

terton, has observed that in a secular age people don't believe *nothing*, they believe *anything*. The book our group was supposed to be discussing began with a great deal of blather about what "modern man" would and would not believe. Its version of modern man was heavily influenced by 19th-century scientism; he looked, as a matter of fact, rather like a Continental theologian. But I've got news for the book's authors. Last I heard, modern man was out on the West Coast waiting for the harmonic convergence.

The decay of orthodoxy leaves a vacuum that certainly can't be filled by the desiccated rationalism of the *Common Catechism*. And the amorphous, nonjudgmental, sentimental quasi-religion of my liberal friends can't say why it shouldn't be filled by the cult of St. Elvis.

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## Letter From Albion

by Andrei Navrozov

### *The Writer as a Young Liar*

Recently, someone asked me to review *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, but so far nothing has come of it. The book, published by Rutgers University Press, is the fruit of many years' work under the direction of Joseph Frank, author of the voluminous Dostoyevsky biography. It contains a selection of 152 letters, culled from the four-volume Soviet edition of 1935.

I have now read the selection, together with all the letters in the original Russian, and I am starting on the *Diary*. So far, however, I have been unable to form any original impression of the writer, save one: in his youth, Dostoyevsky was a pathological liar. But more of this later, perhaps. For the time being, I invite the reader to join me and the 23-year-old Fyodor in St. Petersburg. It is September 1844.

For the past six years, since he became a student at the Academy of Military Engineering, almost every letter Dostoyevsky has written has to do

with money, an interest that would remain with him for the rest of his life. July 3, 1837: 30 rubles, 12 rubles. September 6: 14 rubles. October 8: 950. December 3: 70, 300. February 4, 1838: 50, 300. June 5: 25. August 9: 40. March 23, 1839: 60, 100. Well, perhaps it is reasonable for a student, far from his parents' house, to write home asking for money, even despite the fact that the old man, recently widowed, was barely able to make the ends meet. But what for? June 5, 1838: "Absolutely all my new friends have bought themselves their own shakos, and my general-issue might have offended the Tsar" during a parade (he forgets mentioning earlier that the parade in question had involved a total of 140,000 troops).

Writing to his son from the family estate on May 27, 1839, Mikhail Dostoyevsky pleaded: "From the beginning of spring until now, not a single raindrop, not even dew. The heat, the horrible winds have ruined everything. . . . What threatens us is not just bankruptcy, but real starvation! After this, will you reproach your father for sending you so little? . . . I enclose thirty-five paper rubles, or 43 rubles 75 kopeks by the present exchange rate. Please use it sparingly, since, I repeat, I will not be able to send you anything again soon." According to Joseph Frank, "so far as one can judge, Dostoyevsky never wrote home for funds without eventually receiving the sum requested." Mikhail Dostoyevsky's plea was written in response to his son's demand for money he "absolutely needed" to buy, in particular, a trunk in which he wanted to keep his possessions, along with other sundries (e.g., a subscription to the French "book club" of the time). Mikhail Dostoyevsky died on June 8, 1839, under mysterious circumstances (possibly murdered by his serfs). Thus, according to Professor Frank, "his despairing communication to his son was, literally, his last testament, and Dostoyevsky must have received it almost simultaneously with the news of his father's death."

Now, five years after his father's death, young Dostoyevsky directs his energies to the person of Peter Karepin, a wealthy, middle-aged gentleman who, upon marrying Fyodor's sister, became the trustee of the Dos-

toevsky estate and the family's legal guardian. Fyodor receives an officer's salary, along with regular payments from the estate, but he is far from pleased. He writes to his brother on September 30, 1844, that he is "in a hellish predicament." He has decided to quit military service ("I resigned because I just had to resign"): "Life is bleak if one's best time is wasted."

No one knows that I am leaving the service. If I leave right now, what shall I do? I haven't got a kopek to buy clothes. My resignation becomes effective October 14. If those Moscow pigs [i.e., the trustees] don't come through with the money in time, I'm done for. I shall be dragged off to jail for sure (no doubt about it). It's really comic.

