Dostoevsky

Language, Faith and Fiction

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Christ against the Truth?

In February 1854 Dostoevsky—just released from the prison camp, but still living under legal restriction in the military settlement at Semipalatinsk—wrote to Natalya Fonvizina, who had given him the copy of the New Testament which he had used in prison, a statement of personal faith that has continued to challenge and puzzle ever since. He describes himself as "a child of unbelief and doubt" and says that he expects to remain so until his death; he speaks of the burning *desire* to believe and its cost to him; and, perhaps most famously, he claims that "if someone were to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it was really the case that the truth lay outside Christ, then I should choose to stay with Christ rather than with the truth."[1]

It is a statement that confirms the suspicions of those who see in Dostoevsky a great literary imagination distorted by irrational and self-tormenting religiosity, which he clings to in the face of the evidence of a nightmare world; he knew—such a critic might say—that there was no possible way of supporting his Christian conviction by argument, and implicitly acknowledged this in Ivan Karamazov's great parable. Like Milton, he is of the Devil's party without knowing it, or at any rate without honestly acknowledging it, and his professions of faith are at best poignant testimony to his nostalgia for impossible certainty, a nostalgia expressed by a bare irrational insistence on his *choice* to believe.[2] On such a reading, religious conviction—given the character of the world we live in—can only be such an obstinate self-assertion; a

rather paradoxical matter, given the Christian and Dostoevskian insistence on self-abnegation.

A more sympathetic reading would link it to the whole intellectual drift, from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century, toward a distinction between objective and subjective in religious language, between the deliverances of historical inquiry and the self-commitment of faith. Dostoevsky is here seen as part of the story that begins with Lessing's "ugly ditch" between history and the utterances of faith, that proceeds by way of Kierkegaard's analysis of faith as subjectivity, and that finds diverse twentieth-century expression in Rudolf Bultmann's Christian existentialism[3] and, most radically, Don Cupitt's antirealist theological programme. The confession of faith is just that: a risky self-projection in the face of a void or a world of manifest meaninglessness, faith and not "justifiable assertion." Religious truth is not ordinary truth, a reporting on publicly available and testable realities. It is in one sense or another something *created* by human freedom.[4]

Given the centrality of freedom to all that Dostoevsky wrote—and there will be much more to say about this later on—this looks like an attractive reading. Dostoevsky becomes the ally of a particular kind of religious modernity in which an aesthetic of self-definition through the option to entertain a religious mythology replaces any residual metaphysic, any suggestion that religious utterances purport to tell the truth about the universe. But I want to suggest that this is a hasty and inadequate reading, which finally leads to a seriously mistaken understanding of many other aspects of Dostoevsky's work. That this is so becomes apparent when we pick up some of the echoes of the Fonvizina letter elsewhere in his writing, and also when we think through more carefully the actual phraseology of the letter; it is also worth bearing in mind that Dostoevsky wrote these words at a point when he was a good way from the beliefs of his literary maturity, and was still attempting to come to terms with the enormous mental and imaginative upheavals of his prison experience. In prison, he had—so he later claimed in *A Writer's Diary*—received Christ into his soul in a new way, because of his contact with the faith of the ordinary Russians around him.[5] But it is clear that he did not at this point resume regular Orthodox worship. He seems to have made his Communion on occasions in Siberia during his imprisonment, and even at the time of his most direct involvement

with the radical movements of the day had not completely abandoned church practice, but the evidence is of very infrequent contact with Orthodox sacramental life in the years after his release.[6]

It would be a mistake, then, to take the words of the Fonvizina letter as some sort of immutable testimony: he is slowly evolving a religious idiom and practice and still uncertain of how to relate it to the Orthodox tradition. Yet the letter undoubtedly represents significant strands in his thinking and cannot be written off as a passing aberration. Fortunately we have a good deal of evidence that he himself in later years wanted to make better sense of these ideas, and we shall be examining four places in his later work where they seem to be in his mind and where his reworking of the themes offers some critically important interpretative light.

First, in 1864, there is the whole discussion in *Notes from the Underground* of the arbitrary element in the human mind. The "Underground Man," the tormented, savage, ironical and absurd first person of this text, directs some of his most concentrated venom at a philosophy of rational self-interest. The right-minded liberal world of his time assumes that when human beings are authoritatively shown what is good for them, they will want it and choose it; but the fact is that human beings are not so constructed. Demonstrate that two plus two is four, and there will be someone who will simply assert that it is not so. People will not readily accept any would-be definitive account of what is in their interest. "A man can consciously and purposely desire for himself what is positively harmful and stupid," and will insist on the right to want it [36].[7] As Edward Wasiolek notes in his introduction to Dostoevsky's fiction, even some of the pre-exile pieces, such as *Mr Prokharchin*, already portray people determinedly ignoring or subverting their own interests.[8] What the rational administrator decides is best for us may appear of derisory insignificance in the face of this or that compulsive passion—which may be a passion for truth or love, or a passion for damaging and destructive experience.

