

## I

W. J. LEATHERBARROW

## Introduction

When the idea for a *Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii* was first mooted it was recognised, first, that Dostoevskii had been extremely well served over many years by his critical commentators, in the West as well as in Russia, and, secondly, that the need for a further volume designed to introduce this author to yet another generation of students and more general readers was not self-evident and perhaps required some justification. To acknowledge this latter point is not at all the same as to imply that Dostoevskii's star is somehow on the wane or that the immense popularity his work has enjoyed is in decline. At the start of the twenty-first century his work is as widely admired as it has ever been, and its impact continues to resonate in cultural activity throughout the world more than a century after his death. Moreover, this resonance has been felt not just in the 'higher' or 'élite' manifestations of literary activity, but is also discernible in more popular forms of fiction such as the detective novel. Put simply, Dostoevskii seems unwilling to settle into the role of venerable classic, that of an author admired for the way his work once spoke loudly to his contemporaries, but whose impact in the present is more akin to that of a whisper. To employ an over-used term, Dostoevskii's novels still seem pressingly 'relevant' to the most immediate concerns of the present age in a way that those of his contemporaries perhaps do not. The world depicted in, say, *Crime and Punishment* or *The Devils*, despite its chronological and social remoteness, looks so much more like the world we live in than any described by Tolstoi or Turgenev. George Steiner's challenging assertion that 'Dostoevsky has penetrated more deeply than Tolstoy into the fabric of contemporary thought', having done more than any other writer of the nineteenth century to set the agenda and determine the 'shape and psychology' of modern fiction, does not seem over-extravagant.<sup>1</sup> Nor does Alex de Jonge's claim that, along with Proust, Dostoevskii was the artist 'supremely representative' not only of his own age, but also of ours,<sup>2</sup> a nineteenth-century novelist who has continued to provoke strong reactions in his subsequent readership. One minute acclaimed by Albert Camus as a

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sort of prophet of twentieth-century Existentialism,<sup>3</sup> the next he is dismissed and ridiculed by Vladimir Nabokov as the poor relation of Russian literature, unworthy of admission to the pantheon of the great because of his uncouth literary manners and taste for the cheaply melodramatic.<sup>4</sup> Welcomed by John Middleton Murry for a revelatory art form that transcended the novel and dripped ‘metaphysical obscenity’,<sup>5</sup> he was scorned by George Moore as a mere exponent of shilling-shockers and penny-dreadfuls.<sup>6</sup> For Albert Einstein, the father of the modern scientific world-view, he provided an inspirational glimpse into the relativism and instability of reality and gave him ‘more than any other thinker, more even than Gauss’;<sup>7</sup> for D. H. Lawrence, though, he was a ‘false artist’ with a false vision, a ‘big stinker’ sliding along in the dark like a rat, and ‘not nice’.<sup>8</sup>

The ubiquitous presence of Dostoevskii’s ghost in the machine of twentieth-century culture is as straightforward to illustrate as it is complex to explain. Why do we still read him? And why should we continue to do so? As Russia continues to languish in post-communist social and economic collapse and to watch what is left of its superpower status decay, it cannot be because Dostoevskii somehow symbolises, and helps us to understand, the virility and force of a strategically important imperial power, as British novelists perhaps did in the nineteenth century. (Although, as we shall soon see, it might be because he offers acute insights into the causes and processes of that cultural collapse.) One possible explanation for Dostoevskii’s enduring popularity lies in the unusual ability of his fiction to flatter our willingness to entertain and engage with ‘high’ serious intellectual and emotional issues while simultaneously rewarding any taste we may have for immediately compelling narrative energy and ‘low’ popular fictional devices. Nabokov was right (if not the first) to recognise that Dostoevskii drew some of the building blocks of his art from the literary slums of boulevard fiction, melodrama and cheap Romanticism, and George Moore was perceptive in recognising that the narrative hooks Dostoevskii employed to ensnare his readers’ attention were indeed those used most frequently in the popular novel. The outraged condescension shown by both, however, is characteristic of an earlier age than ours, an age which had not seen to anywhere near the same extent the democratisation and mass commercialisation of culture, and in which ‘élite’ fiction was not supposed to slum it by appropriating the dynamic or fantastic plots, over-egged melodrama, cliff-hanger situations, larger-than-life characters and abnormal psychology of the penny-dreadful. Today we are surrounded by, and sensitised to, cultural products designed for mass rather than élite consumption, and we are consequently far more ready to accept the adoption of the aesthetics and discourses of such products in the name

