

ROUNDTABLE

DOSTOEVSKY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

For this issue of *Umjetnost riječi* / *The Art of Words*, we present a virtually held roundtable titled *Dostoevsky in the Twenty-First Century* to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the great Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881). We have invited top Dostoevsky experts from different parts of the world (Italy, Russia, Serbia, USA) to share their opinions and to illuminate some aspects of Dostoevsky's oeuvre.

Our participants are: **Stefano Aloe**, Associate Professor at the University of Verona. He is a Vice-President of the International Dostoevsky Society and the Managing Editor of the journal *Dostoevsky Studies*; **Carol Apollonio**, Professor of the Practice at Duke University. She is the author, editor, co-editor, and translator of books and articles on Russian literature; she currently serves as President of the International Dostoevsky Society; **Yuri Corrigan**, Associate Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature at Boston University, is the author of *Dostoevsky and the Riddle of the Self* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), and is working on a new book, titled *Soul: A Russian Literary History*; **Kornelija Ićin**, Professor of Russian Literature at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, is a literary scholar and a translator; **Sergey Kibalnik**, a literary scholar and writer, is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Professor at the Saint Petersburg State University; **Boris Tihomirov** is the Deputy Director of the research department at the F. M. Dostoevsky Literary-Memorial Museum in Saint Petersburg.

255

Umjetnost riječi: Dostoevsky influenced numerous twentieth-century writers and thinkers. In your opinion, what constitutes his impact and what was innovative about his work?

Boris Tihomirov: Dostoevsky's influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and culture is total and multifarious. As one Russian's first-wave emigrant succinctly puts it, "No one will pass by Dostoevsky

unpunished". Also, as regards Dostoevsky's influence, some artists and thinkers tried to follow him in every possible way (Leonid Andreev, Aleksey Remizov, Knut Hamsun, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, William Faulkner and others), while others tried to be as different from him as possible, calling themselves Dostoevsky's rivals (Vladimir Nabokov, Ivan Bunin). However, it seems that none achieved the totality and wholeness of Dostoevsky's oeuvre, the most important feature of which is the unbreakable bond between art and religious topics. Dostoevsky is one of the biggest religious thinkers not only in Russia but in the world, and he is at the same time one of the biggest artists in the history of mankind. A clear distinctive feature of this writer is his religious and philosophical thought that is not only embodied in an art form but can clearly reach its authentic apex only in that form (he lowers his style of writing, even deforms it in his essayist writing, for example, and this undoubtedly demands theoretical considerations). And conversely, Dostoevsky's art reaches its uppermost tension and reveals the totality of its creative power exactly when it stems from religious topics. In so doing, his religious and philosophical thought is not only embodied in an art form (as a result), but is also realised in that very form (as a process); its driving impulses for the development and construction feed on art itself. Dostoevsky is also an artist-innovator primarily because in his late post-Siberian writing, he demonstrated a potential *artistic* energy (one that can literally shatter mind and soul) that can be unlocked by tackling the key, final, "cursed" existential questions – about God, immortality, the nature of sin, the purpose of human existence. . .

Kornelija Ićin: I would say that his impact was comprehensive. Without Dostoevsky, the twentieth century would not have been as we know it. Most of all, Dostoevsky influenced literature and philosophy of the Silver Age: the idea of Merezhkovsky's Third Testament comes from Dostoevsky's concept about the reconciliation of body and soul, mind and heart, from Dostoevsky's idea of the restored man. The idea of "life-creation" (Rus. *zhiznetvorchestvo*) by Vyacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely is also based on Dostoevsky's ideas about man. Dostoevsky's thoughts about the slavery and freedom of man impacted the philosophical concepts of Berdyaev and Shestov, as well as the whole of anti-utopian literature. Russian futurism sprouted from the character of Raskolnikov. The OBERIU poets owe their oeuvre to Captain Lebyadkin. Dostoevsky's works are the foundation of literature and philosophy of the absurd. The novelty is the "style of tremor" that reverberates through many

of his works. There are also new ideas about the capital/capitalism and the destiny of man under capitalism, about money as the fifth cataclysm.

Sergey Kibalnik: Dostoevsky revealed and wrote about the real complexity of the human soul before it became a topic in literature. At the same time, he turned out to be a serious artistic philosopher in whose novels philosophical ideas are not the subject of dialogues, as in Plato, but the subject of an artistic method for testing them through the plot.

Yuri Corrigan: Though Dostoevsky certainly had a strong effect on the major intellectual movements of the twentieth century – especially on existentialism, psychoanalysis, and the modernist novel – one thinks of him less, it seems, as an architect of the age and more as a conscientious objector. Indeed, if Dostoevsky had written *The Twentieth Century* as a dystopian novel, it might have turned out quite similar to the one the world experienced. He might easily have made, for example, both of the century’s most brilliant philosophers fall prey to monstrous ideologies – Sartre to Stalinism, Heidegger to Nazism. Reviewers might have complained that this was too much an imposition of Dostoevsky’s own views, too schematic an illustration of his conviction that the modern personality, in rejecting the idea of transcendent roots, in trying to make a foundation of itself, would have nothing to stand on, and would therefore be seized – regardless of its best moral impulses – by the first murderous credo that came along. In general, Dostoevsky stands as an alternative to each of the major intellectual engineers of the century. Both Marx and Nietzsche, for example, had a greater influence on the twentieth century than Dostoevsky, and yet they too, like Sartre and Heidegger, seem eerily like characters from one of Dostoevsky’s novels – characters whose basic assumptions about life would lead them, by about page 400, into agony, madness, and even suicide – much like the century they inspired.