In other words, part of the distinctively human is the capacity for perversity, addiction, self-sacrifice, self-destruction and a whole range of "rationally" indefensible behaviors. Remove this capacity and two

things result: the distinctively human disappears and is replaced by a pattern of ordered but mechanical interaction; and violence is canonized as the means of social rationalization—because the amputation of irrational human needs or wants can only be effected by force. Dostoevsky's fierce polemic against Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin in 1863 and 1864[9] brings out this theme very starkly: if human beings turn out to desire what they ought not to, the only solution for the consistent rationalist is the removal of whatever part of them is involved in the desiring. If someone wants to dance, cut off his legs. But, Dostoevsky insists, the freedom to refuse what is claimed to be rational is part of an integral or complete account of human existence; its denial is thus an act of violence, even if it is done in the name of peace or welfare.

Many later pages of Dostoevsky cast their shadow before them here. But the specific context is significant. The Underground Man is someone who refuses to be *reconciled*: it is no use saying that the world is thus and not otherwise and has to be accepted, because he experiences it as both challenge and offence. The "thereness" of the world and its processes, whether of mathematical calculation or physical regularity, does not yield any meaning that would make possible a "reconciled" life, an intelligent acceptance of things as part of a coherent moral policy. The givenness of the world is felt, says the Underground Man, as a "stone wall" [23], inviting efforts to break through it and causing all the more pain as those efforts are renewed and fail. And in that process of hurling the mind and soul against the unyielding surface of things, the frustrated self increasingly takes the blame for the situation: it is inner weakness that makes the wall impenetrable—as if, by sheer force of will, it might be possible to break through into a world where two and two did not make four. If all there is really to know is that two and two make four, there is "nothing left to do, much less to learn" [41]. The "derision" with which the Underground Man regards the Crystal Palace of a future in which all needs are rational and can be rationally satisfied is the expression of a desire for a world in which human needs were not reduced to what could be rationally satisfied; if that is all there is, the palace will in reality be a "henhouse." And it is a proper matter for derision if the powers that be are constantly trying to persuade us that these squalid surroundings are actually splendid. If only we could really be convinced of that, these deeper desires could be

forgotten, but the very existence of the desires begs the question, "Can I have been made for only one thing, to come at last to the conclusion that my whole make-up is nothing but a cheat?" [43].

What we have here, in fact, is remarkably like a highly dramatized version of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness, with a few extra refinements: the self's ideal existence is unattainable, and what is actually experienced in self-awareness is failure and finitude, finitude itself as a form of humiliation. We experience a "demand" to be reconciled with what simply is (and thus to accept a situation in which we no longer have anything to learn), and when that demand cannot be met, there is guilt and resentment. When the demand is concretely made by an other possessed of or at least claiming power—the rationalist social organizers dreamt of by the social theorists who are in Dostoevsky's sights here—their project can only appear as violent, and so provokes the verbal counter-violence of the Underground Man's rantings. Reason, presented as the triumphant exercise of rationalizing power, power to reshape and reduce the human experience, appears invasive. In one of the great paradoxes of modernity, which Dostoevsky was among the first to recognize, the idea that reason could provide nonviolent ways of resolving the essentially *un*reasonable conflicts of the human world is turned on its head. The amputation of unmanageable desires for the sake of peace becomes the quintessential form of "modern" violence. And, if we can presume to keep in view the Hegelian parallels, reason as defined here represents a basically *pre*rational set of strategies in that it refuses to work with its "other."

It is highly unlikely that Dostoevsky had Hegel even remotely in mind when he wrote the *Notes*. But the parallels are illuminating: the Underground Man is neither a ludicrous irrationalist, though his exaggerated rhetoric invites the charge, as he well knows, nor a trial run for some Sartrean rebel or voluntarist, glorying in the refusal of the world as it is. As the passage referred to puts it quite plainly, this is a state of consciousness that is deeply miserable and painful, and has no glory about it. The Underground Man's savage depiction of his own ridiculous behavior when he tries to demonstrate to his snobbish friends how little he cares for their (supposed) contempt shows that he has no illusion about being a developed or mature specimen of advanced nineteenth-century humanity; his whole essay (including the sad and

self-loathing anecdote of the second part) is a demolition of any claim that either he or those he castigates could be thought of as having solved the problem of how to live in the world.

