

MICHAEL HOLQUIST

Dostoevsky and the Novel



PRINCETON LEGACY LIBRARY

Dostoevsky and the Novel

Dostoevsky and the Novel



Michael Holquist

Princeton University Press
Princeton, New Jersey

Copyright © 1977 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
Guildford, Surrey

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data will
be found on the last printed page of this book

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the Paul
Mellon Fund of Princeton University Press

This book has been composed in VIP Bembo

Printed in the United States of America
by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

This book is dedicated to my sons:
Peter, Benjamin, and Joshua

Acknowledgments

The peculiar anxiety that comes with the conviction that there is no past to learn from or to lean on is what this book is "about." Perhaps that is why its author is more than ordinarily conscious of the debt he owes to the institutions, books, and people who constitute the enabling history of his own volume. If it has been overlong in its preparation, it has not been for shortage of the scholar's most valuable resource—time, generous gifts of which were made by Yale University's Morse Fellowship, the International Research and Exchanges Board, Wesleyan University's Center for the Humanities, and the Australian National University's Humanities Research Center. The Paul Mellon Fund helped to defray printing costs of the book. Parts of Chapter 2 appeared in *Canadian-American Slavic Review* (summer 1972).

I am grateful in a variety of ways to my fellow *Dostoevskovedy* in the United States, particularly Donald Fanger, Joseph Frank, Robert Louis Jackson, and Victor Terras. Had I been able to incorporate more of their suggestions, this would have been a much better book than it is. If I have succeeded in saying anything that is valid about Russia, it is because I have been gifted with extraordinary friends there: Vadim Kožinov (whose efforts on behalf of M. M. Bakhtin [Bakhtin] deserve the gratitude of all serious students of literature), Sergej Bočarov, and Genja Gačev. Thanks also to my former colleague Vadim Liapunov, whose erudition is matched only by the patience with which he suffers impetuous American friends. The students and teachers (they will know which was which) of the Literature Major in Yale College, particularly Alvin Kernan, Peter Brooks, Walter Reed, Margie Ferguson, Donald Freeman, Tom Doyle, and David Dammrosch were particularly resourceful in dramatizing the ways in which friendship can be an act of mind. I am grateful to Mrs. Gianna Kirtley for aid in the final stages of the manuscript's preparation. Thanks finally to Katerina Clark, wife and colleague, who made the completion of this book (among many other things) possible.

August 1976

Austin, Texas

A Note on the Transliteration System Used in This Book

The IPA system is used where actual Russian words have been quoted and for citing editions published in Russian. Familiar Russian names (“Dostoevsky”) or borrowings (“dacha”) are given in their more usual spelling.

Preface

This book consists mainly of detailed readings of specific works. These interpretations, however, are based on certain assumptions of a more general nature, the most important of which should at least be mentioned. The interpretations that follow are grounded in a dilemma shared by a genre, a nation, and a man. Each of these three categories has its own line of development. This book looks at what happened when the three strands became intermixed. The novel, Russia, and Dostoevsky may each be seen as characterized by particularly urgent problems of self-identification, may be said to have a biography. At the center of each such biography stands the question, "who am I?" Each in its own way strives to answer the question of what it is by finding a story that will somehow explain how it came to be. Thus, while the task is necessarily different in its implications for each, the novel as a genre, Russian historiography, and the man Dostoevsky all appeal to narrative as the royal road to knowledge of what they are.

The notorious difficulty of defining the novel, the problem of its identity, stems from the fact that individual representatives of the genre differ so radically from each other. Each great novel is more unique in its class than examples of other genres in theirs. Each contains a multitude of specific details that differ from those in other novels. They tell the lives of individual persons. Each seeks to define the distinctive features of its own characters—what makes them unique, why they are what they are and not something else—therefore, a tendency toward idiosyncrasy inheres in the genre itself. As soon as a new definition for "the novel" is coined, at least three new ones are written or rediscovered that subvert such a generalizing impulse. Something like this assumption that idiosyncrasy is at the heart of what might be called novel-ness is what Viktor Shklovsky had in mind when he said of that most peculiar of books, "*Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature."¹ The paradox consists in the

¹ *O Teorii Prozy* (Moskva, Federacija, 1929) p. 204.

Preface

uniqueness of its members defining the class to which they belong. The novel is not only *about* problematical identity; its characteristic theme of selfhood and the ways in which it pursues the topic in narrative put its own formal identity into constant question.