Dostoyevsky's answer to the "hellish predicament" is to attempt extorting 1,000 silver rubles from the prudent Mr. Karepin in exchange for a promise to renounce all future claims on the estate. Naturally, Mr. Karepin (perhaps on the basis of the young man's "track record" to date) does not want to believe him, doubting both the genuineness of the need and the legality of the promise. I have dug up one of Karepin's letters to Dostoyevsky, and, since it is unavailable in English, I translate it here nearly in full, retaining the syntactic oddities of the original.

"Dear brother," Karepin writes to his brother-in-law, "I send you 50 silver rubles; in return for the arrogance, and the rudeness, with which your letters are filled, I enclose two accounts—one for last year's silver, and the other for this year's assignments; finally, my conclusion as to which of you has received the most money. As you will see, you have been sent the most, Andrei received little, and Nicholas nothing at all. There was perhaps good reason for this, as you had to be set up during your first year out of the Academy; after that, clearly, one brother has no right to draw more than another, not to mention your sisters. Your father's estate yields, as we have seen from the experience of the past three years, approximately 4,000 paper rubles, depending on the harvest or the market price of the produce. From this we must subtract the trustees' fee, payment of private debt to Mr. Marcus, to whom

1,000 rubles is owed, so each brother receives 700-800 paper rubles, up to 1,000 in a good year. That is your basic capital.

"Apart from the sorrow induced by the realization that a son does not value the labors and cares of his late parents, wishing to squander everything they have suffered for one year after leaving school and God only knows in the name of what—it has not been possible to sell a share of the estate in your behalf legally since you were still a minor. It remains impossible, because the estate is held in trust, the debt has not been repaid, and there are other minor siblings. Even if after a long process of legal petitioning of the relevant authorities one were to obtain their leave to redistribute the estate, one would still be in a similar difficulty, since there would not be enough to pay you off all at once, while even now you regularly receive more than your share against future proceeds, to be accounted for in the final reckoning. This difficulty will remain not only as a moral but also as an official obstacle to any redistribution.

"I hesitate to tell you this truth because you understand it yourself, but also because it is easier to imagine the carelessness of youth rather than cold egoism and utter indifference to one's family.

"No sooner did you put on your uniform than you began mentioning two things: your inheritance and your debts. I kept silent thinking it all

many people—you are not the first—are out there, making their way in life, guided by pure, clear, and ever-just principles of work, duty, and patience, with all the intelligence the good Lord has granted, with a good education. . . . Are you destined to cling to your splendid sophistry, to abide in the abstract sloth and languor of your Shakespearean dreams? What's in them, besides some enfevered, inflated, inchoate—exaggerated, and soap-bubble-like—image? Whereas, in reality, before you lies a road of honor, of serious endeavor, of social good—not in some slavish imitations of another's vision, but in the achievements of your own, hard-earned intelligence and knowledge.

"If you have ears still for the advice and friendship and kin, then may you hear this, dear brother!" I have run out of space. Karepin's letter continues for another paragraph.

"Those Muscovites are unspeakably

vain, stupid, and quarrelsome," young Fyodor commented on Karepin's advice writing to his brother on September 30, 1844. "In his last letter, Karepin for some unearthly reason advised me not to get too enthusiastic about Shakespeare! He says Shakespeare is just like a soap bubble. I wanted you to know about this idiotic resentment of Shakespeare. How in the world does Shakespeare come into the picture? You should have seen the letter I wrote him! In one word, it was a model piece of polemics. I really gave it to him." A paragraph later: "In the name of God, ask them to send me that money! What worries me most is that I shan't have anything to put on."

The letter ends: "Karepin drinks vodka, has a rank, and believes in God."

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## SCREEN

### Siren Song

by Katherine Dalton

*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*; written and directed by Patricia Rozema; Vos Productions.