Stefano Aloe: Dostoevsky is possibly the first writer of the twentieth century. At the same time, as his biography shows, he was a man who totally belonged to his era and, in many aspects, was its typical representative. His personal views on politics, for example, were pretty banal. The same could be said, arguably, about his taste in visual art, music, etc. For the most part, it is a portrait of a nineteenth-century man, albeit a weirdo... At the same time, his style of writing, storylines that revolve around moral conflicts, his construction of characters who are “responsible” for their thoughts and actions, a continuous tense permeation of his inner sensations with the

ideas of the period, have resulted in fascinating solutions. The system of the nineteenth-century culture with its targeted foundations and landmarks is replaced with the "theory of relativity", fragmentation, illusiveness of each attempt to explain the world: in short – the twentieth century. The reference point becomes more important than the "fact", the *Dasein* is more important than the *Sein*. The positivist belief in reason is replaced, not with a belief in spirituality, as this issue is frequently simplified, but with a desire for contemporaneity, for faith and reason (where there can be no absolute belief in faith and reason, which is the very source of relativity and fragility of our convictions and knowledge). The nineteenth century erased questions by providing answers. And Dostoevsky became the destroyer of all answers by raising new questions or enacting the old ones in a new way. And he did it by using "experimental" modes of narration which set the mood for twentieth-century prose. He really dramatically influenced thinkers and writers of the period of the aftermath.

258

Carol Apollonio: Dostoevsky wrote during a time when new ways of thinking and new literary forms that came in from the West were posing intense challenges to Russian identity. A voracious reader, he incorporated these influences into his own writing, even as he engaged in a mighty struggle against them. Of all his contemporaries, Dostoevsky probably adopted the widest variety of themes and forms from the West. The restlessness and dynamism of his fiction reflects the intensity of his struggle to speak his own, Russian, truth—and elevates his writing above the topical issues of the day. His intensity reflects the upheavals of his times, the Great Reforms, but his continual focus on "eternal questions" is what attracts him to readers today.

He borrowed material—words, plots, characters—from Western models and Russian predecessors, but what he did with these elements was absolutely unique. Dostoevsky probes deeper into the human psychology than any other writer before him (here, drawing upon Lermontov as much as Gogol), giving voice to those dark and dangerous thoughts, emotions, and desires that social convention requires never to be spoken aloud. Reading the murderer's thoughts, and identifying with him as he brings down the axe—this was something new, and it opened up a whole new way of writing that spread through world literature.

Also unique for its time was the philosophical depth of his writing. Dostoevsky's novels grapple with the great unsolvable problems of ontology; his characters live on the boundary between the material world and the

tantalizingly inaccessible world beyond, which cannot be measured, but whose forces they feel luring and repelling them deep within. Morality, good and evil, originate out there, but use their bodies and souls as their battlefield—as Dmitry Karamazov famously states.

Dostoevsky also gives voice to a uniquely Eastern religiosity, which is under attack both from Western atheism, empiricism, and rationalism, but also from Roman Catholicism and other forms of Christian religion. His struggle on this battlefield, too, unfolds inside and outside his characters—and readers. It is not a simplistic advocacy for Russian Orthodoxy, but an ongoing struggle that all thinking people then and now can identify with, particularly as the most powerful scenes of spiritual experience in his works occur outside of church ritual and structures—in the marketplace, in nature, on a riverbank in Siberia. I find most intriguing Dostoevsky's positive depictions of Muslim believers, notably in *Notes from the Dead House*. This may make his works doubly relevant in today's world, which has changed so radically since Dostoevsky's time, but in which the questions he raises have only increased in their relevance.

Umjetnost riječi: In literary theory, we assume that the modern novel abandons the universality and totality of the world. Are Dostoevsky's novels still "total" novels or just fragments? Are his novels realist in the full sense of the term or do they already have modernist tendencies?

259

Kornelija Ićin: Dostoevsky's novels are not realist. This does not only imply the author's determination to create works that represent "realism in a higher sense", but also refers to the fact that his novels are in effect conceptualistic: those are novels of ideas. That is why they should be defined as proto-modernist.

Sergey Kibalnik: Dostoevsky's novels might really be the last ones in world literature to preserve the universality of the world. Those are classical novels which already incorporate the man of modernism, in the same way as Stavrogin, according to Akim Volynsky, heralds a decadent man.

Stefano Aloe: I think that categories such as "classical" and "modernist" are not helpful in understanding Dostoevsky's novels. They are simply inadequate. The same applies to "realism", because Dostoevsky specified and adapted his concepts to talk about "realism in a higher sense": it contains key aspects that distinguish his novels from classical realist works. If we want to use abstract terms in their wider sense, I believe that Dostoevsky's poetics can be called "neo-baroque". In other words, his poetics shares some features

with those tendencies in art that resist, in one way or another, classicism and renaissance. It is not a coincidence that Dostoevsky bears so many similarities with the geniuses of baroque art (Cervantes, Calderón, Shakespeare), nor is his familiarity with the Romantic movement a coincidence (regardless of his considerable detachment from the Romantic movement). It is also worth mentioning that all anti-classicistic tendencies in the twentieth century (neo-romanticism, modernism, postmodernism...) draw on Dostoevsky. At the same time, Dostoevsky (unlike Tolstoy) has never become a model writer for specific literary movements: all writers influenced by Dostoevsky have appropriated him in their own distinct way. Dostoevsky is a template for narrative diversity and poetic freedom. That is how he positioned himself towards his own templates. This is why we can talk about the wholeness of his novels only to the extent of its instability and its continuously changing nature: it is an artistically and philosophically disordered wholeness. Dostoevsky's wholeness is entropic: not only does it include its own completeness, but also its opposite. A true question is whether we can at all talk about a "total" poetic world where everything is, but wherein cosmos remains unrepresentable. It is hard to provide an answer to that.

260

Carol Apollonio: Such a great question. Despite the ambitious and seemingly chaotic structure of his novels, they show an underlying order. This is particularly notable with *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, whose extraordinarily balanced structure, with a strongly grounded fulcrum at the center from which the plot, character development, and argumentation fans out to both ends (In BK the diptych of the Grand Inquisitor and the Russian Monk; in CP the entrance of Svidrigailov into Raskolnikov's consciousness), reflects an engineer's mind at work. We should never forget that Dostoevsky was trained as an engineer. Interestingly, he did complete his works, mostly—in comparison with the restless Pushkin, for example, who was known for his brilliant fragments. So, looking at their surface structure, we see completed novels. But the inner tension of his works exemplifies the extraordinary challenges of the world at his time (and ours), which, yes, was abandoning its sense of totality and universality, and struggling to maintain some sense of order. The angularity of his writing, his lack of concern, mostly, for the niceties of description, particularly of landscape, his deployment of outrageous coincidences in plot and disdain for boundaries between characters' consciousnesses—all of this feels modernist. Realism comes in the identity readers feel with his characters deep within our shared psychology.