What is especially interesting is that Dostoevsky originally intended to include in *Notes* reference to religious faith as the only way of resolving the tensions he had evoked—the supreme case of a refusal of the bullying of "reason," but one that did not end up in a world of resentful and ludicrous self-assertion. He wrote to his brother[10] that he had meant to speak of Christ and the immortality of the soul in this connection, but was warned off by the censors. It sounds as though he had envisaged a kind of apologetic based on the instinctive denial of reductive pictures of human capacity, the denial most clearly evident in the perverse refusals of self-interest, for good *and* evil purposes, that characterize human behavior. Ten years after the Fonvizina letter, Dostoevsky has turned what was originally perhaps little more than a rhetorically extreme insistence on the compulsion which Christ exercised on his imagination and affections into the beginnings of a very serious literary and theological strategy—even if he would have demurred from being described as a theologian. It is literary as well as theological, because, as we shall see, what he is doing becomes fully explicable in the context of grasping how he sees language itself, including the language of fiction.

But for now we can at least recognize how the rhetoric of the Underground Man elucidates the 1854 declarations. What at first sight appears a deeply perverse and problematic affirmation of Christ's priority over "truth" takes on a somewhat different cast. The interpretation of the remarks to Mme Fonvizina is, of course, complicated a bit further by the absence of the definite article in Russian: to set Christ over against truth itself sounds even worse than setting him beyond the truth. But it seems from the *Notes* that we must understand "the truth" as "what is the case" in the world, as the sum of rationally and evidentially demonstrable propositions independent of human desire and indeed human self-description. It is the empirical world as it confronts human awareness as an impenetrable surface, with no "readable" pattern. In the *Notes*, the focus is on those who are trying to map out plans for human improvement on the grounds of what is obviously best for all (or for most) in terms of their material needs. But as Dostoevsky's

fictional imagination matures, the world that resists the individual will comes to include the obstinate givenness of moral outrages—the horrors of which Ivan Karamazov speaks. And the basic point is the same, only so much sharpened in the latter case: how do we continue to live intelligently and without despair in a world that so deeply pulls against our ideals? How are we to be reconciled—if at all—to meaninglessness, not only as the neutral processes of a material environment but as the moral nightmare of a history of irreversible evil and sadism?

We shall be returning at length to Ivan Karamazov's "mutiny." But before that, we shall look briefly at a second text from the later Dostoevsky which refers us back very directly to the language of 1854. This comes in the very long first chapter (significantly titled "Night") of the second part of *Devils*. Nikolai Stavrogin, the darkly enigmatic figure on to whom so many people have been projecting messianic hopes, is visiting some of his "disciples," including Shatov, recently returned from a prolonged spell abroad (in America) in which he has been extending his experience of the brutalities of nineteenth-century capitalism. Shatov has become more than ever a fanatical partisan of the sort of extreme Russian nationalist views that were often associated with Dostoevsky himself; indeed, he is a very good example of one of Dostoevsky's most disconcerting habits, that of putting some of his own views in the mouth of a character with obvious flaws and blind spots. Shatov developed his convictions about Russia as the one and only "God-bearing" nation under Stavrogin's influence a couple of years earlier, but has now realized that Stavrogin no longer believes this—if he ever did. Stavrogin is beginning to emerge in the narrative as someone who can repeatedly draw others into his own world by his personal magnetism; but that world is a series of almost randomly varying possible points of view, none of which he actually owns for himself. The tragedy of his associates is that they become his "creations": they take on varied and contradictory aspects of his thoughts and commit themselves uncritically.[11]

Shatov reminds Stavrogin of what he used to say—how no Russian can be an atheist, how Catholicism had succumbed to the temptations Christ refused (a significant anticipation of Ivan Karamazov, of course)—

asking, "Didn't you tell me that if it were mathematically proved to you that truth was outside Christ, you would rather remain with Christ than with truth? Did you say that? Did you?" [255]. Stavrogin does not reply directly, and Shatov insists that he is repeating what Stavrogin claimed to believe, "only a dozen lines, just the conclusion" [256]. The preferring of Christ to the truth has become the foundation for a sort of nationalist metaphysic: what shapes the destiny of nations is an affirmation of corporate identity against death, a desire, says Shatov, that is identical with the "pursuit of God." National integrity depends on having a God who is the God of that nation only; "The more powerful a nation, the more individual its god" [257]. It is impossible for a nation to share its vision with others. Insofar as God is the actual form of a nation's self-assertion as free and distinct, as called to lead all other nations to "salvation," the nation becomes a sacred thing, incapable of compromise.[12] "The people is the body of God" [257]. Does Shatov then believe in God, asks Stavrogin, and Shatov replies incoherently that he believes in Russia and Orthodoxy and that the Second Coming will occur in Russia—"But in God? In God?" "I—I shall believe in God" is all that Shatov can say [259].