*Shall I part my hair behind?  
Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel  
trousers, and walk upon the  
beach.  
I have heard the mermaids  
singing, each to each.  
I do not think that they  
will sing to me.*

"My theory," says Patricia Rozema, "is good art is what you like." Rozema, a down-to-earth, 28-year-old Canadian, is the writer, director, editor, and coproducer of *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. *Mermaids* can be hard to describe: It is both a film about independence and a Canadian ode to incompetence — about an impossibly red-haired, wildly inadequate "organizationally impaired" temporary secretary in Toronto named Polly.

Polly is the kind of person who says "Holy Moly," whose polyester sweaters and milk mustache and malapropisms belie a vivid inner life. She comes complete with bicycle and a slightly nosy love of taking black-and-white photographs. She also has a salt-of-the-earth self-sufficiency and sincerity that puts the better dressed, better educated, better spoken people she idolizes to shame. To her employer, the curator, Polly is just a "sweet imbecile," a half-life half-lived. But she is more like what the Russians call a holy fool — wiser than the "wise," and under some good angel's protection.

Rozema does not pretend she has no axes to grind. The trick, according

to her, is to distract the audience from the proselytizing at hand with the story of Polly's coming of age. "I do spend a lot of time thinking about what I'm trying to say and how I'm going to hide it," Rozema says and smiles. "I have strong didactic, evangelical tendencies which I have to sugarcoat with really nice characters like Polly."

Rozema's ax here is just the old saw "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." "Artistic relativism" is what Rozema calls it, and it sounds almost too simple, perhaps. But then again, if the excellent is something other than what you like, who is making that judgment for you? Is taste something you should really leave up to the art critic at the *Toronto Star*? Or Anatole Broyard at the *New York Times Book Review*? Somebody in the English department at Yale? Your mother? Or someone with a more forceful personality or better credentials? To say good art is just what you like is, I'll grant you, naive. But if good art is what somebody else likes, that's just pretentious. And what good has pretension ever been to anybody?

So our heroine, our champion of the independent opinion, is this 31-year-old "person Friday" who proclaims things like, "Isn't life the strangest thing in the world?" and "Y'know, sometimes I think my head is like a gas tank, and you have to be *really careful* what you put into it, or you mess up the *whole system*." It's like having Don Quixote for your knight. Certainly Polly is nothing if not unpredictable — from ordering by number in a Japanese restaurant (she gets squid), to taking photos of a couple in the park (she gets caught), to being hours late for the curator's birthday party (with lip-stick over the entire lower half of her face).

Polly is, says Rozema, "my license to be earnest." She is ours as well; endearing for just that earnestness, and by the end of the movie so wonderful

because, despite every crazy thing about her, she is right. And the curator, with whom Polly is in love ("that's a strong word to use when it's not your mother, but there you go," Polly shrugs), is not right. Polly sends in her photographs (under a "pseudo-name") to the curator, who dismisses them with a glance and a sharp remark and destroys Polly. Polly pedals home, burns all her prints, and pushes her camera off the roof. It is a terrible scene, really, for all Polly's funniness — it is as if Shakespeare's best fool, Dogberry, and not Lear, were going mad on the heath.

Not many films take a line of Eliot's for their title, even a line from his most famous poem. Rozema says she was hard up for a name, happened to be rereading "Prufrock" one day, and latched upon the image for her film. Eliot's elegantly metered dirge to the death of initiative is mournfully sophisticated and cynical, in a way neither Rozema nor Polly is; Rozema has to stretch the image a bit to make it fit (those mermaids show up in Polly's daydreams).

There are, actually, another three lines which fit the movie better:

*We have lingered in the  
chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with  
seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and  
we drown.*

It takes so little — an offhand remark — for the curator to kill what was for Polly the whole of her existence. But holy fools live under the special protection of the Gentleman upstairs, and Rozema has written a comedy: Polly discovers her idol is a fraud, and that's all she needs to bounce back in her idiosyncratic, inimitable way.

This film is not a product of Hollywood. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* was made for peanuts (\$275,000 American) and shot in 23 days, with a