Boris Tihomirov: Dostoevsky defined his own creative method as “realism in a higher sense”. In defining it, he stated that the highest task of creation is to “find the man in man with full realism”. That is his understanding of himself and his own description of Dostoevsky as an artist. At the same time, he was sceptical towards the “realism” of writers, his contemporaries, stating that their realism was “very weak”. What lies behind these statements? Dostoevsky as an artist started from the fact “that evil lies deeper in human beings than our social-physicians suppose; that no social structure will eliminate evil; that the human soul will remain as it always has been; that abnormality and sin arise from the soul itself”. Let’s not forget the “abysses” in human nature revealed, for example, by the Grand Inquisitor. So, in “full realism”, in clear awareness and understanding of the deep-rootedness of evil in “human soul” (“social-physicians” in this sense are less “realistic” than Dostoevsky), he set up the task to find “the man in man”. In this regard, V. V. Zenkovsky’s statement comes to mind (even though its wording is not totally correct): “Dostoevsky’s faith in man does not reside in some sentimental elevation of man, but on the contrary, it celebrates the penetration into the darkest parts of human soul”. Many modernists regarded Dostoevsky their master, by appropriating, as they pleased, his topics, by developing some of his “procedures” (and this has no doubt enriched art). However, in their writing, what Dostoevsky conceived as a gruesome problem and an effort of desperate faith turns into a game and “literature”.

261

Yuri Corrigan: Georg Lukacs described the modern novel memorably as a world of irremediable homelessness, but Dostoevsky’s novels are all about going home, though unwillingly, and with great trepidation. There is a home in Dostoevsky’s world, a sense of wholeness trying to reclaim his characters, and the novel is born from their resistance to it. Raskolnikov finds out his family is coming to visit him, which sends him into a hysterical tailspin. Myshkin comes back to Russia, the place of his orphan-hood and madness. Stavrogin comes back to his haunted childhood home. Arkady Dolgoruky moves to Petersburg to rejoin his long-estranged family. The brothers Karamazov return to the scene of their troubled childhood. Even *Notes from Underground* only becomes a cohesive, engrossing narrative in the moment when the hero accidentally stumbles into a reunion with his old schoolmates, the remnants of a past that he has “cursed and scattered to dust.” The novel, for Dostoevsky, is born of the nervous energy, and the hope and fear emitted from these returns. In each case, there’s a sense of wholeness that seeks to reclaim his protagonists, who will do anything to

make it go away. To actually go home, to integrate one's roots, to become more than a fragment, is the hardest heroic feat of all, and if they didn't resist it – if they weren't fragmented moderns at war with themselves, with the content of their own souls – there would be no novel. So, the novel depends on the sense of fragmentation, but the backdrop is still the promise of wholeness – though to Dostoevsky's characters it's more of a threat than a promise.

Umjetnost riječi: Can you elaborate on the influence Dostoevsky had in your culture (country)? (Reception, translations, required school reading...). When did you first start reading Dostoevsky?

Sergey Kibalnik: For a long time I had a wrong idea about Dostoevsky, which still seems to be predominant about him – that he is a writer who does not only express, but is immersed in the world of psychological aberrations. I had more appreciation for Pushkin, whom I researched for many years. It was only when I started studying Dostoevsky that I discovered quite surprisingly that Blok was right when he wrote about the “happy name” of Pushkin in 1921. Now it is high time to proclaim and talk continuously about the “shining name” of Dostoevsky.

262

Boris Tihomirov: I started reading Dostoevsky unforgivingly late, when I was twenty doing my military service in the Soviet Army (stationed in Germany). My true discovery of Dostoevsky happened at the university, owing to my fabulous professor Yakov Semenovich Bilinkis, one of the greatest experts on Tolstoy, under whose supervision I wrote my MA thesis titled “The Creative History of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*” (defended in 1986).

Kornelija Ičin: In Serbia, Dostoevsky has not only inspired writers (Svetolik Ranković, Bora Stanković, Momčilo Nastasijević, Isidora Sekulić, Milica Janković, Veljko Petrović, Branimir Čosić), but also thinkers (Prof. Nikola Milošević). Dostoevsky's oeuvre was stubbornly and continuously translated by professional translators (Jovan Maksimović, Radivoj Maskimović, Ljubomir Maksimović, Sergej Slastikov, Branka Kovačević, Kosara Cvetković, Nikola Nikolić, Miloš Ivković, Branislava Kovačević, Milosav Babović), as well as by poets and cultural commentators (Desanka Maksimović, Milan Kašanin). The first Serbian translation appeared in 1881 (a fragment from *A Writer's Diary for 1877*) and in that very same year his oeuvre was included in the school curriculum. First translations of his literary works appeared in 1888 (*Poor Folk* and *Crime and Punishment*). *Collected Works by Dostoevsky* in 35 volumes appeared in 1933 (edited by Serbian writer Isidora Sekulić). Many book-length studies