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of 'high' art. Although still a literary 'toff', Dostoevskii seems much more like 'one of us' than Tolstoi or Turgenev.

Another feature of Dostoevskii's fiction that helps to account for its enduring popularity is its amenability to interpretation in terms of the changing concerns that have dominated literary criticism and cultural theory over the last century or so. Initially welcomed in Russia and the West as examples of critical and social realism, his novels rewarded such responses in their pre-occupation with social concerns like poverty, crime, alienation and money, as well as with the issues at stake in the dominant intellectual debates of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, such as the erosion of traditional spiritual values by the burgeoning capitalism and heroic materialism that went with industrialisation. Later, as realism gave ground to decadence, modernism and aestheticism in the European fin-de-siècle, the same novels were acclaimed for their ability to yield metaphysical rather than social insights, for their anti-materialism, and for the doubts they cast upon objectivity. We have already glimpsed how they were then subsequently pressed into the service of philosophical Existentialism and called upon to validate the perceptual revolutions accomplished by the new physics, not only of Einstein but also of Heisenberg and others. The rise to dominance of fascism in inter-war Europe also saw Dostoevskii and his works mobilised in the service of both sides. In Soviet Russia enduring doubts about his ideological acceptability were laid aside as official critics set about the task of mining his works for those nuggets of anti-German sentiment and national messianism that so neatly accorded with war aims, while in Germany Nazi critics laid claim to Dostoevskii for his nationalism, anti-semitism and cultural imperialism.<sup>9</sup> There is no room here to develop much further this attempt to illustrate Dostoevskii's adaptability to critical fashion, but we must at least recognise that such adaptability is not limited just to the social and ideological content of his art. The formal characteristics not only of his fiction, but also of such 'journalistic' writings as his *Diary of a Writer*, continue to attract much critical attention, and the notes and references accompanying the essays in the present volume acknowledge the frequency with which his works have been cited in demonstration of so many developments in literary theory, from the Russian Formalist school through Bakhtinian narrative theory to post-modernism.<sup>10</sup> The novelist called upon in the 1840s by the Russian critic Vissarion Belinskii to fly the flag of social realism has subsequently been enlisted in the service of most of the aesthetic manifestoes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But, as Steiner's remark suggests, it is in Dostoevskii's enduring ability to keep his finger on the pulse of modernity that we find the most compelling

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explanation of the on-going popularity of his art. His novels and tales appear to capture, in both their thematic content and their narrative forms, the fluidity and instability of existence as experienced by most in an age when confidence in enduring political, social, spiritual, scientific and intellectual certainties has retreated in the face of relativism and a craving for immediacy and short-term intensity. The hero of *Notes from Underground* may have puzzled his contemporary readership with his defiant and perverse rejection of the ‘benefits’ of heroic materialism and scientific progress, but today’s reader is much more likely to share that character’s distrust of science, of rationality and of schemes that sacrifice the individual to objective and immutable forces. The chaotic and unstable narrative voice of *The Double*, confusing experience and hallucination and contaminating the narrative discourse with that of the hero, may have strained beyond endurance the patience of Belinskii, but it is unlikely to alienate a readership schooled in James Joyce or contemporary critical theory. Interestingly, Dostoevskii himself sensed that his artistic vision was more likely to be validated by the future. In the following passage from his notebooks for *A Raw Youth* he appears to acknowledge the instability of contemporary life as a condition largely unrecognised by fellow writers, as well as the prophetic qualities of his own art and the nature of its enduring relevance for future generations:

Facts. They pass before us. No one notices them [...] I cannot tear myself away, and all the cries of the critics to the effect that I do not depict real life have not disenchanted me. There are no bases to our society [...] One colossal quake and the whole lot will come to an end, collapse and be negated as though it had never existed. And this is not just outwardly true, as in the West, but inwardly, morally so. Our talented writers, people like Tolstoi and Goncharov,<sup>11</sup> who with great artistry depict family life in upper-middle-class circles, think that they are depicting the life of the majority. In my view they have depicted only the life of the exceptions, but the life which I portray is the life that is the general rule. Future generations, more objective in their view, will see that this is so. The truth is on my side, I am convinced of that.

(xvi, 329)

The views expressed in this passage to the effect that his own ‘realism’ is somehow superior to that of his contemporaries in its ability to suggest the essential nature of an unstable and disintegrating ‘reality’ are views voiced regularly by Dostoevskii in the last decade or so of his life. Most famously, in an undated notebook entry toward the end of his life he claimed to be ‘a realist in a higher sense; that is, I depict all the depths of the human soul’ (xxvii, 65). This is a suggestive, but tantalisingly cryptic claim. What is ‘realism in a higher sense’? If realism in the novel resides in verisimilitude, truthfulness to life, the accurate depiction of experience (as Dostoevskii’s contemporaries

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might well have claimed with a lack of that conscious provisionality that attends any discussion of the condition, or use of the term 'realism', today), then how is it possible to have 'higher' or 'lower' forms of it? In *The Idiot* Dostoevskii's narrator had dwelt on the problem of the nature of artistic realism and had concluded that novelists should try 'to select social types and present them in artistic form: types remarkably rarely encountered as such in real life, but which are almost more real than reality itself' (VIII, 383; Pt 4, Sec. 1). Implicit in such references to 'higher realism' and the creation of an artistic world that is 'almost more real than reality itself' is the suggestion that for Dostoevskii conventional realism, as practised by the other great Russian (and, for that matter, European) novelists of his age, was somehow inadequate and incapable of accomplishing what was surely the primary objective of realist art: the illusion that contemporary reality had been effectively and accurately replicated. In a letter of 26 February 1869 to his friend Nikolai Strakhov Dostoevskii made the following statement: 'I have my own view of reality (in art), and what most people regard as fantastic and exceptional is sometimes for me the very essence of reality. Everyday trivialities and a conventional view of them, in my opinion, not only fall short of realism but are even contrary to it' (XXIX/1, 19). Shortly before, in a letter of 11 December 1868, he had expressed much the same view to another friend, A. N. Maikov: 'I have entirely different notions of reality and realism from those of our realists and critics [...] With their kind of realism you cannot explain so much as a hundredth part of the real facts which have actually occurred. But with our idealism we have even prophesied facts' (XXVIII/2, 329).

Such comments all share the implication that the aim of achieving in novelistic form a robust illusion of reality is not adequately or appropriately served by the conventional realist practices of a Tolstoi or Goncharov. The letters to Strakhov and Maikov cited above suggest that Dostoevskii did not regard the naturalistic depiction of the norms and surface appearances of day-to-day reality as the sole, or even primary, objective of realism. Instead, references to his own 'idealism' which 'prophesies facts' suggest that such an objective should consist instead in the 'explanation' of 'the very essence of reality', its underlying structures and innermost nature. If this required rejection or amendment of the traditional devices and practices of naturalism, so be it. In a letter of January 1854 to N. D. Fonvizina Dostoevskii had described himself as 'a child of the age, a child of uncertainty and doubt' (XXVIII/1, 176). This view of the contemporary age as one of uncertainty was to be repeated many times, by characters in his later novels as well as in his own journalistic writings. For example, Lebedev in *The Idiot* complains that the modern age lacks a binding idea capable of uniting men and nations

