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Is It Possible to Love Dostoyevsky Today?

I. "WE ARE ALL NIHILISTS"

In the digital acceleration that is disintegrating civilizations, reading – a singular experience – calls them to rebound by retaining their memory. The "Russian ogre" is part of this call. Explorer in the undergrounds of the European soul, the carnival of his thought consumes their demons.

"Everywhere and in everything I have lived to the last limit, and I spent my life going over it," wrote Dostoyevsky to the poet Apollon Maykov (1867).

His writing, an exuberant approbation of life even in death, tugs at Internet users swallowed up by the Web, and invites them to an inner experience that I perceive as a kind of intimate immunity. Without replacing vaccines or resolving military conflicts, reading Dostoyevsky builds psychic and cultural buttresses indispensable to the human species' fight for life.

"*Loving Dostoyevsky*"? Dostoyevsky "*author of my life*"? (Buchet-Chastel, 2019, a series which includes readings of Descartes by Valéry, of Schopenhauer by Thomas Mann, of Marx by Trotsky: exorbitant stakes.) Two expressions too narrow to convey the engulfment and the regeneration provoked in me, in you, by the vocal tessitura of the swirling sense and the violence of the incarnate Word that I am, that you are, injuring us, bothering us and transcending us. Many times, I wanted to shield myself from him, to give up. Until my reading of André Markowicz's translation restored his genius for me in the French language.

The oratorio that I proposed in my *Dostoyevsky in the Face of Death, or Language Haunted by Sex* is inhabited by a total and new Dostoyevsky, galvanized by language. The man and his work enter the third millennium, where finally "everything is permitted." And Internet users' anxieties join his experience of subjectivity and freedom, which echoes hypermodern contingencies, without fear of going over boundaries, or living to the last limit.

I accompany the writer to the scaffold: that writer who was sentenced to death for his "revolutionary ideas." I follow him to the Siberian prison where he begins his metamorphosis. The "child of unbelief and doubt," which he will remain until the end of his life, discovers and rebuilds a "national Christ" who will never leave the "new narrator" who emerges in *The House of the Dead* (1860–62) and *Notes from Underground* (1864–65). Prophetic, the "disciple of the convicts" foresaw the prison matrix of the totalitarian universe revealed in the Holocaust and the Gulag, and which today threatens us through the omnipresence of technology.

To confront nihilism and its double, fundamentalism, which blight the world without God and with God, Dostoyevsky reinvents the wager on the power of the word and of narrative through the *polyphonic novel* (Bakhtin). He does so, propelled by his Orthodox faith in the incarnate Word. His novels are Christian, his faith is novelistic. Dostoyevsky frees the senses from the objectification and intellection in which Western Christianity excels, and the intensity of his Orthodox Christianity leads the novelist to the heart of destructive pathos and nihilism to which the fractured democracies of the West struggle to respond.

As I examine the "cursed Russian" (Freud's letter to Zweig, October 19, 1920), I unlock the *intimate backstage* of this hand-to-hand struggle that is my reading. I unearth the "Russian virus" (this expression belongs to the poet Joseph Brodsky) marking what was our second language in my youth; the astonishment of the schoolgirl standing in front of the funeral bust of the "Father of the People" (Stalin); my father, a faithful Orthodox, advising me against reading Dostoyevsky, considered an "enemy of the people" by the Stalinist regime; Mikhail Bakhtin's discovery of carnivalesque polyphony on the basis of the novelist, which the young student introduces into French structuralism; the Soviet dissidents in whom "there is something of Dostoyevsky" ...

With his nervous, generous, awkward laughter, Tzvetan Stoyanov, the great Bulgarian literary critic, punctuated, accentuated and set free the farce of nothingness and being, and drove away the confused melancholy of my first readings. Bakhtin had convinced us that Dostoyevsky carved out an unheard-of path: neither tragedy nor comedy. The author of *Demons* (1872) revealed to us the seriousness of carnival: a vitality that we needed, twenty-five years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, in order to shatter the insanity underlying the ambient pretensions of "making sense." More seriously still, and

beyond the political context, Tzvetan's laughter helped me accept the carnivalesque dimension of inner experience itself, which Dostoyevsky posits as a counterweight to beliefs and ideologies.