on Dostoevsky have been published at various times. I will mention only the most important ones: Grigorij Petrov, *Dostojevski i dostojevština* (1923); Justin Popović, *Dostojevski o Evropi i slovenstvu* (1940); Milosav Babović, *Dostojevski kod Srba* (1962); Milica Nikolić, *Igra protivrečja ili "Krotka" F. M. Dostojevskog* (1975); Nikola Milošević, *Dostojevski kao mislilac* (1981); Milivoje Jovanović, *Dostojevski i ruska književnost 20. veka* (1985); Milivoje Jovanović, *Dostojevski: od romana tajni ka romanu-mitu* (1992); Milivoje Jovanović, *Dostojevski: od romana tajni ka romanu-mitu – metamorfoza žanra* (1993); Vitomir Vuletić, *Dostojevski i univerzalna konfliktnost* (2011); Jasmina Ahmetagić, *Knjiga o Dostojevskom: bolest prekomernog saznanja* (2013); Olivera Žižović, *Živi lik istine F. M. Dostojevskog: "San smešnog čoveka"* (2013); Predrag Čičovački, *Dostojevski i svetost života* (2014); Father Stevan Stefanović, *Bogoslovlje Dostojevskog* (2019), Father Atanasije Jevtić, *Dostojevski* (2020). The first theatre adaptation of Dostoevsky was staged in 1907 in the National Theatre in Belgrade (*Crime and Punishment*). Today this very same theatre is staging *Demons*, directed by Tanja Mandić Rigonat. I was twelve when I first came across Dostoevsky, when I frantically read *Crime and Punishment*.

Stefano Aloe: It is hard to assess Dostoevsky's impact on Italian culture from the twentieth century onwards: his influence is deep and visible in literature, in the history of ideas, in the way in which the issues of ethics, politics and aesthetics have been studied. The best Italian philosophers and theologians looked for answers to many fundamental questions in Dostoevsky's novels. Those were primarily the questions about the nature of evil (especially after the tragedy of WWII), the nature of power, about the interrelation between power and man, about the tragedy of believers' sensibility, and many others. The influence of Dostoevsky's "political" protagonists was immense: Raskolnikov, the heroes of *Demons*, Ivan Karamazov, and most of all his Grand Inquisitor. His works such as *Notes from Underground* and *A Gentle Creature*, among others, became for many Italian writers the foundation for a new way of interior storytelling, revealing possibilities of narrating not only about psychology, but also about the protagonist's elusive subconsciousness. The quantity of Italian translations of Dostoevsky's work is astonishing. Even today he remains among the few authors who are not only regarded as "classic", but are also attracting young generations and readers owing to their "contemporaneity" (at a time when books are increasingly losing their appeal). I personally discovered Dostoevsky late, even though I was an ardent reader as a child. I obviously knew his name, but for some reason I didn't start

reading him before the age of twenty. So, my reading of Dostoevsky started when I became a student of Russian language and literature. In Year 1, we had to read at least two or three works by Dostoevsky. Somehow, I had great expectation when I started reading *The Double* (I was obviously attracted by the topic of the double), and I have to admit that I was disappointed. But soon after, I read *Notes from Underground* and it was a true discovery. For the next two years, I read (in Italian) almost all of Dostoevsky’s oeuvre. He became my idol.

Carol Apollonio: It’s a hard question because I’ve mostly been reading Russian literature! It lured me in early. What I can say is that in the US at least, Dostoevsky appeals to a particular kind of young reader: extremely intelligent, a questioner and seeker, someone who looks at a long book as an adventure, not a threat or an obstacle. The students who choose my classes at Duke are a true elite; they are sensitive and thoughtful, hard-working, and brilliant in their writing and discussion. I find it interesting that of the Russian “big three”, Dostoevsky appeals most immediately and directly to young people. I think it is because at that age, people still trust the power of their rational brain to solve the burning questions of life. Tolstoy comes later, when we are ready to enter a fully tangible world and see it and experience its challenges through the eyes of his characters. Chekhov is for those who appreciate reading for the purely artistic experience of it, as one appreciates and savors a musical performance. Our young readers also look to Dostoevsky, now and always, as a window into the “Russian mind,” whatever that is.

Yuri Corrigan: I grew up in the province of Saskatchewan, in Canada, where I didn’t detect any Dostoevskian imprint on the culture at all. And I’m grateful in a sense that Dostoevsky wasn’t required reading in school. Dostoevsky’s North American readers are a self-selecting group. You probably need to have some inner supply of anguish and alienation to search out Dostoevsky in the first place, and if you find him (in my case through my family), and you make the connection, then it feels very personal, unmediated by any system or curriculum. I’ve noticed that Americans who love Dostoevsky often feel possessive of him for this reason, and there’s almost a sense of resentment that everyone else gets to read him too and have an opinion about him. In teaching Dostoevsky to undergraduates, I find it sometimes harder (though I’ve seen many exceptions to this rule) for students from Russia to be as open to the text since it has been forced on them by teachers, by the kind of people whom one doesn’t necessarily associate with the tremulous, solitary strivings of the imagination.

Umjetnost riječi: We are cautious when we discuss humour in Dostoevsky's oeuvre, even though we are aware of the existence of indirect and subtle humour, unbridled laughter in his short stories and novels. Nevertheless, can we talk about humour as being integral to his work? Can we define its characteristics?

Stefano Aloe: Yes, humour in Dostoevsky does not only exist but is also one of the basic aspects of his poetics. At the same time, this is not the usual humour, it is rarely open and even more rarely incites laughter in the reader. This is a different type of humour, a type that shares very few features with the comical. When Dostoevsky tries to be funny or is getting closer to satire, he is not that persuasive (for example, in the novella *The Crocodile* or in *Uncle's Dream*). That is why it is difficult to define his distinctive type of humour. It seems that the key for decoding this humour lies in Dostoevsky's ideas that are paradoxical and contradictory. It is no wonder that one of the main distinctive features of his heroes, and the author himself, is doubt: Dostoevsky doubts even that which is clear and indisputable. It is not quite correct to say that this is contradictory: in effect, therein lies a specific logic, and this is the logic according to which we and the world we live in are unstable, made of different elements that are continuously changing and are in opposition to one another. I can be a true believer and at the same time doubt my faith and even the existence of God or his goodness since there are different principles in me, because I am free and because nothing is really predestined. So, that deep awareness of human nature is "humoristic", because it is based on the idea that the self changes depending on the viewpoint, and consists of shifts from general ideas and from the wholeness of personality and existence. This is the source of Dostoevsky's antidogmatic faith and his ability to subvert every biased standpoint. Humour lies in the fact that the world as we know it does not exist, but that we accept it as such.

