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Linda Ivanits

Excerpt

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*Introduction: the people in Dostoevsky's
art and thought*

Readers of Dostoevsky will recall the dramatic events in the cell of Father Zosima that initiate the action of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Karamazov family has gathered at the monastery where the youngest son Alesha is a novice so that the saintly monk can resolve a feud between the eldest son Dmitry and his father Fedor Pavlovich. They are an unlikely assortment of visitors. Fedor Pavlovich, his son Ivan, and their distant relative Miusov are non-believers who have come largely out of curiosity. Dmitry alone takes the meeting seriously, but his arrival is delayed for most of the scene. During his absence, Old Karamazov spouts travesties of biblical verses, Zosima steps out to visit a group of peasant women, and the entire company engages in a heated discussion of an article that Ivan wrote about ecclesiastical courts. Dmitry arrives, asks Father Zosima's blessing, and sits down; then the conversation turns to Ivan's thesis that if God does not exist, everything is permitted. Sensing that Ivan is in the midst of a great spiritual struggle, Zosima blesses him. Suddenly Fedor Pavlovich begins shouting scandalous accusations against Dmitry, who in turn cries out: "Why does such a man live? . . . Can one even allow him to defile the earth with his presence?" Old Karamazov responds, "Are you listening, are you listening, monks, to the parricide?" (14: 69). Zosima unexpectedly rises from his place, falls on his knees and bows down before Dmitry. All the visitors rush out of the room.

Thus Dostoevsky propels his greatest novel into motion. Readers and characters alike, prompted by Zosima's enigmatic gesture, immediately suspect that the rivalry between Dmitry and his father will culminate in murder. They also surmise that Ivan's query about the consequences of life without God will be of major import. But following the whirlwind of developments in the elder's cell, Zosima's visit with the peasant women remains only a faint and somewhat puzzling recollection. This scene had briefly shifted the thrust of the narrative from the modern world of rational argumentation and psychological nuance, which the major characters

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inhabit, to the antiquated world of the Russian village. When Zosima left his cell, he visited a *klikusha* or woman who shrieks because, according to popular belief, a devil sits inside her; another woman who practiced sorcery to find out if her son was alive; another whose speech had acquired the sing-song rhythms of a folk lament from grief for her dead child; another who murdered her abusive husband; and another who simply smiled while holding her baby girl for Zosima to bless.

What connection could a group of wailing, lower-class women have with the mayhem in the Karamazov household? No doubt Dostoevsky included them in the tumultuous opening of his story to slow down the momentum and give his readers breathing space. In any case, the women round out the picture of monastery life. But do they have any connection with the murder of Fedor Karamazov? Or with the great issues of freedom and totalitarianism that Ivan will raise in his *Grand Inquisitor*? Indeed they do. Like most of Dostoevsky's characters from the common people, the peasant women of *The Brothers Karamazov* represent a worldview that runs counter to the secularism of the upper classes. As this book will argue, one cannot speak meaningfully about the fundamental issues of human existence in Dostoevsky's mature fiction without taking these people – the Russian *narod* – into account. At best the people exhibit a simple (some would argue simplistic) Christianity that turns on charity; at their worst they embody a primal brutality that manifests itself in wife-beating and throat-cutting. In either case, a vision of reality that encompasses more than earthly life permeates the thinking of Dostoevsky's people and radically differentiates them from most of his educated, upper-class heroes.

The *narod* seldom absorbs the reader's interest in Dostoevsky's novels. The writer tends to keep the people in the background where they constitute secondary or even tertiary characters. His main protagonists are attractive young men from the upper classes who are, for the most part, under the sway of western ideas. Their stories bring us face to face with questions that the Russians termed both "accursed" and "eternal" – the nature of good and evil, the meaning of human freedom, the existence of God. Readers still quiver as they live through Raskolnikov's murder of the old pawnbroker in *Crime and Punishment*; they brood over the failure of goodness in the story of Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot*; they identify with the brilliantly rebellious Ivan Karamazov and argue endlessly about whether his creator was on the side of the Grand Inquisitor or Christ. But I think it is fair to claim that they are not overly concerned about the common people.

