

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE PERSONALITY OF DOSTOEVSKII IN A POSTMODERNIST CONTEXT

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Biographical myths about authors were an integral part of the literary process as well as the collective consciousness in the Russian nineteenth century. We understand the term according to its use by Tat'yana Shemetova:

Biographical myth is a myth of the Modern Age, and one which cannot exist without its subject – the author, who realises the original version of his or her own destiny, which is then redefined many times by the collective consciousness as well as artists and scholars. [...] the myth is not a product of the collective unconsciousness. On the contrary, it is the collective consciousness that reproduces the (auto)biographical myth over and over again. (Shemetova 2011, 2–3)

The personalities of classic authors in the collective consciousness are derived from school impressions, fictional biographies, and pictorial and cinematographic representations connected with the author and his or her works.

The modern biographical myth about Fëdor Dostoevskii can be split up into the following key mythologems:

birth to the family of a doctor of the Mariinskaya Hospital for the Poor; “Mystery of the Mikhailovskii castle” (this mythologem became the title of one of the series of the documentary *Жизнь и смерть Достоевского* (The life and death of Dostoevskii)); father murdered by peasants; the three loves of Dostoevskii (imprinted in the title of the book by the American scholar of Russian descent Mark Slonim); “Russian roulette” (this mythologem has also surfaced in a title: of another of the series of the mentioned documentary *The Life and Death of Dostoevskii*);

and also such mythemes as “(the) convict from the house of the dead”, “(the) ingenious epileptic”, “(a) cruel talent”, and “dostoevshchina” (either a special form of psychological analysis like in Dostoevskii’s novels or mental imbalance like that experienced by some of Dostoevskii’s characters). These mythologems and mythemes represent the ideas about Dostoevskii’s biography and works in the Russian collective consciousness, and are supported by, beside the cinema, fictional biographies, art, and attributes of city culture (for example, the style and design of the Dostoevskaya metro station in Moscow).

The mythologem of Dostoevskii being born to the family of a doctor of the Mariinskaya Hospital for the Poor is metaphorically rethought in the first episode of the documentary *The Life and Death of Dostoevskii* by Aleksandr Klyushkin (2004). In this series a prominent literature specialist, Igor’ Volgin, declares that all of Dostoevskii’s works may be called “a hospital for the poor”, in the figurative sense. Aleksandr Zenkin in his book *Проклятие гениев: (Наказание и преступление): роман-триптих* (The curse of geniuses: (Punishment and crime): a novel-triptych), which is dedicated to three days of Dostoevskii’s life connected with the death of his son Aleksei, attributes to the writer the thought that normal life at Bozhedomka street (where the Mariinskaya Hospital for Poor was located) is completely impossible. In those times Bozhedomka was the place where the corpses of the suicides and the poor were brought. Zenkin attributes to the Dostoevskii of that period the following thought:

How can children live and be brought up happily here, where adults survive only because they drink vodka heavily or are endlessly, while suffering and cursing their lives, cured. (Zenkin 2002, 41)

Zenkin’s book is a kind of stream of consciousness, combining real facts from Dostoevskii’s biography, monologues of his characters, elements of the biographical myth, and Zenkin’s own speculations, this heterogeneity being justified by the ambivalent, fictional-and-nonfictional, genre of the book.

It is noteworthy that mythologems of a biographical myth always concern themselves with only the key milestones of an author’s biography. “Bonding elements” are not included in popular biographical literature. These lacunas may be marked, or filled, with quotations from letters of the “biographical object”, i.e. the author him-/herself. Thus, Marianna Basina, in her popular biographical book *Жизнь Достоевского. Сквозь сумрак белых ночей* (Life of Dostoevskii: Through the dusk of white nights), gives the following titles to the chapters about Dostoevskii’s early St. Petersburg life and work: “Unexpected obstacle”; “At the boarding-house

of captain Kostomarov”; “New acquaintances”; ““Cannot wait till the exam”; “In the Engineers’ castle”; “Always with a book”; ““There is no sun during the drill!””; “At the camp near Peterhof”; ““Another year of shoddy miserable conductor service!””; “Father’s death” (Basina 2004).