Yuri Corrigan: Apart from being consistently very funny, Dostoevsky's novels, taken together, constitute an entire school of thought on the phenomenon of laughter. When Arkady in *The Adolescent* says that "the surest way to understand someone" is "to watch that person laugh," Dostoevsky is instructing us on how to understand his characters. There are the hordes of mirthless "scoffers," competing over who gets to be more ironic, more "intelligent"; there are the titters, like Porfiry Petrovich, who use their laughter to provoke, to find something out; there are the abject self-haters, like Lebedev, who try to stay ahead of other people's mockery by laughing at themselves; then there are the non-laughers, the inwardly deadened or

inert, like Stavrogin, whose interlocutors are always saying, “aha, I see you’re laughing,” when they are in fact dead serious, and who only laugh when nothing funny is happening. But then there’s also the best kind of laughter, what Arkady calls the true “cheerful” or “mirthful” laughter, when something takes hold of one and laughs through one’s body. “The vast majority of people,” Arkady says, “don’t know how to laugh at all. It’s not a matter of knowing how, though: it’s a gift” – for Dostoevsky, possibly even a gift as great as the “gift of tears.” Dostoevsky gives these moments of the deepest, most sincere laughter to his favorite characters – the way Myshkin, for example, laughs at General Ivolgin. Ivolgin tells Myshkin all those crazy lies about his childhood, about his bedtime bonding with Napoleon, and when he goes away, Myshkin sits there laughing “for about ten minutes” – which is a really long time to sit by oneself laughing at someone. The fact that Myshkin sits there for *ten whole minutes* laughing about the ridiculous lies of this crazy old man tells us a lot about Dostoevsky’s profound respect for laughter; this is probably Myshkin’s least charitable moment, but it’s one in which we feel particularly close to him.

266

Carol Apollonio: Sometimes Dostoevsky is hilarious. I fully agree that we have to be cautious, not because he’s not funny, but because analyzing his humor can kill it. And humor is so deeply rooted in its own cultural context. To readers in our day and age, some of the humor feels forced—for example, when Germans start talking in his works, it’s supposed to be funny, but tends to fall flat for contemporary readers (at least on this side of the pond). The funniest parts in Dostoevsky are Gogolian—when his absurdist liars, for example, General Ivolgin in *The Idiot*, tell their crazy tales. Readers of Dostoevsky should laugh out loud in parts, and take a moment to just feel the funniness. It may feel funnier against the background of all the darkness that dominates the novels. I should add that some translators have done a great job with the humor. But I have no desire to analyze it.

Boris Tihomirov: Dostoevsky is really a wonderful literary humourist. In addition, his humour has a rather large range: from simple humoristic novellas, such as *Another Man’s Wife and a Husband under the Bed* to dark humour in the novella *Bobok* or grotesque fantasy in *The Crocodile*. But his artistically best humour is probably in his latest novels – in *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Humour is a constituent part of the architecture of these novels. I will just mention several of his “ingenious jokers”: Lebedev, Lebjadkin and especially Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, all of whom have a specific artistic function. With their unconstrained and rampant behaviour, these protagonists

parody the most important metaphysical problems of the "Great Five Books", by emphasising them grotesquely and illuminating them in a new way. This also includes the Devil, Ivan Karamazov's double. General Ivolgin, a comical character in *The Idiot*, plays a somewhat different but a very prominent role. His whole story as to how he was Napoleon's page is the gem of Dostoevsky's humour. Dostoevsky also paints a fantastic portrait of what defines humour: "humour is astuteness of deep feelings".

Kornelija Ičin: Annensky wrote about humour in Dostoevsky, and so did many scholars on Dostoevsky that followed, such as Bakhtin and Lapshin. In this regard it is worth mentioning Lev Lunts' words at Boris Eikhenbaum's seminar on the comic in Dostoevsky (on Captain Lebjadkin and buffoonery). Naturally, it is possible to talk about humour in Dostoevsky. And this is a special "reduced humour" which appears at the moment when an ideally imagined rational construction crumbles: on the surface of a highly elaborated idea of subordinating life to arithmetic operations, Raskolnikov with a fever wearing a felt hat looks as funny as the open door of the apartment of the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna.

Sergey Kibalnik: Most of all, I like talking about Dostoevsky as a fabulous humourist (humour is just one element of the comic). He is a humourist not in some other sense, but in the sense of the comic in Shakespeare's and Dickens' works. Complexity lies in him being a comic and a tragic writer simultaneously, as Shakespeare – which is exactly what human life is, comic and tragic at the same time. If there is more humour in Shakespeare's comedies and more tragedy in his tragedies, in Dostoevsky there is a lot of comic and tragic in his "Great Five Books". However, since the comic is a constituent part of portraying the "phenomenological" being of the majority of his protagonists, and the tragic constitutes their metaphysical depth, most readers tend to notice only the second aspect of these two inseparable components.

Umjetnost riječi: Some critics argue that Dostoevsky is far more interested in expressing ideas and is indifferent towards style. This led to conclusions that he was always rushing and not inclined to "spruce up" his work. What can you say about his style?

Carol Apollonio: Those whose tastes run to decorum and polish can't get through a single Dostoevskian sentence. He's always running into things and breaking things. He repeats himself, waves his arms in the air, deploys melodramatic clichés, descends into sentimentality; his characters shout,

fall to the ground, slap one another, rush madly from place to place. He sets up a drawing room, only so that Shatov, or Rogozhin, or Marya Lebyadkina, or Grushenka, or Nastasya Filippovna, can rush in and create a scandal. So, his style feels this way too! You are not here for a cup of tea and some light entertainment; you are flailing in the darkness, burning with big questions that polite conversation cannot answer. Dostoevsky is writing to the parts of ourselves that crave something deeper, underneath that scandalous surface. That being said, I will repeat that despite the surface appearance, his most famous novels are extraordinarily well structured, with good load-bearing walls and beams. He is a master of dramatic construction—particularly in his design of the novelistic space, placement of characters in it, and (famously) their entrances and exits. The reader who pays attention to visual images and dreams in Dostoevsky will discover a whole new level of meaning beyond the words. He is the master of binaries, paradoxes, and contrasts: light and darkness; silence and noise; anguish and peace; good and evil—not just in dialogues between two characters who disagree, but in the dramatic space where it occurs. In cramped, human-built dwellings and public buildings the human soul is itself cramped, miserable, unfree. He keeps himself, his character, and his reader in there as long as we can stand it, and then, when we can take no more, he gives us a radiant dream. We rush outside, fall weeping with joy, to the wide-open, green earth, and feel the freedom that can only come when we have experienced its opposite—a darkness which may indeed entail a seeming awkwardness of style.

