

# DOSTOYEVSKY: THE TASTE FOR LITERATURE AND THE TASTE FOR LIFE

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I remember the writers who gave me a taste for reading: Richard Matheson, Bram Stoker, Eiji Yoshikawa. Adventure and fantasy stories were my first literary loves; and both genres do have an unparalleled strength to capture imagination. The pleasure was always immediate: a mysterious or epic world opened up to us. Evil and heroic characters appeared there. A breathtaking plot, respecting certain codes specific to entertainment, was set up. Knowing how to appreciate such a narrative structure, enjoying the simple fact of opening a book, but also closing it, knowing that the story will continue the next day, this is what we could call "having a taste for reading."

The "taste for reading," I distinguish from the "taste for literature," without discarding the hypothesis that the second is the maturation of the first. This "taste for literature" was given to me by Fedor Dostoyevsky; and I would like to show here that these are two different aesthetic events; that one can be awake to the first without being so to the second; that one can love to read without loving literature.

I discovered Dostoyevsky as a teenager. It was a purely chance encounter, almost a misunderstanding. But it had the charm of an encounter made without a go-between. As was the family tradition, I was on vacation in the Vendée, on the island of Noirmoutier. In the bookstore, where a few years earlier I had unearthed the novel, *Stone and the Sword*, I found myself intrigued this time by a name, "Dostoyevsky," and by a title above all, *The Possessed* (it was only much later that I learned that this translation was incorrect and that it should be *The Demons*). Not knowing anything [about the writer](#)—the name vaguely reminded me of something—I thought I was in the presence of a fantastic work, a true story of possession. I bought the book hoping that this Dostoyevsky was a kind of Russian Stoker or Shelley.

What a surprise it was for me when I waded into those boring first pages (hardly the best beginning among Dostoyevsky's novels), which had those exchanges, whose issues I did not understand, between Stefan Trofimovich (old idealist, father of Piotr Verkhovensky) and Varvara Petrovna (Stavrogin's mother). I stuck it, however, for hours on end, waiting for the moment when the story of possession would occur. But nothing of that nature happened. In fact, something much more important appeared in the person of Stavrogin, a charismatic and shady character who dominates the novel with his fascinating presence.

It is a known fact that Dostoyevsky worked on his characters like no other writer; that he did so not by giving them a detailed physical description nor by placing them in a particularly coherent social and historical framework, but by giving them a deep psychology, in the sense of Nietzsche; and by playing

on certain behavioral traits (gestures, manner of expression or, on the contrary, the unspoken). Some observers have made of this particular talent a pinnacle of "realism." This is the case, for example, of the Welsh writer [John Cowper Powys](#), who writes in his *Dostoevsky* (1946): "I would add as a codicil that not only must what happens to the characters be of absorbing interest but the backgrounds, while entirely realistic, must have about them that something else without which, by some strange law of the mind, things do not remind us of that deeper reality of our own experience which must always remain on the brink of mystery." In his eyes, the superiority of Dostoyevsky's art over other realist novelists lies in the fact that it takes into account a dimension of reality often hidden, irreducible to the materiality of events. Dostoyevsky was able to show something that the others do not show, trapped by certain traditional codes of realism—codes that Dostoyevsky hijacked to transcend the genre and forge a realism "in four dimensions": "Here we are at the heart of the problem: it is located between the 'realism' of Zola, say, or De Maupassant or Tolstoy or Hardy, and the more real realism of Fedor Dostoyevsky." But is that what Dostoyevsky is all about? Is the issue only that of literary genre? Should we be satisfied with the fact that Dostoyevsky shows us "the mystery," the hidden reality in a kind of overcoming of realism? In my opinion, it is something more powerful than that, which has to do with the very definition of literature.

Powys is right to make this point, but we think he does not go far enough. It is not enough to say that types like Stavrogin (based in part on the nihilist theorist Neshayev) or like Myshkin (after all, Christ is a historical figure) can be met in reality, can find a real equivalent in terms of intensity. It is necessary to go further and affirm—and here is perhaps the key to the mystery of literature—not only are exceptional historical characters not "novel characters," but novel characters are exceptional "historical" characters. This is perhaps where Dostoyevsky's genius lies in particular (but also that of a Balzac, despite Powys' displeasure); and this is why his encounter with him is so disturbing.