In this semi-documentary novel the educational institution is named rather neutrally, “In the Engineers’ castle”; while the title of one of the episodes of the documentary film aims to puzzle the audience and thus to draw its attention. The title, “Mystery of the Mikhailovskii castle”, is an allusion to the assassination of the Russian Emperor Pavel I and, simultaneously, to a considerably new mythologem spread by television: the main “mystery” of young Dostoevskii, which is always noted by biographers, is how the lieutenant engineer Dostoevskii transformed into an author with an enormous creative potential.

Here we also find an interesting biographic feature – Dostoevskii’s unmet need for tea during his student years. This topic is touched upon by many biographers. They note its importance in/for the texts created by Dostoevskii himself. After Basina, the case looks as follows:

The older Fëdor grew, the more bitterly he felt from his inequality with rich fellows. They spent hundreds in camps, while he could not afford even tea, settling for the tea provided by the high school two times per day. He wanted to buy another pair of boots or a chest for his books. And all these wishes required money, which others had and he did not. It was a bitter humiliation. He remembered it all his life. Several years later, in his first novel *Poor Folk* the young author would say through his character Makar Devushkin: “But, somehow, I do not like having to go without tea, for everyone else here is respectable, and the fact makes me ashamed. After all, one drinks tea largely to please one’s fellow men, Barbara, and to give oneself tone and an air of gentility”¹. (Basina 2004, 101)

In the aforementioned documentary by Klyushkin, *The Life and Death of Dostoevskii*, the conductor’s unmet need for his own tea is related to the words of the “underground man” about the choice between drinking tea and the Apocalypse: “Is the world to go to pot, or am I to go without my tea? I say that the world may go to pot for me so long as I always get my tea.”² A similar, if not identical, understanding is maintained by a contemporary graphic: The Dostoevskii Literary Memorial Museum in St. Petersburg put on sale a postcard with the drawing *Достоевский и чай*

¹ The quotation is from Charles James Hogarth’s translation of *Poor Folk*, freely accessible at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2302>.

² The quotation is from Constance Garnett’s translation of *Notes from the Underground*, freely accessible at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/600>.

(Dostoevskii and tea) by Igor' Knyazev (2004, paper, tempera). The postcard is designed in the style of a Russian popular print (lubok) and has the aforementioned quote from the *Notes from the Underground* at the bottom.

However, scholars doubt whether Dostoevskii actually suffered from such a severe lack of money that he could not afford tea. Lyudmila Saraskina, in her biography of Dostoevskii for the popularising book series *Жизнь замечательных людей* (Lives of remarkable people), quotes another student of the Engineering High School, the Russian geographer Pëtr Semënov-Tyan-Shanskii. In the same place and time, he was in the same situation as Dostoevskii but the lack of money was not that bitter for him at all (Saraskina 2011, 98).

During his study at the Military Engineering Institute Dostoevskii received the news about the death of his father. The mythologem of his father being murdered by peasants paints the personality of the author as very tragic, though it has not been confirmed whether the death of Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevskii was a result of a murder or an apoplectic seizure. This question is still discussed in "criminalist literary studies" (Prohorov 2009, 217–20), which explore not only the death of Dostoevskii's father but also the deaths of Maksim Gor'kii, Sergei Esenin, Vladimir Mayakovskii, etc. Aleksandr Zenkin in his aforementioned book *Proklyatie geniev* interconnects the death of Mikhail Dostoevskii with his nasty temper. He also sees the nasty temper as one of the causes of epilepsy, the illness that took his son Alyosha Dostoevskii. Zenkin ascribes the accusations to the writer Dostoevskii himself: "He [Mikhail Andreevich] was constantly angry to that extent that he was even killed by his own men for his evilness" (Zenkin 2002, 28).

The beginning of Dostoevskii's creative work in the field of literature is aptly signified by the title of one of the episodes of Klyushkin's documentary *Žizn' i smert' Dostoevskogo*: "Дебют. Цена успеха" (Debut. The price of success). However, in the collective consciousness Dostoevskii's debut is represented rather vaguely, so we do not consider it as a mythologem. On the contrary, Aleksandr Pushkin's words, "Old man Derzhavin noticed us / and blessed us at passing away", became an idiom, and even common people having little to do with literature studies know about the beginning of Pushkin's career as an author. Dostoevskii in this respect is not that lucky.