268

Yuri Corrigan: Sometimes I'll think of a scene in Dostoevsky, and I can picture the mood and weather so clearly – like, for example, the scene of Shatov's murder in *Demons* – but when I look at the text, apart from a few scattered words here and there ("it was dark," "in the dark"), I can only find one very small descriptive sentence. In the case of Shatov's murder, it's: "Ветер колыхал верхушки сосен." ("The wind swayed the tops of the pines"). This a great sentence, and Dostoevsky was a master of finding exactly the right places for these efficient and concise descriptions. But then there are also the parts of the following, hypothetical sentence, of which we see many different combinations: "Suddenly – for some reason – almost even as if on purpose – he gave a start – and was as though suddenly – filled with some kind of boundless disgust." It's here, in these extremely vague and problematic sentences (which any decent editor would flag for omission), that Dostoevsky gives up control of his text, leaves room for speculation and mystery – which I think is a greatly undervalued literary impulse. I admire Dostoevsky's courage in letting his defenses down to allow vulnerable, raw

psychic material onto the page, and also his courage in permitting himself—maybe more than any other major modern writer, including even Dickens—to write emotionally, not sentimentally, but with fearless emotion. If Dostoevsky had written like Nabokov—in that neat, self-censored style—if he were as afraid of being mocked, what would be left? One can just imagine Nabokov editing Dostoevsky: deleting Alyosha's speech at the stone, the Lazarus scene from *Crime and Punishment*, probably over half of *The Idiot*, or at least the most memorable parts.

Stefano Aloe: The idea of Dostoevsky as a “bad stylist” is still embraced by many researches in the long tradition of Dostoevsky's reception. This idea is simultaneously true and false. It is true if we analyse Dostoevsky's style through the prism of literary canon and its evolution from the antiquity to the mid-nineteenth century. Dostoevsky really lacks proportion, the control of his content, attention to aesthetic values and rhetorical complexity of the text, both on the level of the plot and its individual parts. Dostoevsky dodged the idea of mimesis, of mimicking reality as an aesthetic procedure that regulates reality to the final point via artistic means. There is no transformation of the world into a harmonious synthesis. Dostoevsky's poetics is a poetics of transfer of the same chaos, the same “fantastic” disorder so that we are able to feel and recognise it in its totality. But to conclude that due to this Dostoevsky is a “bad” writer is a gross error. Dostoevsky is an excellent stylist, aware of and focused on his goal. His style corresponds to his poetics: chaos can only be presented as chaos and he invented new stylistic procedures to transmit this matter without a form. The beauty of his style consists of a magnetic, fluid movement without dead points, of unexpected solutions and vitality. Everything happens in a seemingly haphazard manner even though the author thought about it thoroughly. He did not focus on decorative phrases (his writing seems fast and immediate), but created voices and gestures of his heroes through a long and complicated process: he fixed “alive speech” before he introduced it into the storyline. In that way everything is stylistically fixed while everything else flows like a stream of consciousness. That is in effect his style that is stronger because he knew how to masterfully use rhetorical devices, not to decorate his text, but to structure the speech of his narrator and his characters.

Boris Tihomirov: This is true and not true. It is indisputable that Dostoevsky is a “writer of ideas”, or as Bakhtin called him, an “artist of ideas”. In that regard he is unique and one-of-a-kind. And at the same time his distinctiveness lies in the fact that he was an artist who thought in images of a thinker, thus creating live heroes-intellectuals, such as as the paradoxical

Underground Man, Ippolit Terent'ev, Kirillov, Versilov, Ivan Karamazov and others. Regarding the rebellious god-defying position of his protagonist Ivan Karamazov, Dostoevsky said that "in Europe, there has never been such a powerful atheistic statement". In other words, the final depth and rigour of Ivan's god-defying criticism belongs primarily to the author himself; he develops this cycle of ideas to the full as if from somebody else's thinking position, as an artist in order to show the thoughts of his character. And this distinctive artistic activity on Dostoevsky's part turns out to be crucial for the development of his own polarising religious thought. This thought finds within itself (or rather creates in itself) the totality of a god-defying argument (in this example) just to allegedly push it away, which in turn is artistically enacted in the form of a literary hero. Thus, Dostoevsky as a thinker and an artist gets an exceptional chance to construct this type of a hero-ideologue as the protagonist of the "great dialogue" in the novel in order to enter into "a dialogical communication" with him, "which is deep, serious, real and not rhetorically playful or conditioned by literature" (Bakhtin). As regards his style, Dostoevsky is inconsistent. For example, in *The Idiot*, apart from pages that astonish the reader with their artistic perfection (though of a distinctive order), such as the scene with Prince Myshkin and Rogozhin near the dead body of Nastasya Filippovna, there are crumbled, forced pages, obviously written in haste and without inspiration (just check the beginning of the second part of the novel). But such pages are not Dostoevsky's "business card". He is an excellent stylist who shines brightly in his humoristic works, as I mentioned earlier in relation to his humour.

Sergey Kibalnik: The best way for someone to prove his own stylistic clumsiness is to blurt out something about Dostoevsky's stylistic imperfection. Even Nabokov admired *The Brothers Karamazov* in the 1930s before he realised that his comparison to Dostoevsky was not good for him. The artistic world and man in Dostoevsky are like that, even more alive than the real world around us. Hence, Dostoevsky's style creates a miracle that is subordinate only to true art where style is not separate from other levels of a work of art, but constitutes its organic whole with those other levels.