In the meantime, Tzvetan Stoyanov devoted himself to the ultimate "dialogue" that Dostoyevsky brought into play in his relations with Konstantin Pobedonostsev, professor of law and Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod: complicity and manipulation, again and again! The first volume of Tzvetan Stoyanov's research on this subject, which is central to any totalitarian regime (*The Genius and his Master*, French edition, 2000), is as passionate as it is meticulous. Traversed by sparse and distant allusions to the risky links intellectuals forged with the Bulgarian authorities at that time, it was to be followed by another volume, devoted to the novelistic cunning of Dostoyevsky's genius, which, under the auspices of the Holy Synod, never ceased to refine its art of parricide ...

Embarrassed by Russia, struggling with multilingualism, Europe cannot cope with its Orthodox part. It has not yet taken the measure of those penetrating voices that have made it happen, that will make it last. The voice of Tzvetan Stoyanov is one of these.

I flew to Paris with five dollars in my pocket (the only ones my father had found, and which were to support me pending my scholarship for doctoral studies on the French New Novel) and with Bakhtin's book on Dostoyevsky in my suitcase.

* * *

Paris talked about language, discussed phonemes, myths and kinship ... elementary structures and generative syntax, semantics, semiotics, the avant-garde and formalism ... Exile is a test and a chance, so I dared to ask: "Gentlemen structuralists, do you like poststructuralism?" I heard Émile Benveniste insist on the enunciation which carries the utterance, and Jacques Lacan play with the signifier in the unconscious. Bakhtin's post-formalism inspired me to another vision of language: intrinsically dialogical, and of writing: necessarily intertextual. Roland Barthes' seminar, the journal *Critique*, but especially Philippe Sollers' journal and series *Tel Quel*, then the École des Hautes Études, the Université Paris VII, New York, and many others, gave me the chance to develop this vision.

I only moved away from Dostoyevsky's themes in order to engage with his polyphonic logics and with my own intimate understanding through the writings of Mallarmé, Céline, Proust, Artaud or Colette. Beyond the surprises and the force of styles and forms, this approach immediately disclosed the revolutions in language which, in depth and often against the current of social upheavals, revealed and performed pivotal tremors in civilizations ... Psychoanalysis was to open up new and more stimulating horizons for me.

Where Freud divides Dostoyevsky into four (the writer, the neurotic, the moralist, the sinner), I dig deeper into *redoubling*, *homoeroticism* (the obsessive "doubles" and "trios" of the novels' plots) and the *limit states* in which madness and suicide, sanctity and crime, flow. Beyond the cult of *suffering*, I discern the *jouissance* of writing, in contact with an essential dimension of the human condition: the advent and eclipse of meaning through and in *splitting*.

The paroxysmic investment in narrative arises from Dostoyevsky's exceptional singularity, able to translate his epileptic *auras* into a flood of language. Tirelessly asserting his Christian faith and Russian populist messianism, tempted by anti-Semitism, the novelist remains a fervent follower of Europe, which yet he never ceases to vilify. He was a critic of Catholicism, but also of atheism, its supposed offspring. A connoisseur of "idiotic" saintliness (Myshkin) and "stinking" saintliness (Zosima), he opposes the Grand Inquisitor, who castigates Christianity, but spares Christ the stake (*The Brothers Karamazov*). The nihilist Shigalyov suppresses freedoms in the name of egalitarianism, while Kirilov will have to commit suicide to open the way to absolute freedom (without God) (*Demons*).

II. WHAT NIHILISM?

In the novelist's *Notebooks* (1881) I spotted these words written towards the end of his life:

> Nihilism appeared in our country because we are *all nihilists*. What frightened us was only the new, original form.…
>
> It was comical to see the commotion and the trouble our wise men took to discover: where did these nihilists come from? But you see,

they did not come from anywhere; they were all among us, within us, and part of us.

Let us dwell on these sentences. Who is this "we"?

"We," the Russians, torn between Europe and Asia, which attract and repel each other, each (Europe and Asia) fascinated and baffled by the habits and customs of the other. "We," the Orthodox, devoted to the *pafos stihii* ("pathos of the elements," Solzhenitsyn will say), the cruel underground of passions and the plaintive adoration of icons, "veritable village nihilists" ("Vlas," *Diary of a @riter*, 1873), inexorably sublime and preferable to the razor-edged doctrinaires who subscribe to the scholastic pleasures of understanding.