This is a notoriously difficult section to interpret; but one thing that can be said unequivocally is that it makes it impossible to treat the Fonvizina statement as a simple defense of pure voluntarist faith. It is as if Dostoevsky is attempting to clear his own system of something—the 1854 letter was not, of course, on the public record. But with a very typical eye for the possible shadows around his most strongly held convictions, he sets out what might be done with an apparently voluntarist phrase and warns against such a strategy. If choosing Christ over the truth means that the most significant element in religious commitment is the sheer power of the will to hold to whatever it likes, we are once again in the territory of violence. A nation's surge of will to identify itself as the unique bearer of God's purpose within history is, as Shatov readily grants, a recipe for exclusion and for competition without mercy. And the paradox is that there is no God yet for Shatov: he is trapped within a voluntarist politics and metaphysics that demand a primary willed act for which there is no foundation. We have to commit ourselves to being God-bearing while knowing at some level that the God whose purpose we "bear" is our own projection. And it

is clear that this is intolerable: Shatov is fully aware, as he admits, that he is recycling stale nationalist (Slavophil) rhetoric which has for foundation only a sheer empty self-assertion. And when he looks at Stavrogin, he discovers that he is looking into a mirror: Stavrogin, whose only consistent affirmation is to do with the power of the will, has no way of discriminating between good and evil. It is all the same whether he asserts himself or humiliates himself, whether he preserves life or destroys it. Confronted with this, Shatov's despair is intelligible: if this is the basis of his religion of national self-assertion, it is both vacuous and potentially self-destructive.

Shatov is, of all the would-be revolutionaries in the book, the one who exhibits the most convincing signs of something like ordinary humanity. We see him later on in the novel [III.5] attending his wife in labor: he is well aware that the child is in fact Stavrogin's, but his response of wonder at the birth, and unquestioning generosity, followed by reconciliation with his wife, are marks of a sort of prosaic—but nonetheless miraculous—goodness not in large supply in the feverish moral atmosphere of the novel. As if to highlight the contrast, Dostoevsky has Shatov briefly visiting his neighbor and fellow radical Kirillov; Kirillov, whose metaphysical adventures are even more tortuous and bizarre than Shatov's, wants to talk about the sense of the "eternal harmony" he experiences intermittently. Shatov is concerned for Kirillov's health, and almost cheerfully dismissive of his vision: this is how epilepsy begins, and Kirillov needs to be careful [587].

For Kirillov, who believes that suicide is the supreme and logical climax of human maturation into God-like power, the future is irrelevant. "What do you want children for, what do you want mental development, if your goal has been attained?" [586]. The moment of cosmic acceptance that bursts upon him represents a "reconciliation" beyond love or forgiveness; there is no labor left to undertake. And at this moment, Shatov's preoccupied anxiety directed toward the very specific future of his wife and her child is clearly to be understood as not only a saner but a more transformative thing than Kirillov's ecstasy. Yet again, Dostoevsky puts his own experience and thought in the person of another so as to subject it to criticism; the moment of visionary clarity preceding epileptic trauma, which he describes elsewhere in words almost identical to Kirillov's here and with which he was so familiar, is

"judged" by the sheer fact of ongoing life, the risks and human celebration of a new birth.

But the point is that Shatov has been liberated from the need to create God through his own will by the invasive presence of joy; the midwife and Shatov's wife suspect him of running out onto the stairway to pray while she is in labor, and after the birth, as he and his wife talk aimlessly and affectionately together, we are told that one of the things Shatov speaks about is "the existence of God." Earlier, in the conversation with Stavrogin, he has urged the latter to "kiss the earth" in penitence and to find God by work ("everything is in that" [262]). Kissing the earth and washing it in tears are standard Dostoevskian tropes, of course, but the surprisingly "Tolstoyan" injunction to work is less so. Only when we see Shatov at his wife's bedside is it plain that the work involved is not necessarily (as Shatov himself at first seems to think) a return to the soil; it is simply the labor of conserving life in small particulars, a commitment to human history not as a grand project but as the continuance of a vulnerable localized care. And the vulnerability is hideously underlined as Shatov's murder follows the birth almost immediately—as harsh a dissolution of unexpected promise as the end of *King Lear*.