Kornelija Ičin: His style is such that the reader can't put the book down. Who thinks about Dostoevsky's style when we become involved with his ideas that capture the paradox of human existence he managed to illuminate, and captivate the characters he created? His style corresponds to the heroes, their everydayness, the surrounding, the issues that torment them. The style

corresponds to the author's hectic writing and also to the hectic thoughts that keep his protagonists alive.

Umjetnost riječi: Can we talk about Dostoevsky in the twenty-first century or about the twenty-first-century Dostoevsky? To what degree are his works contemporary in our present moment? Can you single out some works without which contemporary literature and culture would be inconceivable?

Kornelija Ičin: Dostoevsky can't be measured in the categories of historical time. "Dostoevsky is immortal", as Behemoth says in *Master and Margarita*... Dostoevsky is our contemporary, as he was in the twentieth century, as he will be in the twenty-second century and beyond. Dostoevsky completely matters today – with his questions about slavery and freedom of man, his "theory" about the right to life of others, with his thoughts about man and the capital/accumulation, about the dehumanisation of the world, about life in the underground, about the killing of God within us... Contemporary culture can't be imagined without his *Notes from Underground*, *The Gambler*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Boris Tihomirov: Mikhail Bakhtin insisted that the author of *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* should be evaluated and studied in the context of "Great Time". Dostoevsky is an epochal phenomenon. However, Dostoevsky's epoch hasn't finished. We live in times that in a way belong to Dostoevsky's epoch. And this is primarily how the meaning of the spiritual heritage of the great Russian writer for contemporary society is defined. Dostoevsky's epoch is an epoch marked by the beginning of a major crisis of religious consciousness, faith. Dostoevsky thoroughly problematises traditional Christianity – Christian dogma, Christian morality, the Christian understanding of the world – through many of his heroes in the "Great Five Books" (Ippolit Terent'ev, Versilov, Ivan Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor). One of his notes before his death states: "It is not as a child that I believe and confess Christ. My hosanna is born of an enormous crucible of doubt." This confession not only testifies to Dostoevsky's personal painstaking religious quests and discoveries, but at the same time represents a complete formula of his creation that reveals the deep impulses and the powerful nature of the author's creative energy. Because to embody "hosanna" in Dostoevsky's oeuvre – the highest praise to God and the world he has created – is possible only by showing the journey through the tremendous "crucible of doubt" because this is the only way how human soul can become free. The reader is

overcome by Dostoevsky's oeuvre by these controversial issues, by this fight between *pro* and *contra* that happens not in speculations of the mind but in the human heart where "The Devil and God are fighting". And arguably this applies most of all to the reader of our time marked by the highest "critical mass" of *contra* arguments that obstructs our faith in God and mankind, a time that alongside the crisis of faith is increasingly going through the crisis of disbelief, a dead-end path of disbelief, whose overcoming can only be understood and accepted if we go on "Dostoevsky's journey" – the journey of a free spirit that is experiencing the "crucible of doubt".

Stefano Aloe: Dostoevsky is always up-to-date. Each era will imagine its "own" Dostoevsky, in other words, it will read him pursuant to a specific context. But, generally speaking, he didn't belong to his epoch; and neither does he belong to the twentieth century, nor the contemporary moment. The reason for this is simple: he asked universal questions that will never be answered by religion, philosophy or science, and he asked them honestly so that we will always feel connected with them. Dostoevsky makes the reader his companion, his accomplice in these questions. The reader is strongly "infected" by Dostoevsky's responsibility for his ideas and the actions of his protagonists. Readers of Dostoevsky are never bystanders or witnesses: if they don't put down the book (which many do), they find themselves in the inner world of these novels and they find themselves more in the minds of his protagonists than in the middle of their actions. Dostoevsky lures his readers, deprives them of orientation points and fixed focalisation points. Which is why he gives his readers hope and perspective to continue the journey initiated by his characters on their own. In this regard, his essential works are *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes from Underground*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and maybe *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*.

Sergey Kibalnik: I also organised and published a roundtable titled "A World without Dostoevsky". However, participants such as Igor P. Smirnov and Jasmina Vojvodić believe that, on the one hand, our world is already a world without Dostoevsky, and on the other, that Dostoevsky has managed to remain present in the twenty-first century – if nothing else, for many individuals. It is totally obvious today that at least his novels *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* have entered the mind and body of contemporary world culture.

Yuri Corrigan: Dostoevsky, I believe, is *the* novelist for the internet age, the age of the "shallows", of *bezličnost* (personality-lessness), where our inner lives are under siege, our ability to remember compromised by search engines, where we are becoming increasingly incapable of contemplation.

Pyotr Verkhovensky's plans for seizing control of others depends on what he calls the lack of an "inner idea," the absence of an inward dimension that makes people "obedient like wax," defenseless against an "external will" – and there's no question that Pyotr Stepanovich, if he were around today, would be somehow involved in engineering social media platforms, where the possibilities for making people "into a web of knots," with "blind obedience" to "some enormous, but mysterious" center are unprecedented. Dostoevsky is also the best explainer of what it means to be trapped in a faceless web of connectivity. His underground man is still the best paradigm for understanding the trolls who write horrible things in the comment sections, not to mention the humiliated, embittered, lonely, invisible people who take violent revenge on the world around them as a desperate bid for existence. And of course, Dostoevsky's "demons" are still the best paradigm for understanding the ideologically inflamed, those who repeat "other people's thoughts" with sanctimony and self-righteousness, and whose idealism, fueled by a contempt for actual human beings, is perfectly suited to the online format. What's so crucial about Dostoevsky for the twenty-first century is not only that he diagnosed these elements so shrewdly, but that he also tried to conceive of antidotes. For Dostoevsky, the antidote begins with what he calls the "seed" – a good image that enters the mind at an early age, that serves as a kind of protection, or immunity. This "seed" was closely connected in Dostoevsky's thought with the images of the Gospel, but for those of his readers who might not be able to follow him in that direction, he also had in mind the best images of world literature, an insight which offers us a potential blueprint for the work of the humanities in the age of inward erosion: the cultivation of an inner landscape, a place to go that's deeper than the aggressive shallows and that can provide a different kind of stability.