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and preventing the disintegration and discord so characteristic of European political, social and personal life in the nineteenth century (VIII, 315; Pt 3, Sec. 4). While acknowledging here what Gary Saul Morson has called ‘the irony of origins’, in that these views are articulated by a character not otherwise identifiable with Dostoevskii, it would be perverse in the light of all the evidence not to sense the author’s own values underpinning Lebedev’s outburst.<sup>12</sup> For Dostoevskii Europe, including Russia, was at a transitional stage when the old social, moral and psychological structures were decaying and new ones had not yet fully emerged to take their place. In his *Diary of a Writer* for January 1877 he describes how in Russia the old landowning order is undergoing ‘some new, still unknown, but radical change [...] some enormous regeneration into novel, still latent, almost utterly unknown forms’ (xxv, 35). The same forces of uncertainty, dissolution, re-creation and unpredictability were at work also in most other areas of Russian and European life, in Dostoevskii’s view. They manifested themselves in such political, social and cultural phenomena as the on-going processes of revolution, the rapidly changing social and economic order prompted by the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism, the collapse or erosion of traditional unifying social structures such as church and family, and the growth of individualism in both society and, following the Romantic movement, the artistic and cultural products of that society.

The contemporary age was for Dostoevskii a ‘thunderous epoch permeated with so many colossal, astounding and rapidly shifting actual events’ (xxv, 193). The present was a process rather than a firmly defined condition, and surely it demanded a new ‘realism’ to capture its essential provisionality and uncertainty. Yet many novelists wrote as though nothing was changing. In the conclusion to *A Raw Youth* the hero’s former mentor, to whom he has sent a copy of his disordered memoir, remarks that in the current age a writer who wishes to depict a stable and orderly pattern of life has no choice but to write historical novels about a vanished reality, for there is no such order and stability in the present. He goes on to say:

Oh, and in the historical form you can depict a multitude of details that are still extraordinarily pleasant and comforting! You can even so enthrall the reader that he will mistake a historical picture for one still possible nowadays. Such a work, in the hands of a great talent, would belong not so much to Russian literature as to Russian history. It would be an artistically finished picture of a Russian mirage, but one that actually existed as long as no one guessed it was a mirage. (XIII, 454)

The ‘great talent’ offering mirages of Russian life is a thinly veiled reference to Tolstoi whose work, like that of other contemporary realists, was for

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Dostoevskii misleading and ultimately unrealistic in the way it suggested stability and permanence where there was in fact only discord and dissolution. While the majority of readers would probably not wish to join Dostoevskii in dismissing Tolstoi as a historical novelist even in works set ostensibly in his present – and, indeed, might even point, as Morson does in this volume, to the ways in which Dostoevskii's art represents a development rather than a rejection of Tolstoian narrative with its emphasis on presenting life as process – there is something in what he says. At the centre of Tolstoi's moral and artistic universe there does appear to remain a profound confidence in the enduring power of normality. This reveals itself in characters such as the Oblonskiis in *Anna Karenina* or the Rostovs in *War and Peace*, who stand as a touchstone of that normality and whose values ultimately endure in the face of the individual tragedy of others or cataclysmic historical events. Stability is the keynote of Tolstoi's novelistic world; life recomposes itself in the end; the ripples that have momentarily disturbed the surface eventually fade to reveal again the underlying permanencies.