The central role of anomaly in the novel as a genre is what insures that it will be the most characteristic cultural expression of nineteenth-century Russia. Russia, too, labored under the necessity of defining what *it* was. A major preoccupation of its people during that period was somehow to come to grips with their own peculiar status in the family of nations. Excluded from such defining categories of West European history as the Renaissance and Reformation, to name only two, they were just as anomalous when judged by the reigning historiographical norms as the novel was when measured according to the standards of traditional poetics. Russia, too, was forced to meditate its own identity. It sought the answer in history, in a coherent story the logical end of which would be a definition of the national essence.

The motivating assumption of this book is that the generic impulse of the novel to problematize identity, on the one hand, and the national quest of the Russians for an identity of their own, on the other, met and fused in Dostoevsky's works. The shape of his career as it is charted by the works he wrote, as well as the shape of the individual novels themselves, may be understood as morphological answers to the same existential questions. The characteristic dilemma animating a Dostoevskian novel is how a character finds, or fails to find, a story he can live as his own. The novels are quests for a proper biography, attempts to fit the contingency of individual lives into the form of pre-existing life narratives.

The book is laid out in a series of chapters that it is hoped outline a shape of their own. The first chapter sketches the Russian historical background—or rather the absence of it—that everyone during Dostoevsky's lifetime sought to fill. The next chapter concerns itself with *Notes from the Underground*, the text of which sets up the problem that dominates all the others following it: if there is a difference between liv-

Preface

ing and telling, how can I tell a story about my life, myself, that is nevertheless somehow true? There follow a series of readings that show Dostoevsky's various experiments for sealing lives with story. The emphasis in the readings, then, will be on plot in the Dostoevskian novel, but plot conceived as including the metaphysical implications of narrative structure as well.

While this book contains readings of most of Dostoevsky's fiction from the "major phase" and some too, of the earlier texts, it does not include an interpretation of *The Adolescent* (or, as it is sometimes translated, *A Raw Youth*). I have not touched on this novel for two reasons: one, it seems less interesting in its own right,² when judged by the very high standard of Dostoevsky's other late works; and, two, its functional role in the structure of my argument is preempted by the utopian aspects of *The Possessed* and *Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the pattern of son-evolving-into-father that is present in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

² But see Horst-Jürgen Gerigk's book devoted exclusively to this novel: *Versuch über Dostoevskijs "Jüngling": ein Beitrag zur Theorie des Romans* (München, Wilhelm Fink, 1965).

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	ix
Chapter 1. The Problem: Orphans of Time	3
Chapter 2. The Search for a Story: <i>White Nights</i> , <i>Winter Notes on Summer Impressions</i> , and <i>Notes from the Underground</i>	35
Chapter 3. Puzzle and Mystery, the Narrative Poles of Knowing: <i>Crime and Punishment</i>	75
Chapter 4. The Gaps in Christology: <i>The Idiot</i>	102
Chapter 5. The Biography of Legion: <i>The Possessed</i>	124
Chapter 6. The Either/Or of Duels and Dreams: <i>A Gentle Creature</i> and <i>Dream of a Ridiculous Man</i>	148
Chapter 7. How Sons Become Fathers: <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	165
Afterword	193
Index	199

Dostoevsky and the Novel

== Chapter 1 ==

The Problem: Orphans of Time

I

Russia is always being discovered, or at least since the sixteenth century, when disputes arose in Europe as to whether von Herberstein or Sir Richard Chancellor could claim the honor of what Hakluyt was to call "the strange and wonderful discovery of Russia." For Milton in the seventeenth century and Voltaire in the eighteenth, Russia was still resistant to symmetrical English or French models of time and space, linear history, and binary (occident/orient) geography. One of the reasons Westerners still find it difficult to classify Russia is that the Russians themselves have never been quite sure where and when they are.

For most of Europe, January 1, 1700 was the beginning of a new century. For the Russians it was an even more momentous occasion. By decree of Peter I, it was the end of an old chronology that dated events from the creation of the world, and the first day of a new epoch that was to be calculated according to the Julian calendar. The new calendar was another of Peter's attempts to break down the differences between Russia and the West, and its adoption is perhaps the most comprehensive symbolic act of his reign. It is an emblem of Peter's intention to Europeanize not only Russian culture and space—to change the course of history, in other words—but to change the native sense of *time itself*.

The fact that in Peter's reign the year 7208 was supplanted by the year 1700 is a metaphor for much subsequent Russian history. It is first of all ironic that the Julian calendar should have been adopted as a progressive measure at a time when most of the rest of Europe was gradually going over to the even more accurate Gregorian calendar. Thus while Peter brought Russian time more into congruence with Western time, there would still be a gap (depending on the century) of twelve or thirteen days between Russian and European dates.

