Dostoyevsky and the process of literary creation

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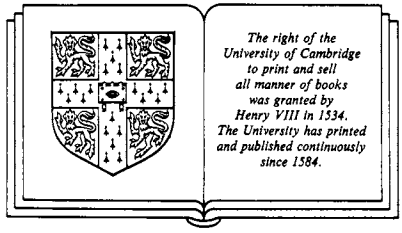

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General introduction

Dostoyevsky's world is a vast universe, far beyond the grasp of any one reader. This book is not an attempt to make a synthesis of the universe of his works. Vyacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Bakhtin, who focus on Dostoyevsky's poetic vision, and Leonid Grossman, Konstantin Mochulsky and Pierre Pascal, whose subject is Dostoyevsky's life and works, are the best of many writers who have tried to do so. But no book can include everything; in particular, it may fail to convey the totality which is the essence of Dostoyevsky's work. Most books devoted to the novelist rip the seamless web to pieces.

How can we preserve a sense of plurality in unity without attempting a synthesis? Perhaps we shall find the answer by analysing the reasons which make a perfect synthesis impossible.

There are roughly three main tendencies in Dostoyevsky studies. In the first, the novelist is overshadowed by the philosopher, prophet and seer, who debates abstract and eternal questions throughout his works: good and evil, God and Christ, socialism and revolution, the Golden Age, the future city, the freedom of man. These problems are so finely balanced and debated with such incandescent passion that philosophers of various schools – Rozanov, Merezhkovsky, Shestov, Berdyayev, Camus – have made forays into Dostoyevsky's works to carry off the heroes best suited to their own systems. As Bakhtin says:

> If we consider the vast literature devoted to Dostoyevsky, it may seem that we are not discussing a novelist writing novels and stories, but a series of arguments set out by different philosophers, such as Raskolnikov, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor, and so on. In the eyes of many critics, Dostoyevsky's work has disintegrated into a collection of independent philosophical structures defended by his heroes, among which the author's own viewpoint is secondary. For some critics, Dostoyevsky's voice fuses with the voice of one particular hero: for others it is the synthesis in which all the contradictory voices originate; for others, the heroes simply shout down the author. The reader has discussions with the heroes, and learns from them; their opinions are developed into systems.[1]

The second tendency, which originated while Dostoyevsky was still alive, when numerous accounts and memoirs of him began to appear, abandons the literary work to concentrate on the fascinating paradoxes of his life and character: an epileptic, an invalid, a man condemned to execution, a

convict, a gambler, a brilliant journalist, a political turncoat, a passionate orator, an apostle of love and an anti-Semite, a heart torn between sacred and profane love, a devoted father, possibly because he secretly hated his own father, and finally a soul rent between faith and doubt. According to some critics, all this is reflected in his heroes, who are assumed to be concentric mirrors of their creator. We owe a debt of gratitude to the scrupulous biographers who have resisted idolatory and romance, but recently, especially in the West where there is no hesitation about psychoanalysing the dead, Freudian criticism has successfully invaded Dostoyevsky's personal life. Psychoanalysis has its uses in the study of Dostoyevsky, but Freudian analysis, based on obscure and unprovable data, has arbitrarily distorted his life and character, and I have felt obliged to try to rectify this.

Finally, a third tendency begins with the text and tries to clarify its deep structures. This kind of criticism appeared at the beginning of the Silver Age, and flourished during the early years of the revolution. The ground was prepared by the immense and admirable effort of Anna Grigoryevna, the writer's widow, who died in 1918, and by the patient labour of some remarkable scholars. Seven posthumous editions of the *Complete Works* appeared from 1882 to 1906, containing *Materials for a Biography* by O. F. Miller and N. N. Strakhov's *Memoirs* which show Dostoyevsky's method of working, V. V. Rozanov's essay in critical biography, numerous letters and several extracts from Dostoyevsky's notebooks. From 1911 to 1918 there were two more editions of the *Complete Works* edited by L. P. Grossman, one in twenty-one volumes, the other in twenty-three, including rough drafts published here for the first time, articles attributed sometimes rather too hastily to Dostoyevsky, and the translation of *Eugénie Grandet*, which is not available elsewhere. From 1926 to 1930 thirteen volumes of the *Complete Works* edited by B. Tomashevsky and K. Khalabayev were published, providing the best text available at the time, and containing variants of the printed texts. These editions were accompanied by numerous other studies: collections of materials and articles by L. P. Grossman (1921), by A. S. Dolinin (1922 and 1924), and by N. Brodsky (1924), Works of the Academy of Science in 1923 and later the four compilations of A. L. Bem, published by the Free Russian University of Prague. In parallel, from 1928 to 1934, three volumes of the complete, or almost complete, correspondence from 1831 to 1877 were published. The work on the notebooks went on more slowly, due to disagreement about methods, but by 1935, thanks to I. Glivenko, P. Sakulin, N. F. Belchikov, B. Tomashevsky, N. Ignatova and Ye. Konshina, the scholar had at his disposal all that had survived from the notebooks of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. There were many other studies and articles, too numerous to list here. The harvest was so abundant