"We": Fyodor Mikhailovich, disgusted with the positivist socialists "convinced that on the tabula rasa they will immediately build paradises". "We": the former Fourierist who lived through a death sentence and the scaffold, was not without empathy for the nihilists: did he not consider himself a former Nechaevian? (*Diary of a Writer*, 1873)

"We": "passive" nihilists, whose refusal to believe or lack of aptitude for the sacred kneads them into *indifference*, in a utilitarian world based on biological materialism and rational egoism? Or "active" nihilists, like the vulgar assassin who dreams of being Napoleon, but is only a Raskolnikov (from *raskol*, "division," "split," designating the schism between the Old Believers and the official Orthodox Church, but also the Great Schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy)? Or is "we" one of "our own," the "secret society of killers, of arsonist-revolutionaries, of rebels," under the spell of Pyotr Verkhovensky, the exalted double of the icy Shigalyov, anarchists, incendiaries, reminiscent of the Paris Commune burning the Tuileries?

The collapse of democracies into totalitarianism, brown or red plagues, but also sovereigntist excesses, neoliberals with their finances, commodification of bodies, globalized automation of minds or what remains of them, find their ancestry in Shigalyov's tragicomic, pre-Leninist program. Stepan Trofimovitch Verkhovensky amuses himself by mocking utilitarian happiness, adding to "Shigalyovism" the "depth" of the consumer society to come: "Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum?" (*Demons*) These words resound in the present.

Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Kirillov, Verkhovensky, Ivan Karamazov ... Dostoyevsky's great protagonists are nihilists, atheists, deniers of God, yet leaning against him. "*You venerate the Holy Spirit without*

knowing him," Tikhon diagnoses to Stavrogin when listening to his confession (*Demons*). Kirillov commits suicide "*to be free*" and "*alone*," but shouting: "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou a mort!*" For Pyotr Verkhovensky, it is obvious that this "*citoyen du monde*" "*believes in God worse than any priest*."

Orthodox Russia may not have turned out to be the cradle of nihilism if Dostoyevsky's "we are all nihilists" didn't concern us – more gravely, more universally "all of us": speaking humanity that "participates" in nothingness and nihilism. Since when? Since unfettered liberalism, colonialism, the rise of technology? Since the "history of metaphysics," which "protects nihilism in its heart" (Heidegger)? Since we starting speaking so that Freud could hear? Today, Dostoyevsky's writing challenges in depth the social and political history of Europe and the world.

Dostoyevsky's novels are novels of thought that raise the Word to the most vehement multiplicity. The *polyphony of the text* is the only possible way (the writer says in effect) to non-forgetfully penetrate the underground of nihilism. Thus to transmit only the enigmatic *jouissance* (*naslajdénié*) that Dostoyevsky loves, and which leaves nihilism behind.

III. THE GAMBLER

The narrator is the gambler himself. Alexei Ivanovich, the young tutor to a general's children, falls in love with the beautiful daughter of this old man, Polina Alexandrovna, who is going to play him.

In the novel, Alexei becomes addicted to gambling, because he is caught in the game and knows, he says, a "pleasure" like no other, unless it is "when the knout comes down on your back and tears your flesh to pieces."

This stinging image betrays the convict: it is not Alexis, the tutor of the naive general's children, but Dostoyevsky the convict who feels "this whim of chance" and who shudders when he hears the voice of the head croupier declare: "*Les trois derniers coups, messieurs!*"

One can detect an intoxicating sadomasochism in the casino players' ritual, which did not escape Turgenev, who in a letter to Tolstoy wrote that Dostoyevsky is "our Sade."

In *Notes from a Dead House of the Dead* (1862), Dostoyevsky describes the convicts' craving for alcohol and ripped by the whip, who manage to get money to gamble and lose it while laughing, and the novelist tells us that "*they remembered this whipping with laughter and delight*." "What is higher than money for a prisoner? Freedom, or at least the dream of freedom." Squandering his money, the convict acts as a free man. The psychopathological problem of gambling becomes a metaphysical one.