The Problem

It remained to the Bolsheviks finally to wipe out this discrepancy when they introduced a new calendar to mark their revolution, as Peter had for his. But if the difference between a French, say, and a Russian calendar in the nineteenth century was only a matter of days, the difference between the historical development of French and Russian culture was felt to be considerably greater. For the Russians after Peter the clock—or calendar—was always West European, with the consequence that they felt out of phase at any given moment. Their history did not seem to parallel that of those privileged states in the West which shared a Roman Catholic Middle Ages or Renaissance Humanism, to mention only two defining ages that were absent in the Russian past. This problematic relationship of the Russians to their own antecedents may be seen as one of the reasons why it is not until the nineteenth century that a culture arose that Russians and West Europeans alike would define as being uniquely Russian, distinctive, but no longer exotic.

It is not, then, the blind prejudice of Westernizers alone that maintains that “Russian literature . . . starts with Derzhavin (1743-1816) and Pushkin (1799-1837) and all but one or two significant figures in it lived within the life-span of a single man, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910).”¹

While this may be merely curious or strange to West Europeans, it is a matter of the profoundest concern for the Russians themselves. Long before Sartre, they were forced to ask “What is literature?” as they strove to answer the question, “Can we have one?” In thinking this problem through, they repeated the pattern of Peter’s calendar reform as they compared the West European literary past with their own. They were chagrined by the poverty and peculiarity of their native tradition in the face of developments in France or England. Since they began, as had Peter, by assuming that Western models of development were privileged, their problem was somehow to create a national literature that would be similar to those in Europe. At the same time they felt they could not

¹ Andrew Field, *The Completion of Russian Literature* (London, 1971), p. xi.

The Problem

draw on the long heritage that already (by the nineteenth century) supported those literatures.

The very recognition of this dilemma was late in being made. One reason for this tardiness may be found in that fastidious disregard for history as a proper subject of reflection that eighteenth-century Russian *lumières* shared with the French thinkers they sought to emulate. As Frank E. Manuel has pointed out:

“For many eighteenth century *philosophes* history was either entertainment, a moral homily of a secular order, or an ugly spectacle of human vice and idiocy, the unlovely prolegomenon to the Enlightenment. It was difficult to discern philosophical sense in a combination of acts whose human motivation was overwhelmingly bestial and self-seeking. If men were driven by their uncontrollable lusts, how could their history be rational or subject to exposition in scientific terms? There was a fundamental cleavage between philosophy and history. . . .”²

Another reason why national identity was less of a problem in the eighteenth century than it was to become later can be traced to Neo-Classicism, the reigning literary ideology in the West, which had built into its theory (if not its practice) a means for overcoming—or at least avoiding—difficulties raised by unique national traditions. Tredyakovsky (1703-1769), Sumarokov (1718-1777), even Lomonosov (1711-1765), the men who define Russian literature in the eighteenth century, could exploit the *internationalism* implicit in Classicist theory; if you rigorously applied the normative requirements for writing an ode or an epic, as they were formulated by Horace and transmitted by a Gottsched or a Boileau, you were making literature. There was, in the strict generic definitions of such a theory, a conception of literature so abstract and yet so normative that it could be used to certify texts as

² *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (N.Y., Atheneum, 1967), p. 152. A good example of the philosophical status of history in the Enlightenment is Kant's statement: “It is hard to suppress a certain disgust when contemplating man's actions upon the world stage.” (Quoted in Bruce Mazlish, *The Riddle of History: The Great Speculators From Vico to Freud*, N.Y., Minerva Press, 1968 [1st paperback ed. orig. pub. 1966], p. 103.)

The Problem

literature, without raising the sticky question of national traditions (or, for the Russians what was more to the point, about the *absence* of such traditions). Simply stated, this meant that Lomonosov was free to be less anxious than Russian writers in the next century would be about the status of his odes as *literature*, even though there was only a very poorly and recently developed tradition of the ode in Russia. He could experience confidence because he was imitating a model more ancient than the Russian (or, for that matter, the French or any other West European) state itself. If he could not—as Italian, French, or English poets in the eighteenth century felt they could—draw on sixteenth- or seventeenth-century examples of the ode in his native language, he could appeal to the example of Horace himself. There was a tradition he could turn to that would ensure the literariness of what he was doing as long as the validity of Neo-Classical poetics was not called into question.