Shatov is the chosen victim of the revolutionary cell because it is assumed by the others that he is going to inform the authorities about their illegal actions, and they are manipulated by their conscienceless leader, Pyotr Verkhovensky, into murder. But in one sense they are right to see Shatov as threatening: the practical needs of a human birth relativize the generalities of the various revolutionary philosophies so passionately and ineffectually discussed in the group. One of the pervasive themes of *Devils*, to which we shall be returning, is that certain kinds of radicalism, in Dostoevsky's eyes, are in fact a denial of recognizably human futures, and it is a point not unrelated to the Underground Man's apologia for human difficulty and perversity as part of a concrete human distinctiveness that resists reduction.

So the allusion back to the Christ-and-truth axiom of 1854 leads us into a complex Dostoevskian scrutiny and glossing of the original remark. Taken initially as a charter for voluntarism, for understanding religious commitment as the will's adherence to its own projection, it breaks down into absurdity and violence. It is not Shatov's Russian

Christ or Russian God, the manifestation of a corporate self-will, that brings about actual and specific reconciliation in the world; nor is it the all-embracing but therefore empty reconciliation of Kirillov's cosmic vision. The unplannable and unpredictable emotion around the baby's birth, the conviction of something *having been made possible* by agency other than the will, is the pivot of change. Certain sorts of action and event open the way to reconciliation, though they still demand of us the labor of making the possibilities actual. What is coming into focus gradually is the idea, not that Christ is in some sense to be created by the will, but that reconciliation with the unyielding and superficially meaningless processes which we confront becomes possible because of some event which reconfigures those processes as manifestations of gift or of beauty. And the response to such a moment is, in the nature of the case, not a matter of compulsion, not anything resembling a "mathematical" proof, but an act of *appropriate* freedom, recognizing its capacity to act so that there will be reconciliation.

Dostoevsky defends freedom against all comers, and his Underground Man insists on the right freely to refuse to cooperate in what we are told is good for us. But that does not mean that Dostoevsky is proposing a valuation of naked will as being in itself good. Stavrogin is put before us as an example of will arbitrarily exercised, and the effect is that of a black hole into which those around him are drawn, an ultimately self-consuming void. It is essential to recognize that the relation between the world and the motions of the human mind or soul is not that of cause and effect—as would be the case if a wholly clear and comprehensive account of what was in our interest automatically produced rational and harmonious behavior. But that hiatus between world and soul is not a way of claiming that the will is the source of good or that reconciliation with the world is impossible or undesirable. Living without reconciliation—like the Underground Man or Shatov in his first long conversation with Stavrogin—is not presented as anything other than hellish, a self-tormenting.

In other words, Dostoevsky's confession of 1854, whatever exactly it meant to him at the time of writing, comes to mean something like this. "Truth," as the ensemble of sustainable propositions about the world, does not compel adherence to any one policy of living rather than another; if faith's claims about Christ do not stand within that

ensemble of propositions, that is not a problem. It means that they cannot be confused with any worldly power that might assume the right to dictate a policy for living or impose a reconciliation upon unwilling humanity. This does not mean that they are irrational in the sense of contradictory or in the sense of being arbitrarily willed; they represent something that can make possible new motions of moral awareness precisely because they are not generated by the will. But these new motions generated by the recognition of the claims of faith are a response that moves "with the grain" of things, at least to the extent that it does not lead to literal and spiritual self-destruction. At this level, response to Christ connects with a "truth" that is more comprehensive than any given ensemble of facts.

The truth of faith is thus something that cannot be reduced to an observable matter of fact: it is discernible when a certain response is made which creates the possibility of "reconciliation," and is fleshed out by way of the specific engagements of loving attention. But a serious question remains, the question which is uppermost in the third of Dostoevsky's later texts which we are examining for help about his understanding of faith. Briefly put, the issue is this: if the claims of Christ represent an order of reality quite independent of the ensemble of facts in the world, if they are not simply part of what happens to be the case, how exactly do they connect with that world? Are they not bound to be in significant ways detached or ineffectual in any sphere outside that of the personal moral motivation? If Christ and "the truth" are outside each other's realm (and the territorial resonance of Dostoevsky's choice of the word "outside," *vne*, is important), are we not bound to admit that—even if faith preserves us from self-destruction—there can be no ground for thinking that Christ can make a difference in the world of specific historical interaction? The vision of faith can transform the local and personal world of a Shatov; but Shatov will be murdered and the moral chaos of the narrative is not redeemed.

Effective compassion for humanity, it seems, requires more; this moral chaos cannot be left to be regarded with suffering resignation. Hence the most powerful of all Dostoevsky's self-critical meditations on Christ and the truth, Ivan Karamazov's "Grand Inquisitor" fantasia.