In contrast to his fiction, Dostoevsky's journalism highlights the *narod*. The "thick" monthlies *Time* and *Epoch* that he published with his brother

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Mikhail in the early 1860s advanced a “native soil” ideology that called for bridging the historic gap between the upper classes and the masses. In *The Diary of a Writer* of the 1870s, the people of post-Emancipation Russia occupy center stage. Dostoevsky harps on the theme of their moral superiority to the intelligentsia, which, supposedly, has succumbed to the allure of western European materialism (22: 43). The tone of the *Diary* often seems harsh and doctrinaire when compared with that of his novels. Educated Russians, Dostoevsky pontificated, should “bow down before the people’s truth and recognize it as the truth even if, God forbid, it should come in part from the Lives of Saints” (22: 45). After all, he argued, the illiterate folk had preserved a true knowledge of Christ:

They say that the Russian people know the Gospels poorly and don’t know the basic teachings of the faith. That’s so, of course, but they know Christ and have carried him in their hearts from time immemorial. There is no doubt about this. How is a true understanding of Christ possible without learning about the faith? That’s another question. But a heartfelt knowledge of Christ and a true understanding about him exists completely. It is passed from generation to generation and has fused with the hearts of the people. It may be that Christ is the only love of the Russian people, and they love his image in their peculiar way, that is to the point of suffering. (21: 38)

Now and then, statements about the people similar to the above excerpt from the *Diary* surface in Dostoevsky’s fiction. In *The Devils*, Ivan Shatov cries out: “The only God-bearing people is the Russian people” (10: 200). Prince Myshkin delivers a tirade claiming that Roman Catholicism is the religion of the Antichrist and that a Russian who loses the native soil under his feet loses God (8: 450–53). Father Zosima, like Shatov, terms the Russian people “God-bearing,” though his tone is far milder. Considering the relentlessness with which the *Diary* pursues the theme of the decadence of the West and the moral superiority of the people, one can only be amazed by the relative infrequency of such statements in the novels.

Yet the *narod* is every bit as important to Dostoevsky’s fiction as to his journalism. Its presence or absence affects the working out of the “accursed” questions. In Dostoevsky’s great novels, however, the technique for handling the people and their ethic differs from that of *The Diary of a Writer* and, for that matter, from that he employs in creating his intellectual heroes. On the primary level of plot, the writer tends to shift the emphasis away from the people. At the same time, he crowds the shadows of his fictional world with servants, tradespeople, and peasants, whom readers are prone to dismiss as simply constituting a veneer of local color that renders the novels truly *Russian*. A multitude of street people inhabits the seedy section of

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St. Petersburg where *Crime and Punishment* takes place. *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov* contain large numbers of servants who attend to the everyday needs of the upper classes and function as conduits of information. Both novels contain a few highly conspicuous peasants. The escaped convict Fedka of *The Devils* is a former serf who was dispatched to the army to pay gambling debts; he robs churches, cuts throats, and, at the same time, spends his nights listening to readings of the Apocalypse. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the murderer Smerdiakov belongs by birth to the people; he is the son of an idiot girl whom the townspeople called “Stinking Lizaveta” and revered as a holy fool.

The eccentricity of such characters as Fedka and Stinking Lizaveta catches our attention and perplexes us. But most of Dostoevsky’s lower-class characters are mentioned solely in conjunction with major personages. If studies of his great novels of the 1860s and 1870s have tended to ignore them, it is not just because they are inconspicuous; it is equally because they lack the prime feature that we postulate as a mark of significant characters – self-consciousness.¹ Dostoevsky does not allow us to enter the minds of his common people, and they usually do not tell us what they think. Symbol and innuendo rather than internal monologue and direct statement open up their world, and folklore imagery, much of which has a religious coloring, plays a major role. Allusions to particular narratives or songs often conceal the ethical perspective of the *narod*. While the people’s point of view is less evident than, say, arguments for a rational restructuring of society, the moral vision that it encodes bears directly on the central spiritual dilemma of the novels.

In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, major characters discuss the hypotheses that crime reflects an aberrant social structure and that there exist extraordinary people to whom crime is permitted (the Napoleonic theory). Both these positions serve as possible motives for Raskolnikov’s murder. But the text also points to legends and spiritual songs that embody popular notions about crime. In coming to grips with his deed and his prospects for reintegration into the human community, Raskolnikov must weigh the people’s perspective against modish environmental and Napoleonic theories. None of Dostoevsky’s novels contains a greater abundance of folk imagery than *The Brothers Karamazov*. Folklore patterning and motifs help bring the three Karamazov brothers as well as Grushenka and Smerdiakov into sharper relief. Popular notions enter into such key scenes as the murder of Old Karamazov, the death and putrefaction of Father Zosima, and Dmitry’s trial; they touch on the novel’s central questions of suffering, justice, and resurrection.