By showing the mysterious dimension of the world, by exposing the souls of his characters, Dostoyevsky reaches a level of reality that is higher than the one we encounter in everyday life. This is why the meeting with Stavrogin is a shock (a shock that is renewed with Raskolnikov, Myshkin or the Karamazov siblings later). Dostoyevsky shows, through fiction, the essence of reality; that is to say, life. He does not only show us appearances, pretenses, social conventions, hypocrisy, which is the tragic and grey daily life of our reality. He shows the interiority of the soul. He shows the naked man. He exposes him in his greatest vulnerability. Dostoyevsky allows us to know his characters, not as we know others—since their interiority remains fatally inaccessible to us—but as we know ourselves.

In a strong sense, Dostoyevsky shows subjectivity. He manages to show what is usually invisible. André Suarès had already noticed this in his *Dostoïevski* (1911): "No power is closer to life. The great dreamers are the great living. Where they seem to be farthest from life, they still touch it more closely than others." Or again, "Everything is interior. It is not even the thought that creates the world, by figuring it. It is the emotion which creates all life, by making it sensitive to the heart. The world is not even the image of a mind. The universe is the creation of intuition."

This is what one realizes when confronted with the presence of Stavrogin: this unique character is indeed a "real man," a living man. He is a real man because of the radical nature of his baseness, because of the unhealthy fascination he exerts on others, because of the absurdity of his behavior. For sure, a real hero of a novel would never have acted like this, with this ambiguity, this perpetual balancing between the greatness of the commitment and the emptiness of the conviction. Stavrogin expressed something extremely powerful and completely new for me—literature is the most adequate expression of reality, of life itself.

The encounter with Dostoyevsky, which I had first thought of as entertainment, as the possibility of reading a pleasant book on the beach, turned out to be something else entirely. From then on, I understood something new—books are not only there to amuse us, to give us aesthetic pleasure, nor even, as we trivially say, to make us think. Books, in so far as they are authentically literary works, are manifestations of reality. They are both the expression of a subjective life, that of the writer, and the concrete realization of a new "objectivity." Stavrogin exists, like Raskolnikov or Prince Myshkin. But they exist in a certain way outside the world, outside the lies of the world. Or rather, trapped in the world's theater, they drop a veil and participate in its indictment.

For Dostoyevsky, the world (both in the "worldly" sense and in the sense of the strict objectivity of what is visible) is the place of lies. This is what gives Dostoyevsky's astonishing power—he teaches us, often for the first time, that the world as it is, is a scandal. This constitutes a sort of exit from innocence. The staging of abjection and injustice functions as a revelation. In *Crime and Punishment*, the hero Raskolnikov is the murderer of an old pawnbroker, while Sonia, a redemptive figure, has sacrificed everything for her family, even going so far as to prostitute herself in order not to starve. In *The Demons*, the hero Stavrogin rapes a little girl. Shatov, on the other hand, is killed while his child is being born. In *The Idiot*, Myshkin, a Christ-like figure and main character, is mocked for his benevolence. Nastasia Filipovna, the woman he loves, eventually marries his rival Rogozhin, who eventually kills her. Hyppolite, a young phthisic who wants to go on a rampage, is unable to commit suicide.

It is a commonplace to say that certain books or writers accompany us throughout our lives. But it would be a mistake to say that Dostoyevsky is a simple companion. He does not only accompany us in the world, he shows us the reality of the world. He brings with him the world as it really is by exposing the souls of men. He tears the veil of appearances to show a man, often mediocre, unhappy, sick, sometimes ignoble, sometimes fortunately close to sanctity. Dostoyevsky's work constitutes, as we said, an indictment of the world and its hypocrisy. Hypocrisy in the social conduct, in the respect of certain hierarchies and, more generally, in the value that one can grant to men. Dostoyevsky asks this radical question: what is a man worth? Not in the lowly material sense of professional success, but in the sense of the purity of his heart, of his closeness or distance from the Christian model. And Suarez knew how Dostoyevsky answered: "He considered that the first in rank are often the last in life; and the last in the world, the first in the hidden soul of the world. There he learned to put himself above all appearances. There he made himself to live in depth—for all the work of Dostoyevsky is a life in depth and, no doubt, in the secret truth, which is the only truth."