Carol Apollonio: Certainly, this Dostoevsky bicentennial year is a good time to think about this question. I'd say that *Notes from Underground* may have been the most influential of Dostoevsky's works on the modern mind, particularly as it has been read and taught in philosophy. But I do think that the biggest challenge in our current moment is that reading itself has become less central as a source of knowledge and communication. My students connect with the world around them not through books, or in fact the written word, but through online sources—short, catchy ones at that: bursts of video, gifs, memes, tweets, YouTube videos, Instagram and Snapchat things (whatever they're called). They don't go to the library! Or they go to the library to study,

not to look at books. They communicate through short text messages, and reach each other instantaneously around the world. Education has changed: there's no point in lecturing about facts when one click can get you any fact you need on the Internet. My students now find an assignment to watch a film burdensome! So, we do need to ask ourselves what literature's value is, or rather, since those of us "talking" here don't need to be convinced of its value, we need to understand how to communicate this to people who don't actually see a need for spending hours alone with a book. I find it incredibly heartening that during the COVID lockdowns, people seem to have rekindled an interest in reading, and I hope that that will last. It is our job as teachers to nurture that love for literature, and to help students develop their skills as readers, their concentration, their stamina, and their ability to tune out external stimuli. The culture at large also is inclined to see value only in income-producing skills, in STEM, and to label literature and the arts as frivolous and impractical. I'm getting off track here, but these are basics, preconditions for appreciating Dostoevsky's writing, and that of other great writers. The themes he addresses—Apocalypse, tyranny, freedom, plague (at the end of *Crime and Punishment*)—of course, are uncannily prescient, such that among some readers in his homeland he enjoys status close to that of a prophet. So, in short, my answer is that as long as there are readers, they will appreciate Dostoevsky.

Umjetnost riječi. Are there any contemporary twenty-first-century writers (in Russian, European, American and other literatures) who are considered to be his successors?

Yuri Corrigan: If you can make it through the emotionally gruesome pages of Michel Houellebecq's *Serotonin* (2019), the piercing final paragraph seems to come almost directly out of Dostoevsky. What we're medicating into non-existence with pharmaceutical psychiatry, Houellebecq suggests, is ultimately the howling of God within us, the "active love" that is constantly being sent into us from the depths. We prefer not to be carriers of this energy, Houellebecq concludes; we choose instead to be tranquil, superficial, hollow. And it seems there's a movement in fiction today that seeks to address this problem of hollowness and superficiality, with Dostoevsky as a guide and interlocutor. The Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgård offers another way of thinking about this problem in *My Struggle, Book 2* (2009), where he laments that it's only teenagers today who care about the meaning of life and the problem of nihilism, and who therefore search out "Uncle Dostoevsky" for help. Adults avoid these questions, he says, by encouraging the intellectual

life to be “swallowed up” by “ideas of justice and equality, which of course are the very ones that legitimize and steer the development of our society and the abyssless life we live within it.” Out of the writers who are trying to redirect us back towards the “abyss,” Marilynne Robinson has done a great deal to embolden intellectuals to shed their embarrassment over being religious or spiritual; and Donna Tartt has made a massive career from reimagining crime novels of suspense in the Dostoevskian mode as metaphysical quests. Each of these writers (among many others) tends to lean on “Uncle Dostoevsky” as still possibly the greatest defender of the field of “soul” within a reductively positivist and materialist milieu.

Boris Tihomirov: I’ve mentioned them earlier...

Carol Apollonio: I find Dostoevsky in Japanese writers like Yukio Mishima or Kenzaburō Ōe. Since I spend most of my time immersed in Russian literature, I’m embarrassed to say, I don’t know of Anglophone writers who can stand proudly next to Dostoevsky—but I know they must be out there. Some of my Dostoevsky students at Duke (Corey Sobel, Maria Kuznetsova) have gone on to write novels, but their style and sensibility is quite different, less dark and interior in tonality.

275

Kornelija Ićin: We could call the Russian writer Yuri Mamleev or the French author Michel Houellebecq the twenty-first-century Dostoevsky. Our dialogue with Dostoevsky continues in the twenty-first century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Sorokin wrote a play entitled *Dostoevsky-trip* (1997) that incorporates parts of *The Idiot* to illustrate one level of the protagonist’s collective awareness. In 2000 Andrej Levkin published a story “Dostoevsky as a Russian Folktale – *Crime and Punishment* in New Clothes”. Akunin in his novel *F. M.* (2006) also refers to *Crime and Punishment*. Many of Mamleev’s texts continue with Dostoevsky’s ideas about heroes’ attempts to reach transcendence, about their strange transformations, about the problem of man’s double abyss and others. So, we can rightfully regard Mamleev as Dostoevsky’s twenty-first-century successor.

Sergey Kibalnik: Without doubt Philip Roth, Kazuo Ishiguro and our Victor Pelevin – this is in a way Dostoevsky today. Irrespective of pretty radical changes and, logically, improvements in art.

Stefano Aloe: Dostoevsky has no successors in a strict sense, and there haven’t been any. Those who imitate him, imitate him only in a

given aspect (thematic, narratological, especially in the sense of “anti-confession”). There are writers who are influenced to a certain degree by Dostoevsky’s oeuvre. I don’t recall contemporary writers in whose writing I’ve detected a direct parallel with Dostoevsky, even though there are works where Dostoevsky’s influence is somewhat visible. Tempting paradoxes of Michel Houellebecq with his bellicose critique of western culture could be compared to Dostoevsky’s paradoxes. Dostoevsky exists in the tradition of the contemporary Japanese novel. In contemporary Russian literature, Eugene Vodolazkin has risen above the formulaic appropriations of Dostoevsky, with his novel *Laurus*. However, parallels with Dostoevsky are mostly limited to the topic of Russian piety and not much else.