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Prince Myshkin's resemblance to Christ constitutes a fundamental issue in *The Idiot*. In evaluating this relationship it is important to consider the role of legends about Christ walking the Russian countryside as a beggar. The portrayal of Nikolay Stavrogin, the focal character of *The Devils*, hinges in part on comparisons with heroes of the popular tradition. But *The Idiot* and *The Devils*, which were written, for the most part, between 1867 and 1871 during Dostoevsky's self-exile in western Europe, display a much darker religious vision than *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky knew who Raskolnikov was when he began *Crime and Punishment*; from the inception of *The Brothers Karamazov* he had a firm grasp on Dmitry, Ivan, and Alesha. The *Notebooks* to *The Idiot* and *The Devils* indicate that the characters of Myshkin and Stavrogin eluded him, and in the finished texts the question of just who they are becomes the central issue. The wide array of folklore imagery accompanying them embeds fundamental religious and political questions, yet masks rather than reveals the true nature of the heroes. When the masks fall, the reader is confronted with a spiritual void.

The present book is a study of the *narod* in Dostoevsky's art and thought. Few would dispute the people's centrality for Dostoevsky. One of the great "truths" about this writer is that after spending four years in a Siberian stockade side by side with the common people, they came to occupy a pivotal role in his thinking. As G. M. Fridlender remarks, "The people (*narod*), their moral and spiritual life, their impulses . . . – this is the reference point that Dostoevsky tried to follow and on which hung his social position and his ethical pathos."² It is equally true, as many have pointed out, that Dostoevsky's vision of reality was fundamentally religious and focused on the image of Christ.³ Generations of readers have been inspired by his creative representations of the workings of the divine in human life and have glimpsed their own search for faith in the tortuous paths of his heroes. This book is primarily a discussion of the interconnection between the *narod* and Christianity in the four great novels of the 1860s and 1870s. Along the way, it also looks at *Notes from the House of the Dead* for clues about Dostoevsky's inner changes during Siberian incarceration and surveys the people of *The Diary of a Writer* and *The Adolescent* for his attitudes about them in the post-Reform era. While there are a number of commentaries that focus on Dostoevsky's Christianity and some that explore his ideas about the people or his use of folklore, few probe the artistic integration of these two strands in his work.⁴

My study proceeds from the premise that any talk of God in the mature Dostoevsky must include talk of the *narod*. But the issue is by no means as

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straightforward as the writer's mandate to "bow down before the people's truth." The powerful scenes of peasant brutality and drunkenness appearing in his fiction and journalism suggest he may have been far less certain about the people's Christianity than the doctrinaire statements of the *Diary* would indicate. Moreover, by his own admission, he himself was tormented all his life by the question of God's existence (29, 1: 117). Dostoevsky struggled to believe in Christ and in the Christian essence of the Russian people, but at times his striving and the dark face of Russian reality were uneasy bedfellows.⁵ His inner doubts, to a good extent, find reflection in the dark atmospheres of *The Idiot* and *The Devils*.

My methodology will involve close readings of text, bearing in mind that the Dostoevsky who steps forth as an overt champion of the people in *The Diary of a Writer* may seem quite different from the wily artist of the great novels. Imagery relating to his fictional *narod* can be double-edged and one must approach it with caution. Dostoevsky uses motifs from popular lore for characters that represent positive spiritual ideas (Sonia Marmeladova, Alesha Karamazov, and Father Zosima). But his art also abounds in travesties of the supposed holy, and some of the same patterns and images that appear in depictions of Sonia, Alesha, and Zosima accompany such counterfeit saints as Semen Yakovlevich, a fool for Christ in *The Devils*, and the monk Ferapont of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevsky tends not to distinguish between Old Russian literature (especially apocrypha and saints' lives) and oral legends and songs as narratives that reflect the moral values of the people. On occasion he mingles folklore with biblical or hagiographic imagery in such a way as to create tension between their respective associations. In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, water is simultaneously a positive and a negative symbol. Biblical overtones connect it with the "living waters" of rebirth; but in popular notions water is the place where devils dwell, and from this perspective it is associated with suicide and darkness.⁶ Both hagiographic canons and folklore imagery about the earth accompany the putrefaction of Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The model of the saint's life anticipates that the body of a holy man will give off a sweet fragrance and fail to decompose; folk beliefs, on the other hand, demand rapid decay as a sign of acceptability to Mother Earth.⁷