The mythologem "The three loves of Dostoevskii" or, in another variant, "The three women of Dostoevskii" (as reads the title of the film by Evgenii Tashkov, 2010) inspired many books, films, and theatre pieces. This section of Dostoevskii's biography is largely based on his letters and

on memoirs of his life (including *Дневник 1867* (Diary of 1867) by Anna Dostoevskaya). This is the period that attracts cinema attention, and even the Soviet film “Twenty-six Days of Dostoevskii’s Life” filmed by Aleksandr Zarkhi (1980) is not an exception in this sense.

Among the “three women of Dostoevskii” the person of Apollinaria Suslova is seen as the most contradictory by script writers. This is not without the influence of Dostoevskii’s daughter Lyubov’ Dostoevskaya’s memoirs.

Their [of Dostoevskii and Suslova] relationship was embarrassing, unhealthy and torturous for both of them, but Fëdor Mikhailovich did not see life without her as possible,

writes Boris Akunin in his popular crime novel *F.M.* (Akunin 2008, 177–78). Almost every author writing a biography of Dostoevskii attributes new and quite often speculative features to Suslova’s personality. Leonid Tsypkin, in his novel *Лето в Бадене* (*Summer in Baden-Baden*), tries to compare Apollinaria and Anna Grigor’evna using fictional traits of their behaviour:

mademoiselle Polina was of course an unattainable woman. She had aristocratic manners, unhealthy pride and strong character, while Anna Grigor’evna accidentally broke pencils and became red when he looked at her. (Tsypkin 2005, 55)

It is important to mention that Tsypkin’s novel, published for the first time in New York in 1982, possesses a lot of features lately employed by postmodernist novels. In the novel two parallel realities are paradoxically combined: “the narrator’s trip from Moscow to Leningrad in the 1970s and Dostoevskii’s trip with his wife Anna Grigor’evna from Saint Petersburg to Europe in 1867” (annotation on the cover of the 2005 Russian edition). The literary critic Susan Sontag in her essay “Loving Dostoevsky” (included as a conclusion to the aforementioned edition) attributed Tsypkin’s book to a specific genre: “novel-dream” (Zontag 2005, 636). It is also important to mention that Dostoevskii himself assigns a large role to dreams in his works. Moreover, one of them has the title: *Сон смешного человека* (*The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*), so the genre-form chosen by the amateur writer Tsypkin does not contradict Dostoevskii’s own poetic manner.

But let us return to “Dostoevskii’s women”, which are eagerly compared by many biographers. Thus, Dora Bregova in her biographic novel *Ищите и найдете: Последние четырнадцать лет*

Достоевского. Заблуждения и вершины (Seek and ye shall find: the last fourteen years of Dostoevsky. Illusions and peaks) tries to sort out Dostoevskii's love affairs:

No, he loves her [Anna] and even much more than when she is near. But this love is of another type. No, it is his love for Apollinaria, which was of another type, which has nothing to do with the normal understanding of love. But Apollinaria was also different! But she did not love him, but Anya does. And he is happy with her love. (Bregova 1993, 115)

Melodramatic features of Suslova, sometimes noticed already by contemporary memoir authors and sometimes fancied, as well as biographical inaccuracies concerning Dostoevskii himself turned the writer into a melodramatic character in the twenty-first century. The worst tradition of this cinematographical genre was employed. A coarse and vulgar view was represented in the film series by Vladimir Khotinenko *Dostoevskii* (2011). This series travesties not so much the figure of Dostoevskii himself but the key ideas behind the popular perceptions of the writer.

Theatrical interpretations of Dostoevskii's destiny are more historically accurate. In a theatre play by Vladimir Yurovitskii, *Анна Григорьевна* (Anna Grigor'evna), 20th century realities exist independently from the love story unfolding in the 19th century. The drama *Анна Григорьевна* is a part of the dilogy *Русские жены* (Russian wives), in which the wives of Fëdor Dostoyevskii and Lev Tolstoi – Anna Grigor'evna Dostoevskaya and Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya – are the main characters. In each of the chapters of the dilogy the author employs the most popular episodes of interactions between the writers and their wives, about which a lot of memoirs and biographies have been written. In the case of Dostoevskii and Anna Grigor'evna, these episodes are: their first meeting when Dostoevskii came to a stenographer in order to dictate his novel *Игрок* (*The Gambler*); the marriage proposal; living outside Russia and Dostoevskii's gambling; Anna Grigor'evna's first pregnancy; her jealousy of Suslova; the settling of debts; and the death of Dostoevskii. Yurovitskii makes his Dostoevskii pronounce a declaration of love, which combines two passions of the writer, love-passion and gambling:

“All my life I dreamed of winning the jackpot. And I have won it but not at the roulette table. My jackpot is you, Nette [Netochka] [...] I know for sure that marriage accounts for three fourths of happiness and everything else barely accounts for the other one fourth of it [...] Trust me, I have never

cheated on you even in my thoughts. You gave me everything I desired.”³
(Yurovitskii 1997, 76)

A certain dissonance in the play is brought about by abstracts from Dostoevskii’s famous Pushkin speech, delivered in the form of a dramatic monologue. Even stronger dissonance is brought on by the anachronistic, and polemical, interruption of that speech. It is some kind of *deus ex machina* acting in the play, God’s voice citing a pseudo-historical document, a letter from a group of Siberian women to Nadezhda Krupskaya. The Prologue of the play, in which the young composer Sergei Prokof’ev brings Anna Grigor’evna the music scores for the opera *Игрок* (The Gambler), looks much more accurate from a historical point of view. This episode was recounted by Dostoevskaya to Leonid Grossman, who documented it.

Almost all memoirists and biographers deal with the mythologem of “Russian roulette”, with Dostoevskii’s obsession for gambling. All questions of interpretation are limited largely by the text of his novel *The Gambler*, which describes this fatal obsession as destructive and suppressive of human personality. Leonid Tsyarkin in his *Summer in Baden-Baden* could not escape this painful topic:

The first two or even three bets he won and the familiar roundabout of gamblers and gapers twisted around him like a whirlwind. And he again climbed to the top with the crystal palace above, and all the familiar pitiful silhouettes stayed below. But then he started to lose. The more he tried to play according to some system the worse he lost. Without any system he lost as well. He ran home to get more money, but quickly he ran out of it again, and had to retrieve more. (Tsyarkin 2005, 115)

The expressions chosen by the author successfully convey the commotion of the spirits of the character.

The perception of Dostoevskii’s personality in mass consciousness is characterised as well by persistent verbal formulae – mythemes. The expression “peasant man from Arkhangelsk” is associated, thanks to Nikolai Nekrasov, with Mikhail Lomonosov, while the mytheme “convict from the house of the dead” is associated with Dostoevskii. This mytheme includes a paraphrase of the expression “house of the dead” (as in the title of Dostoevskii’s novel, *Записки из мертвого дома* (*Notes from the Dead House*)), which became popular for denoting prisons and penal colonies even during Dostoevskii’s lifetime. Almost all authors writing about penal

³ All translations from artistic and memoir works cited in this chapter are, if not noted otherwise, by Il’ya Tsatska.

colonies said that they got their first impressions of the institution from Dostoevskii's works. Without repeating what we said in our previous works (Kryukova 2002), we would like to bring an example from the prison prose of Igor' Guberman:

You know Dostoevskii wrote somewhere, I think in *Notes from the Dead House*, that it is a pity that so many talented people are dying in prisons and labour camps, as if Russia is deliberately making herself poorer. (Guberman 2011, 235)

Even during the period when people spoke about Dostoevskii little and with bias, the mythologem of the convict was ideologically acceptable. This mythologem was popularised by one of the first movies about Dostoevskii, *Мертвый дом (House of the Dead)* (1932).

The mytheme “ingenious epileptic” is used in many semibiographical books about Dostoevskii, who gave this illness to his “positively beautiful man”, count Myshkin. Epilepsy, as an integral feature of Dostoevskii, has been repeatedly reviewed in postmodernist literature. Quite often, a postmodernist piece of literature is a kaleidoscope of hints to literary and historical facts. A good example of that is a blog post in verse by Natal'ya Chernova – “Dostoevskii”, in which the hint to Dostoevskii's illness is transformed into a means and object of (professional) specialisation of a school class. This looks neither absurd nor alien in the context of the poem. Neither do so some actions untypical of a character from the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* to which the poem meanwhile switches. In order to understand the poem completely, the reader is required to be familiar with the problems posed by the novel as well as with the specificities of Dostoevskii's outlook. It is this that allows the reader to understand the metaphorical epithet *расхристанный*, “raskhristannyj” (“untidy”; literally: “deprived of Christ”) used in connection with Alësha Karamazov. The following quotation is an abstract from the poem:

I am a teacher of a since long dead school. / My method of teaching is trivial. / Children from the class specialising in epilepsy / Read Dostoevskii and cry. / The eyes of the children are enlightened by the mind of the Universe. / And leaving the class a little bit earlier / *Raskhristanny* Alësha Karamazov / Will pour me some brandy in the teacher's room.