In this way, Dostoyevsky, a Sadeian, becomes a Pascalian. To bet is to make a wager (to win, to be free, to get out). To bet is a way of believing. Can one dare not to believe? It's not certain. You are free to betv... on the void. That's what Alexei will do. After losing all but his last coin – he didn't dare not to believe. He bet on the zero: the void, the lack, the nothing. And he won. How not to bet on the lack, when one has only that to hazard? And it is already enormous, it makes you live. In essence the gambler says: Readers, dare to bet, dare to believe!

Modern humanity is being born around Dostoyevsky and through his writing: a humanity of the prison, of the concentration camp: all of us, convicts, imprisoned/held by socioeconomic and administrative constraints, confined (as we would say today) by freedom-killing procedures. But convicts doubled as gamblers, their pathetic version, who need to believe, even in the void!

Money – debauchery and freedom – is one of Dostoyevsky's obsessional themes, along with the "trio" of lovers and the "rape of the little girl." "Money is everything," diagnoses the novelist, a sharp observer of the situation in Russia, a country where rampant capitalism is sweeping away the old Russia at the end of the nineteenth century.

But since nothing is simple in Dostoyevsky's work – "everything is money" and "everything is permitted," as the nihilists say – this vision leads the writer to the fantasy of the Jew who, in possessing money, possesses all powers, vices and manipulations. A hatred of Jews is ubiquitous in Dostoyevsky's work: on the one hand, his unabashedly populist political anti-Semitism ("The Jewish Question," in *A Writer's Diary* [1877]); on the other hand, a continuous veneration of the biblical message. The Jew, brotherly neighbor and threatening rival, yet never less than a supreme authority, as attested by the "cold water" in the synagogue that will put an end to the *jouissance* under the lash at the casino.

In 1871, in Wiesbaden, the novelist, ashamed and tormented at having lost everything, willing to confess for the *n*th time in an

Orthodox church, finds himself unwillingly "pushed by fate," he says, in ... a synagogue.

"It was as though I'd had cold water poured on me ... A great thing has been accomplished over me, a vile fantasy that *tormented* me almost 10 years has vanished ... Now that's all finished with! ... I had been bound by gambling. I'll think about serious things now ... And therefore *the serious business* will move better and more quickly, and God will bless it."

Would he have heard the call of Job that he had known by heart since his childhood? The Job that young Elihu reconciles with Yahweh: neither guilty nor innocent, repudiating transgressions and mortifications?

Yahweh gave him a sign. Dostoyevsky is never reconciled, but during the "cold shower," the Unnamable recognized him, perhaps *elected* him, almost. Dostoyevsky would no longer go to the casino. The work alone would take over the roulette wheel. Writers know that writing is a game of chance, of life and death. Sollers makes this clear by titling one of his novels *Portrait of a Gambler* (1984).

The novel *The Gambler* was dictated to the young stenographer Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, twenty-five years his junior, who would become his wife. The great novels followed: *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

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I hear your question: What does the globalized Internet user have in common with the nihilist Raskolnikov and the half-mad Stavrogin; with the masochistic gambler; with the holy Prince Myshkin flanked by his double, the angry Rogozhin; with the four Karamazov brothers? There remains the most radically evil crime imaginable crime, the sexual abuse and murder of a child: Svidrigailov's dream, Stavrogin's confession, it haunts Dostoyevsky himself ... Between cruelty and grace, there is no other forgiveness for crime than to write it endlessly.

So reopen his books, and listen carefully. When finally "everything is permitted," or almost, and you no longer experience anguish but only liquid anxieties, no longer desires but only buying frenzies, no longer pleasures but only needed release through lots of apps, no longer friends but followers and likes, you are incapable of expressing

yourself in the near-Proustian sentences of Dostoyevsky's demons, but empty yourself in an addiction to clicks and selfies? Well, you resonate with the extenuating polyphonies of Saint Dosto, who prophesied the streaming of SMS, tweets and Instagram, pornography and "tribute marches," "#metoo" and nihilistic wars under cover of "holy wars."

Could Dostoyevsky be our contemporary? No more, no less than a fugue for a string quartet and a choral symphony by Beethoven. Or the density of Shakespeare. Or Dante's comedy. Insolent challenges in the timelessness of time.

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Thus incorporated into the passions, the history of religions and the deflagration of ideologies, Dostoyevsky's discordances are no rhetorical device, and even less a polemicist's provocation, but his historical truth. This undecidable tension – inerrant, indispensable to writing – constitutes us; it may, perhaps, survive us.