I shall follow the rule that in Dostoevsky's art it is not possible to know what a reference or motif means until its function within its own text is assessed. The same imagery can operate differently from one work to another. This is the case with legends about the wandering of Christ as a beggar in *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Sometimes obvious

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folklore imagery, such as Smerdiakov's song in *The Brothers Karamazov*, plays a far more superficial role than hidden allusions that are deeply embedded and have undergone severe transmutations.⁸ In *Crime and Punishment* references to songs about the beggar Lazarus are almost invisible, while the text highlights the story of the resurrection of Lazarus from the Gospel of John. Yet both Lazaruses prove essential to Raskolnikov's regeneration.

My organization will be chronological. The initial chapter will sketch out background information about Dostoevsky's changing understanding of the people and his acquaintance with folklore prior to the mid 1860s when his major novels began to appear. A later chapter will examine the people in the mid 1870s. These two chapters will be concerned largely with Dostoevsky's thinking about the *narod*. Four chapters will focus on his greatest novels, *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), *The Idiot* (*Idiot*, 1868), *The Devils* (*Besy*, sometimes translated *The Possessed* or *The Demons*, 1871–72), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 1879–80). Unforgettable characters seeking answers to the fundamental questions about God and human nature entice us to read these masterpieces over and over again. I hope to offer new readings demonstrating how the presence of the people and folklore contributes to their probing of the eternal questions.

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I

The face of the people, 1821–1865

Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's greatest fiction captures his own spiritual quandary, first as a liberal and revolutionary of the 1840s and then as a Christian apologist in the 1860s and 1870s. His novels juxtapose modish, rational blueprints for the betterment of society to the simple faith of the Russian people. By the late 1860s, Dostoevsky was arguing vehemently that the *narod*, however sinful and ignorant, had managed to preserve the image of Christ and that the upper classes, corrupted by western ideas, needed to learn from them. Two decades earlier he had placed his hopes for social change in the westward-looking intelligentsia and had rejected the notion that Russianness was to be found in pre-Petrine antiquities or among the superstitions of village folk. Between lay the central episodes in the formation of the mature writer – arrest, Siberian imprisonment, and exile.

This chapter will chart Dostoevsky's thinking about the Russian people and folklore prior to the writing of *Crime and Punishment* in the mid 1860s. Its first section will treat his childhood acquaintance with the *narod* and its traditions, the probable murder of his father at the hands of his serfs, and his ideas about the people in the 1840s. Dostoevsky's closest contact with the Russian people occurred between 1850 and 1854 when he was squeezed into filthy, putrid quarters side by side with common criminals in the Omsk Stockade. I shall examine his fictionalized autobiography *Notes from the House of the Dead* for shifts in his ideas about the *narod* and his own inner life during these turbulent years. Then I shall survey the period following his return to European Russia when, along with his brother Mikhail, he edited the journals *Time* and *Epoch*. During these crucial years in the early 1860s Dostoevsky became increasingly antagonistic to the materialist and rationalist notions he attributed to western Europe and prone to see the Russian *narod* as the repository of genuine Christianity. The chapter closes with a discussion of Dostoevsky and folklore.