(Я педагог давно умершей школы. / Мой метод изучения избит. / Культ-класс с эпилептическим уклоном / Читает Достоевского навзрыд. / В глазах ребят – вселенский светлый разум. / И, выйдя незадолго до звонка, / Расхристанный Алеша Карамазов / В учительской нальет мне коньяка.) (Černova 2013)

Postmodernist literature often associates borderline and pathological states of mind with the personality of Dostoevskii. This trend is demonstrated also by the aforementioned novel by Akunin *F.M.*

The mytheme “cruel talent” was created by the literary critic Nikolai Mikhailovskii, who in 1882 published an article under the same title (Mihailovskij 1956, 306–385). Another mytheme, “dostoevshchina”, appeared in late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. According to the Dictionary of the Russian Language by Dmitrii Ushakov (1935), this word has two meanings: 1) Psychological analysis, like in Dostoevskii’s novels (with a sense of disapproval), and 2) Mental instability, bitter and contradictive emotional stress, peculiar to Dostoevskii’s characters (Dostoevščina 1935). Quite often, the term “dostoevshchina” was used in connection with Dostoevskii himself, meaning to describe his mental instability and even hysteria. The personality of Dostoevskii is viewed in the memoirs of Pavel Florenskii within the same paradigm, but Florenskii does not use the word “dostoevshchina”:

Cries, shouts and whooping – I cannot even imagine that in our house. And if Dostoevskii would break in, then I imagine our mother would tell us: go and play in the yard, Fëdor Mikhailovich is ill. (Florenskij 1991, 69)

Tsyppkin also does not use the word “dostoevshchina” in his *Summer in Baden-Baden*, but he describes the behaviour of Dostoevskii in such a way that readers associate it with the mytheme of “dostoevshchina”:

For God’s sake, leave me alone! – shouted he and pushed away the plate. With a napkin hanging at his collar, he sprang out of the table, and quickly marched to his room. He slammed the door and sat at the table putting his face upon the hands. His heart thumped, and its beating reverberated in his ears like a hammer banging. (Tsyppkin 2005, 178)

The anxiety and hot temper of the writer are stressed also by Dora Bregova:

Sometimes even a small issue could lead to a nervous breakdown. It happened earlier as well. For example, during his trip with Strakhov across Italy, when he cursed at a lackey rudely for nothing. And in Paris, in the nuncio’s house, where he threw a horrible fit, because he was asked to wait until the nuncio finished his morning coffee. (Bregova 1993, 184)

Notwithstanding, Russia has evolved in her understanding of Dostoevskii, from the mythemes of “cruel talent” and “dostoevshchina” to seeing the writer’s deep psychologism. This is an achievement of critics

and literature historians. Contemporary Russian cinema either exploits popular mythologems of the biographical myth about the genius (as in *Три женщины Достоевского* (The three women of Dostoevskii), 2011) or distorts them significantly (as in the series *Dostoevskii*). From these distortions rises an image of a neurotic, epileptic, and obsessive man. This image is very far from the personality of Dostoevsky as a writer, a man, and a citizen. The genre of semi-documentary myth (*The Life and Death of Dostoevskii*) opposes fictional and pseudo-fictional movies with its elitism, with being not for the mass audience.

It seems that contemporary media-centrism is not always focussed on the personality of the author. In the biographical myth, the author himself may be withdrawn to the periphery (according to the principle “around Dostoevskii”). In cinematic or theatrical adaptations following the author is just one of the many possible approaches a director might use. For example, Kama Ginkas’ drama staged in The Moscow Theatre for Young Audiences is named not *Crime and Punishment*, but *Katerina Ivanovna*. Thus, the author’s original intention is altered. Likewise, the author’s intention is transformed in Akunin’s novel *F.M.*, though, at first sight, it might seem that the title is meant to focus the reader’s attention on F.M., Fëdor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii, himself. We would like to hope that the gross biographical mistakes popularised by some products of mass culture will contribute to increasing readers’ interest towards Dostoevskii’s works.

(Translated from Russian by Il’ya Tsatska)

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