All these factors tended to obscure the meaning that Peter's reform might have if Russia was to possess its own unique cultural identity. It was not until the first years of the nineteenth century that concern for such an identity made itself widely felt. But when it did, it did so with particular urgency. During the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855) the quest for a cultural personality of their own led Russians to ask questions so radical that they were called cursed. Of these "*prokljatye voprosy*" "the most widely debated . . . during Nicholas' reign was the meaning of history . . . in 1804 the society of History and Russian Antiquities was founded . . . the defeat of Napoleon and the reconstruction of Moscow created a broad, popular interest in history and Nicholas I contributed to it by encouraging the activities of a large number of patriotic lecturers and historians: Ustryalov, Pogodin and others. Between Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1825) and Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* (1836) historical plays and operas dominated the Russian stage. . . . Historical novels dominated the literary scene . . . [and there were] 150 long poems on historical themes . . . written in Russia between 1834 and 1848."³

³ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe* (N.Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 314. For accounts of the interaction between secret police and liter-

The Problem

This is also, of course, the age of "Official Nationalism," when Nicholas was doing much more than merely "encouraging the activities of a large number of patriotic lecturers." The emperor, through such men as Uvarov in the newly redesigned Education Ministry and Benkendorf in the Secret Police, forced Dostoevsky's generation to confront in the most immediate, as well as the most insidious, ways, what it meant to be Russian. Faddej Bulgarin, who was an employee of the Secret Police, ran the most widely read newspaper of the day (*Northern Bee*); Senkovsky, another notorious government sympathizer, was editor of the period's most widely read journal (*Library for Reading*). Grech, a publicist who worked closely with both these men, constituted the third member of what was known as "the triumvirate." This unholy trinity never let an opportunity pass to further explicate the government's triadic motto, "orthodoxy, autocracy, nationalism."

The ubiquitous activity of these men—who were not ungifted as propagandists—forced not only their friends but also their enemies to turn to the one source that all felt was an adequate ground for supporting—or for de-mystifying—the litany of orthodoxy, autocracy, nationalism: history. History "in one form or another became the center of attention and controversy. 'The historian represented,' in the words of Pogodin (a leading historian of the period) 'the crowning achievement of a people, for through him the people came to an understanding of itself'."⁴ The conception of the historian

ary figures see: Sidney Monas, *The Third Section: Police and Society in Russia Under Nicholas I* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U.P., 1961) and P.S. Squire, *The Third Department: The Establishment and Practices of the Political Police in the Russia of Nicholas I* (Cambridge U.P., 1968).

⁴ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia 1825-1855* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, U. of California Press, 1969), p. 102. This exalted conception of the role historians could play in forming national consciousness was so widely felt in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century that it became almost a Romantic cliché: even the great Niebuhr, who with Ranke is generally considered to be the father of modern critical historical methods, admitted that "the evil time of Prussia's humiliation (under Napoleon) had some share in the production of my history" (quoted in G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* [Beacon Paperback, Boston, 1968, p. 17]). He agreed with the king that "we must make up by

The Problem

as detective of a nation's identity derived, of course, from German Idealist philosophy. D. M. Vellansky, M. G. Pavlov, A. I. Galich, and A. I. Davydov had already lectured on Schelling and the group known as the "lovers of Wisdom" (Lyubomudry—a Russian calque, of course, for philosophers) had already been formed before the Decembrist's 1825 uprising. Hegel played an even larger role in creating a new sense of the importance of history.⁵ Nicholas I was a notorious Germanophile; during his reign the German influence was felt as much in the academy as it was on the drill field. Such scholars as Haxthausen and Hilferding did much to investigate and popularize such distinctively Russian institutions as the peasant commune (*obščina*) and oral epic (*bylina*).

A new sense of the importance that historical study might play in building Russian national identity was not confined to Polish emigrants, such as Bulgarin and Senkovsky, or the Baltic Germans enumerated above. Native Russian scholars and publicists were at the cutting edge of the new historical consciousness. I. V. Kireevsky (1806–1856), who had studied philosophy and theology in Berlin and Munich and had met both Schelling and Hegel, felt he had thereby earned the right to his distrust of the West; he was able to convince many Russians who were otherwise disgusted by the jingoistic excesses of official nationalism, that there nevertheless *was* something unique and valuable in Russian history. S. P. Shevryov (1806–1864) also travelled extensively in the West, where he met many leading thinkers (spending three months in discussions with Baader alone). He, too, came back to his homeland convinced that the future lay in it; he also helped to make intellectually respectable those conceptions of Russia's greatness that were the stock-in-trade of "official nationalists." His career is important, too, in showing the growth of new in-

intellectual strength what we have lost in material power." He set himself to "regenerate the young men, to render them capable of great things. . . ." (Gooch, *loc.cit.*).

⁵ See two important books by Dmitrij Tschizewskij, *Hegel in Russland* (Halle, Inaug. Diss., 1934) and the collection *Hegel bei den Slaven* (Bad Homburg, Herman Gentner Verlag, 1961, 2nd ed.).