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BEFORE SIBERIA

Common people formed an integral part of Dostoevsky's environment from the time of his birth in 1821. He grew up on the edge of Moscow in a cramped apartment attached to the Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor, where his father Mikhail Andreevich was a resident physician. Thanks largely to the *Memoirs* of his younger brother Andrey we can piece together a rough picture of the servants and peasants the writer knew as a boy. Of the six or seven domestics who were a constant presence in the apartment, the most prominent was the housekeeper and nanny Alena Frolovna. Treated as a member of the family, this good-natured, corpulent woman entered the Dostoevskys' service in the early 1820s and remained until the death of Mikhail Andreevich in 1839. Never marrying and referring to herself as "Christ's bride," she stayed with the children at all times, leaving the premises of the hospital only rarely to spend a day with her sister. Although Alena Frolovna boasted that she was of the lower-middle class (*meshchanstvo*) and not "of the simple folk," there was little in her worldview separating her from the peasants. She even attributed periodic bouts of howling in her sleep to the choking of the house spirit of popular superstition (*domovoi*). When Dostoevsky's parents went out for the evening, the children, left in her care, sang, danced the circle dance, and played games of tag or blind man's buff, and their mother Maria Fedorovna would jokingly say, "Take care, Frolovna, that the children have a good time."¹ Some reports suggest that occasionally Alena Frolovna concealed the children's misbehavior from Mikhail Andreevich.² This kindly woman made a powerful impression on young Fedor, who noted many years later that she told wonderful tales and termed her a "true saint from the people" (22: 112; 24: 181).³

Andrey gives the names and duties of various other domestics, most of whom were serfs. David, the coachman, and his brother Fedor, who carried water, chopped wood, and took care of the stoves, were Ukrainians whom his father acquired prior to his marriage in 1819. The family had an excellent cook named Anna, but their laundress Vasilisa ran away, evidently homesick for her native village. At first the Dostoevskys used hired servants as maids. But in 1834 the pretty Vera, who sometimes took part in the children's games, was dismissed for having an affair with Maria Fedorovna's brother Mikhail. Mikhail Andreevich expelled his brother-in-law from the house, striking him on the face and probably shocking the children, who were not subjected to corporal punishment.⁴ After this Maria Fedorovna brought three orphan girls from the villages of Darovoe and Cheremoshna to Moscow to help with the household. The eldest, Akulina, assisted Mikhail Andreevich in

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his practice.⁵ Maria Fedorovna became particularly fond of Arisha (Arina), who served as her personal maid and nursed her through her final illness; she requested that this girl be granted freedom after her death. The liveliest of the orphans was the “fireball” Katerina, who was the same age as the future writer.⁶

In addition to the regular servants, several wet nurses continued to visit the family after their duties ceased. Such visits served as story-telling occasions, and Andrey transmits a vivid picture of their festivity:

The following picture takes place in my memories as if it were now: Nanny Alena Frolovna appears before Mama in the drawing room one winter morning and reports, “The wet nurse Lukeria has come.” We boys run from the hall into the drawing room and clap our hands with joy. “Call her,” says Mama. And so the bast shoemaker Lukeria appears. The first thing she does is pray before the icons and greet Mama; then she kisses all of us and we literally hang on her neck; then she gives us all our share of treats from the village such as buttermilk cookies. But after this she again withdraws to the kitchen: the children don’t have time to spend with her since they must spend the morning at their studies. But now dusk is upon us, evening comes. Mama is busy in the drawing room; Papa is also in the drawing room busy writing prescriptions in case histories (for the hospital), of which he has a multitude to do each day, and we children are already awaiting the arrival of the wet nurse in the dark (unlit) hall. She appears; we all sit down on chairs in the dark, and the telling of tales commences. This pleasure lasted for three or four hours, and the tales were related almost in a whisper so as not to disturb our parents. There was such silence that one could hear the squeak of Father’s pen. And what tales didn’t we hear, the titles of all of which I don’t remember now! There were some about the “Firebird,” about “Alesha Popovich,” about “Blue Beard,” and about a lot else. I remember only that some tales seemed very terrifying to us. And we reacted to the tellers in a critical manner, noting, for example, that although nurse Varina knew more tales, she didn’t tell them as well as Andriushina, or something like this.⁷

In addition to the tales of servants and wet nurses, the Dostoevsky children were familiar with the folktale collection *True and Tall Tales* (*Byli i nebylitsy*) by the Cossack Lugansky (a pseudonym of the great folklorist V. I. Dahl), and the three older brothers visited the carnival and observed first-hand various folk comedians and puppet shows.⁸

Besides the domestics of his immediate household, the future writer could observe the poor patients at the Mariinsky Hospital and the peasants of Darovoe and Cheremoshna, where he spent a good part of the summers between 1832 and 1836. In Moscow, the hospital’s large garden with its pathways and linden trees served as a playground for the Dostoevsky children, and although they were prohibited from conversing with the patients, it