that it enabled the critic to take new directions: he could clarify the structure of Dostoyevsky's novels, or he could enter the laboratory of the writer. Precursors of modern criticism, V. V. Vinogradov, Yu. N. Tynyanov, A. G. Tseytlin, M. Bakhtin and V. Shklovsky, formalists or structuralists as they would now be called, published works which are still unequalled. Like the more traditional L. P. Grossman, they were interested in the poetics of Dostoyevsky and based their work on the written novel, using linguistics and stylistics to support their conclusions. G. L. Chulkov (*How Dostoyevsky Worked*, 1939) and A. S. Dolinin (*In the Laboratory of Dostoyevsky the Writer*, 1947, and *The Last Novels of Dostoyevsky*, 1963) turned to the actual creation of the novels, but their studies, valuable as they were, proved unrewarding, and their works were published only just before or even after the Second World War. This resulted in a significant time-lag between these two groups, one studying the written work and the other the process of writing, so that the work of the first groups was necessarily somewhat premature. This is one of the reasons for my book. Since the complete notebooks for *A Raw Youth* were published in 1965 and the other notebooks have been reorganised in the new Academy edition of the complete works, which has been appearing since 1972, the disproportion in materials for studying the text of the novels and studying their creation has been reduced.

But my chief reason for writing this book relates to the more general argument I have just developed in describing the different tendencies in Dostoyevsky criticism. Three main approaches have been distinguished. These critical arguments are used for other writers besides Dostoyevsky, but in his case the difference of approach is exacerbated by the character of the novels, which are swarming with ideologies, by the man and his destiny, which form a novel within the novels, and finally by his art, a challenge to classical ideas. The fragmentation of Dostoyevsky criticism is caused by the originality and richness of Dostoyevsky himself. Forced to choose between subject or form, man or work, criticism is trapped in the traditional dichotomy between idea and expression. Every critic of Dostoyevsky conceals a philosopher, a moralist, or a psychologist, each subconsciously trying to muzzle the others. Bakhtin's attempt to discover the 'profound and constant structures of Dostoyevsky's literary vision' and his insistence that Dostoyevsky was first and foremost an artist, not a philosopher or a journalist, is salutary, but it is an excess replying to an excess. All art refers back to first principles. Bakhtin's stress on carnivals and Menippea, where everything is permitted and nothing decided, dissolves the metaphysics of Dostoyevsky, whose creative thought is a struggle to reconcile four antinomic freedoms, two of which oppose the other two.

It was while Dostoyevsky was planning and researching his novels that the effort of reconciliation and struggle was at its most intense. At this point

Dostoyevsky, developing his plans and grappling with the original chaos which he had to reduce to order, felt split in two. There were two men in him, the poet or creator, and the artist. The plans of the poet often exceeded the means of the artist, or at least so he thought, but the novel was created by the efforts of both, by the fruitful tension between them.

I have given the texts of the notebooks and the novels priority over the abundant literature which accompanies them, and so I hope, like the biologist or the geneticist, to try to find the constants which preside over the procreation, labour, birth and adolescence of each text, and then to grasp the structure of the finished novel. As far as possible, I shall try to follow Dostoyevsky's steps, reversing the usual critical procedure which uses the finished work to understand the idea and analyse its expression. There is a wide gulf between the notebooks and the novels, which makes the task difficult, but at least we shall have the joy of seeing the novel come to life. We shall follow the natural period of gestation, first studying the conditions in which it takes place, the creative environment, then the creative process itself, and lastly the created work in its essential structure.

If we can see how the novel is created, we may perhaps come to understand its first causes and clarify the laws which bind Dostoyevsky's rich and overflowing universe into one great kingdom.