With Dostoyevsky, the world of childhood, the reassuring cocoon—the one where the book is a fiction that we look at from the outside and that cannot reach us—suddenly collapses. It disintegrates before our eyes and reveals its nightmarish nature. This is perhaps the fundamental difference between "reading" and "literature." The book, which constitutes a simple "reading," can be closed, put on our night table, put at a distance of our conscience. Its history does not follow us afterwards, except perhaps in our dreams. The book, which belongs to "literature," never closes. We start to read Dostoyevsky, but we never finish. His work becomes for the reader a perpetually turning page. The world that Dostoyevsky brings with him is not only a fiction, a repulsion imagined to make the readers shudder, it is the face of the world itself.

This is why Dostoyevsky was very critical of Turgenev, whom he considered a writer of good conscience. Dostoyevsky is the writer of the bad conscience! The writer of sin! That is why he speaks to us so much. Because we all know in the end that nothing is right. Or rather, every sane man knows that he has something to blame himself for. In 1928, Freud showed in his preface to the German translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Dostoyevsky and Parricide," that Dostoyevsky was fundamentally a figure of the sinner, that he was haunted by the idea of sin at the same time as by that of freedom. For the one does not go without the other; there is no sin without freedom; and, conversely, there is no freedom without sin. It is this very human tension that Dostoyevsky meditated on throughout his work, that he experienced in his flesh; and we with him.

Dostoyevsky obsesses the reader because he confronts him with his faults, with his most unavowable desires and with the vertigo of freedom. The latter offers man the possibility to do everything, to act beyond good and evil, to accomplish the greatest things, but also the lowest. But there is something that limits our use of freedom, and that is the consciousness of sin. To what extent can a free man assume to be a sinner? This is the question that Dostoyevsky's characters ask themselves; it is the question that he asks himself; and it is the question that we ask ourselves.

Dostoyevsky shows the disturbing abyss implied by the very possibility of an unlimited use of freedom. But at the same time, he says: can you assume the odious character of such a freedom, of a freedom without God or in place of God? Can you assume the freedom of a Raskolnikov, a Kirilov, a Stavrogin? The first takes the path of redemption; the second commits suicide to show that he is God himself; the third, who believed he could make his conscience evolve in an amoral space, ends up hanging himself, caught up in his terrible sin: the rape of a girl.

The supreme act of nihilism—the outrage inflicted on the child (the most innocent of innocents), reveals the very failure of nihilism. Nihilism is impossible for man. It claims that "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." But God does exist insofar as He is the condition of possibility of freedom itself. Pierre Boutang does not say otherwise when he writes in an article entitled "Stavrogin": "When Stavrogin wants to explain, in his confession, the effect of Matryosha's suicide on his existence, he cannot hold his own judgment within ethics. Despite his desire for the Cross, without faith in the Cross, he fails to be a Christian, to conceive of the evil and shame of his crime. No, in this fragmentation of inner time, he oscillates between an almost social, extremely low and diabolical idea of the act as ridiculous, and a metaphysical view, beyond ethics, but which can only lead to madness and death."

For Dostoyevsky any attempt to evolve beyond good and evil is doomed to failure. And this is also the case of literature. This is why, as André Markowicz points out, his conception of literature is not aesthetic but ethical (or rather, contrary to the proponents of art for art's sake, it identifies ethics and aesthetics). Dostoyevsky's work cannot therefore be consumed as entertainment. Its goal is not to please us. It is fundamentally an indictment of the world and a revelation of the profound reality of existence. In his quest for truth, which is synonymous with the quest for God, Dostoyevsky tells us what man is. And with him we understand—it is through literature that we gain access to the radical interiority of life, that is to say, to the person of Christ who is the only beauty.

*Matthieu Giroux is a Dostoyevskian sovereignist and the editorial director of [PHLITT](#). This article appears through the generous courtesy of [PHLITT](#).*

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*[Featured image](#): "Dostoevsky in St. Petersburg," by Ilya Glazunov.*