For Dostoevskii, though, the ripples had now become the underlying permanency, and in his own art he struggled from the start to devise new artistic forms that would not finalise or stabilise the shifting uncertainties of the age they purported to depict: forms in which deep probing of the innermost and darkest recesses of the human soul took the place of portraiture and *paysage*; where coincidence, symbolism and mythography threatened to overwhelm the limits of verisimilitude; where the narrative point of view refused to locate itself in a secure vantage point and instead lured the reader into perceptual and ontological doubt; and where the clash of ideas took place not in the polite and limited confines of the conversation and the drawing room, but in the infinite spaces of the souls of his possessed characters. In his highly evocative meditation on the experience of reading Dostoevskii, which serves as a conclusion to this volume, Gary Saul Morson shows how Dostoevskii sought to find an alternative to traditional narrative, an alternative that would offer genuine uncertainty of outcome instead of the foreclosed possibilities and compromised immediacy of a structured and foreshadowed dénouement. Among the characteristics of this anti-determinist narrative, a form that bestows real freedom upon fiction and upon those who lead their lives within it, Morson identifies the following: *suspense*, or the intensification of moments when a character is confronted by a choice of possibilities, so that the reader experiences the reality of that choice; the technique of *sideshadowing*, which presents time 'not as a line of single points but as a *field of possibilities*' with no single structured outcome; and an approach to psychology based on the view that intentions are not fixed but an evolving process, so that actions too are part of a process, not the result or outcome



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of it. These characteristics contribute to a novel form in which ‘at every moment the author would know what he was doing, but not what he was going to do. He would be guided not by a single design but by an evolving set of possibilities.’

Broadly speaking, the immense critical literature that has arisen in response to the challenge of explicating the nature of Dostoevskii’s art is, like that devoted to most great writers, conventionally divisible into, on the one hand, specialised works explicitly directed at an academic readership comprised of ‘experienced’ Dostoevskii scholars (and therefore implicitly inaccessible to the general reader and those approaching the writer for the first time), and, on the other, ‘introductory’ works explicitly directed at that general readership (and therefore implicitly of little interest to the specialist). This conventional division has gone unchallenged for so long that it has acquired the status of a clear and immutable truth; yet it begs a lot of questions and makes a lot of assumptions. First of all it seems to contain the implication that the ‘advanced’ reader is somehow a more sophisticated, and therefore ‘better’, reader of Dostoevskii. This is not self-evidently true, and those who remember the impact of their first reading of the works of this most immediately challenging novelist will be loath to dismiss that reading as somehow inferior. Secondly, the division also contains the implication that the discourse required for critical mediation between Dostoevskii and his ‘advanced’ reader is necessarily different from that appropriate to a general readership, and that the former therefore necessarily excludes the latter. It is arguable, though, that whoever writes about this most accessible, and in a very real sense ‘popular’, author in a discourse that is exclusive and inaccessible has, at best, perpetrated a failure of judgement and, at worst, is guilty of that dry scholasticism which the Russian writer Alexander Herzen dismissed so adroitly in his description of ‘the guild of scholars’: ‘This jealous caste wants to keep the light to itself, and it surrounds knowledge with a forest of scholasticism, barbarous terminology and ponderous, discouraging language. In the same way the farmer sows a thorny bush around his plot, so that those who impudently try to crawl through will prick themselves a dozen times and tear their clothing all to shreds. All in vain! The time of the aristocracy of knowledge has passed . . .’<sup>13</sup>

The present volume, therefore, starts from the assumption that a critical work capable of offering fresh insights to the Dostoevskii specialist need not be inaccessible to the new reader, and indeed may be explicitly *directed* at the latter as well as the former. In order to achieve this dual objective the present *Companion* approaches its task in a way different from that adopted by other volumes in this series that are focussed on a single author,



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and indeed from that characteristic of most ‘accessible’ critical studies of Dostoevskii. These have tended to be of the ‘life and works’ variety and have offered a linear, evaluative account of the writer’s biography, of his social/historical/cultural/intellectual ‘context’, and of his ‘major’ writings. To produce another account of that sort is clearly unnecessary, and to do so would also, arguably, be a disservice to Dostoevskii himself, in that it would serve to reconfirm the implications and assumptions that go along with a familiar and long-established approach to his art. This is not to say that there is necessarily anything wrong with such an approach. Quite the contrary: works such as Konstantin Mochulsky’s *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work* (1967), Edward Wasiolek’s *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* (1964) and, most recently, Joseph Frank’s multi-volume critical biography (1976–2000) are outstanding contributions to Dostoevskii studies and will remain indispensable for future readers. But the approach they adopt is not the only one appropriate to an ‘introductory’ study, and in this volume we shall be seeking to establish parameters additional to those of ‘life and works’, ‘text and context’, onto which to map the characteristics of Dostoevskii’s art.

