn public opinion against you – the opinion of those same hateful people? Question yourself, Irina and don't take on a burden you cannot shoulder. I don't want to reproach you, but remember that you've already succumbed to its charm. I can give you so little in exchange for what you will lose! Listen to my last word: if you don't feel capable of abandoning everything and following me tomorrow, today even – you can see how boldly I talk, how I do not spare myself – if the uncertainty of the future terrifies you, if alienation, isolation and popular censure terrify you, if, in a word, you cannot rely on yourself, tell me frankly and without further ado, and I will go away. I will go away with a lacerated soul, but I will bless you for telling the truth. If you, my

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She answered him
Come and see me
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but you love me

She was sitting in h
year-old girl who h
previous day show
cular box of lace s

beautiful, my radiant queen, have really fallen in love with such an insignificant and obscure man as me, and are really prepared to share his fate – well then, give me your hand and let us embark together on our difficult path! Only know that my decision is beyond doubt: either all or nothing! It's insane... but I can't do otherwise; I can't, Irina! I love you too much.

Your

Grigory Litvinov

Litvinov himself did not much like this letter. It did not express entirely faithfully and accurately what he wanted to say; awkward expressions, some elevated, some bookish, were to be found in it, and, of course, it was no better than many other letters which he had torn up, but it was the last one, and the main thing had been said. Tired and tormented, Litvinov did not feel capable of extracting anything else from his head. Besides, he did not have the skill to set out his thoughts in literary fashion and, like anyone who is unused to writing, he worried about his style. His first letter had probably been his best; it had been warm and heartfelt. However that might be, Litvinov sent off his epistle to Irina.

She answered him with a short note:

Come and see me today, she wrote. He is going away for the whole day. Your letter worried me exceedingly. I'm still thinking, thinking... and my head is spinning with thoughts. I feel very downhearted, but you love me and I'm happy. Come.

Your I.

She was sitting in her room when Litvinov came in. The same thirteen-year-old girl who had been on the lookout for him on the staircase the previous day showed him in. On the table in front of Irina a semicircular work one hand she was absent-mindedly