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MODERN NOVELISTS
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

Peter Conradi

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For Jim O'Neill

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and even self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid and later twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claims to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but

geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been selected for detailed attention but an attempt has also been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Preface and Acknowledgements

This study is aimed at the general reader and the student of Dostoevsky alike. It sets out to describe his four great novels, and two lesser ones, in simple terms, and to relate them to the post-Romantic debates of the day and to Dostoevsky's 'modernity'. Given this brief, and so short a space in which to fulfil it, it would be hard to do more than sum up a few aspects of the work. In so far as I attempt more, it is to look at the question of Dostoevsky as a *comic* novelist. On the whole it has been other novelists who have noticed how funny Dostoevsky is. Where critics have tackled the comedy, they have tended to relegate it either to 'light relief'; or to 'dark comedy' and the absurd, both by now mid-century platitudes. Ronald Hingley, who last addressed Dostoevsky as a comic writer, wrote that, 'at the elbow of Dostoevsky the devout, there usually stood Dostoevsky the irreverent joker with his water-pistol, sneezing-powder and stink bomb' (1962, p. 217). Well, perhaps. But this suggests that the comic and the serious must stand at odds. My case would be that the comedy is sometimes at odds with the message, but not always. Comedy and message can assist one another, on occasions.

And this is the case, without the work necessarily turning into 'dark comedy' either. The mid-century saw Dostoevsky taken over by a pop-existentialism, for which 'dark comedy' represented an important value. Existentialism, which claimed Dostoevsky as a forebear, and was 'apparently so pitiless and so searching', was in fact the 'opiate of the sub-intelligentsia' and the 'prop upon which the common reader interested in ideas can cheerfully recline'.¹ The importance of 'dark comedy' for

the general existentialist viewpoint was that it aligned Dostoevsky with a variety of metaphysical complaint. This is certainly there in his work, but as one element only. Dostoevsky has been used to feed that metaphysical self-pity which has for so long marked one kind of contemporary 'thinker', constituting his deepest piety and his natural intellectual home.

I should like to acknowledge the help of friends, colleagues and students at Kingston Polytechnic. Sarah Johnston and Gail Cunningham made many valuable suggestions. So did Priscilla Martin. Madeleine Evans in the library at Kingston, and Professor Malcolm Jones of Nottingham University, were generous in their help with bibliography. Professor Jones also most kindly and illuminatingly answered queries about the Russian texts. Julie Campbell helped with the proofs. I owe much to delegates of the Sixth International Dostoevsky Symposium held at the University of Nottingham in August 1986. My deepest debt – I hope apparent throughout – is to previous Dostoevsky critics, especially British and American.

References to Dostoevsky's novels are by the divisions of the text (part, chapter, etc.), rather than page, since readers may use widely differing texts. For *The Double*, references are by chapter (e.g. 'ch. 1', in parenthetical references); for *Notes from Underground*, by chapter and section (e.g. '1.1'); for *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, by part and chapter (e.g. '1.1'); for *The Devils*, by part, chapter and section (e.g. '1.1.1'); and, for *The Brothers Karamazov*, by book (*not* part) and chapter (e.g. '1.1'). My own quotations use the wording of the Penguin editions, and I am grateful to Penguin Books for permission to quote from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* tr. David Magarshack (Penguin Classics, 1955), copyright David Magarshack, 1955; *Crime and Punishment* tr. David Magarshack (Penguin Classics, 1966), copyright David Magarshack, 1966; *Notes from Underground*; *The Double* tr. Jessie Coulson (Penguin Classics, 1972), copyright Jessie Coulson, 1972; *The Brothers Karamazov* tr. David Magarshack (Penguin Classics, 1958), copyright David Magarshack, 1958; and *The Devils* tr. David Magarshack (Penguin Classics, 1953; repr. with appendix 1971), copyright David Magarshack, 1971. References to Dostoevsky's other writings (letters and diary) are to the editions mentioned in the bibliography.

References to secondary sources listed in the bibliography

are, so far as possible, made parenthetically within the text, by name of author (if not already given) and date. Page references are cited where appropriate.

Chronology

Dates according to the old Russian calendar.

30 October 1821	Dostoevsky born at Mariinsky Hospital, near Moscow, where his father is a surgeon.
27 February 1837	Death of his mother.
May 1837	Goes to military engineering College in St Petersburg with his brother Michael.
June 1839	His father dies, probably murdered by his own serfs.
May 1845	Belinsky enthusiastic about <i>Poor Folk</i> .
February 1846	<i>The Double</i> published.
April 1847	Dostoevsky starts to frequent the Petrashevsky circle.
23 April 1849	He is arrested.
22 December 1849	Mock execution in Semonovsky Square. Sentence commuted to four years in prison and four years as a private in the Siberian army.
6 February 1857	Marries the widow Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva.
26 March 1858	Released from army service.
1861–2	<i>The House of the Dead</i> published.
1862–5	Makes three trips abroad.
1864	<i>Notes from Underground</i> published.
15 April 1864	First wife dies.
1866	<i>Crime and Punishment</i> published. Anna Snitkina engaged as stenographer. Dostoevsky dictates <i>The Gambler</i> to her. They become engaged.
1867	Second marriage (to Anna).

1867–71	They live abroad.
1868	Publication of <i>The Idiot</i> starts.
1871	Publication of <i>The Devils</i> (also translated as <i>The Possessed</i>).
8 June 1880	Dostoevsky makes his ‘Pushkin speech’ in Moscow.
November 1880	Completes <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> .
28 January 1881	Dostoevsky dies.