We must start by asking ourselves what traditional ‘life and works’ studies in fact achieve. In particular, do they produce what might be termed ‘collateral’ effects in their readership, in the sense of effects additional to and aside from those explicitly intended by their authors? It seems to me first that, consciously or unconsciously, they promote in the reader a receptiveness to an exclusively linear account of progression from youth to experience and from artistic immaturity to genius. Such progression may indeed be a reality but it is often too neat and comforting an assumption, and one that discourages other, complementary ways of looking at Dostoevskii and the artistic works he has created. Secondly, such accounts establish, as a by-product of their concept of progression, a canonical description of Dostoevskii’s ‘major’ and ‘minor’ works which is rarely, if ever, challenged. There may well be very sound reasons for the existence of such a canon and for the lack of challenge to the assumption that, say, *Crime and Punishment* is superior to Dostoevskii’s unfinished early novel *Netochka Nezvanova*, and it is certainly not the intention here to encourage the sort of extreme cultural relativism and downright failures of judgement sometimes discernible in the more extreme manifestations of ‘cultural studies’. Let us rather subject the traditional canon to fresh, implicit interrogation by other approaches to Dostoevskii, and let us not be too surprised if its hierarchies survive such interrogation more or less intact: *Crime and Punishment* does indeed receive more attention than *Netochka Nezvanova* in the present volume, but the important thing is that it does so as the result of an approach which, by not starting from the rehearsal of familiar canonical hierarchies among

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Dostoevskii's texts, frees up the reader to approach those texts in different ways. Thirdly, all but the best of the traditional introductions to Dostoevskii, as they migrate between 'life' and 'works', are vulnerable to the tendency to suggest perhaps too simplistic an account of the relationship between 'text' and 'context', between Dostoevskii's artistic products and the environment in which they were created, usually in terms of the 'influence' of the latter upon the former. Moreover, in establishing contexts and sources of such 'influence', traditional accounts have tended in general to prioritise what is now familiarly termed 'high culture' over 'low culture'. These are terms that should not be allowed to go unscrutinised, and we shall return to them shortly.

The present volume seeks to occupy a different niche in the market by adopting an approach designed to persuade the student to think about Dostoevskii and his art in a way different from that encouraged by the implicit assumptions of the 'life and works' approach discussed above. Most obviously, it adopts a different approach to authorship by virtue of being an edited volume bringing together the insights of some of the finest contemporary Western Dostoevskii scholars in a way that militates against singularity of critical perception whilst hopefully not dissolving into lack of coherence. The multi-authored critical volume is already a familiar form in Dostoevskii studies, and there have been several very successful examples in both recent and not so recent times.<sup>14</sup> These have, though, tended to follow, in part if not in whole, the structures and embedded assumptions of the traditional approach, with essays devoted sequentially to separate 'major' works (sometimes with a more general preliminary essay on 'minor' or early works). The present volume seeks to avoid the assumptions that emerge as by-products of the linear, progressive view of Dostoevskii's career by adopting an approach structured upon what might be termed 'horizontal' (i.e. broadly speaking, 'thematic') sections through the author's life, works and cultural context, rather than the more familiar 'vertical' sections produced by linear accounts of Dostoevskii's life and works on a year-by-year or text-by-text basis. (Although for the sake of readers in need of some initial orientation in the chronology of Dostoevskii's career this Introduction does attempt to justify the selection of topics addressed by seeking to show how they emerge from the author's biographical, social and cultural experience, while the Chronology of major events and works offers a quick point of reference.) In selecting the topics that make up these horizontal sections the editor and contributors have sought to foreground the fact that Dostoevskii's writings were produced amidst a variety of cultural stimuli and assumptions, and to encourage awareness of the extent to which the nature of his texts was subject to manipulation – sometimes in ways acknowledged explicitly, on