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“To be Continued”: Dostoevsky’s Evolving Poetics of Serialized Publication

Those who revere Dostoevsky the novelist are wont to neglect Dostoevsky the journalist, but, I will argue, this diminishes our understanding of his fiction and his creative process. First of all, Dostoevsky published all of his post-exile novels in “thick journals,” aiming to serialize the novels over the course of a year, although health, other commitments, and struggles with his publisher sometimes intervened to extend publication beyond the journal’s subscription year. Himself deeply involved in producing four periodicals (“Time”, “Epoch”, “The Citizen”, and “The Diary of a Writer”), Dostoevsky took a serious professional interest in the poetics and pragmatics of producing fiction in periodical formats. His correspondence testified eloquently to this commitment, as do contemporary memoirs, such as those of his wife and of M. A. Aleksandrov, the typesetter for “The Diary of a Writer”. Dostoevsky, ever the professional writer, took cognizance of all aspects of the interaction between fiction and the journals, from the technical details of typesetting and proofreading to the phenomenological process of reading serialized fiction.

The relationship between Dostoevsky’s fictional and journalistic work has troubled his readers since the 1860s. At the very beginning of Dostoevsky’s activity as a journalist, one of his colleagues, Apollon Grigor’ev, feared that this activity would ruin Dostoevsky’s talent. In a letter to Strakhov, subsequently published by Strakhov and cited by Dostoevsky in “Epoch”, Grigor’ev wrote: “We shouldn’t drive the lofty talent of Fedor Dostoevsky as if he were a post horse but rather tend and care for him and hold him back from the journalistic work which will

finally destroy him, literarily and physically.”¹ The Russian word I have translated as “journalistic” here, *fel’etonnii*, encompasses the wide range of activities that journal work in the 1860s entailed. Similarly, we should remember that the word “journalist” in Dostoevsky’s time was much broader than we English speakers may imagine when we use that word in our own language. In Russian it encompasses our terms “reporter,” “satirical columnist,” “critic,” “essayist,” and “writer.” Dostoevsky would come to draw upon all of these roles in his career as a serial novelist.

At an earlier IDS symposium, I discussed the poetics of serialization for one novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I raised such issues as genre, endings, and interaction between the novel’s installments and other contributions to *The Russian Herald*.² Here I propose to provide more of an overview of Dostoevsky’s approach to serialization, placing it in comparative perspective and focusing on a few striking moments in his post-exile writing. I will pursue three interrelated themes in tracing the evolution of his work in serialized fiction, the first of these is the desperation with which he and other serial novelists were forced to work. My second theme is Dostoevsky’s drawing on his experience as writer of sketches, criticism, and essays for the journals, all of which he incorporated into his fictional prose. My third theme is his innovative restlessness, as he worked through several approaches to writing serialized fiction for the “thick journals.” My basic hypothesis is that as Dostoevsky’s career unfolded, he made less and less use of the sensational devices of European serialized fiction, such as plotting with abrupt surprises and melodramatic suspense, and that he tended to give his installments more of the thematic, argumentative closure of his non-fictional journalistic writing. In opposition to Grigor’ev, I would argue that journalism in the broad Russian sense of the word helped open the way for Dostoevsky to become a more original and profound novelist.

Serial fiction developed in a variety of formats, beginning in England in the eighteenth-century. All of them placed considerable demands on authors, printers, and publishers alike. By the beginning of Dostoevsky’s career, serialization had taken three basic forms, of which he was well aware. The most notorious form was the newspaper serial, the roman-

¹ F.M. Dostoevsky, “Primechanie ‘k stat’ie N. Strakhova ‘Vospominaniia ob Apollone Aleksandroviche Grigor’ev’,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-90) 20:133. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.

² William Mills Todd III, “*The Brothers Karamazov* and the Poetics of Serial Publication,” *Dostoevsky Studies*, 7 (1986) 87-97.

feuilleton. Eugène Sue, whom Dostoevsky proposed to translate in 1843, was the most famous creator of these novels, and his *Mystères de Paris* is the textbook example. It appeared four times a week, over sixteen months in 147 brief episodes, printed at the bottom of the first page of the *Journal des débats*. Its shadowy hero, Rodolphe, its child-prostitute heroine, Fleur-de-Marie, and 3,000 pages of violence, depravity, and deviant behavior insured that newsstand sales and quarterly subscriptions would remain high. Working with such short installments, Sue moved high-action plotting and the manipulation of suspense to the foreground. Sue worked without a fixed plan, responding to reader's suggestions as he improvised his popular masterpiece. Russians would eventually turn to this form of serialization, but only toward the end of the nineteenth-century, when inexpensive, mass-circulation newspapers and growing literacy made it profitable.³ More ambitious novelists might shun this form of creation and dissemination, but, as Peter Brooks has noted, a number of the century's greatest writers (including Balzac, Dickens, Hugo, Collins, and Dostoevsky) would be drawn to its exploration of the sensational, the deviant, and the unsocialized for their characters and themes. It is indicative of the close interaction between fiction and journalism that when Sue finally ran out of energy, he referred his readers to a new Socialist newspaper which would continue the novel's attention to life on the lower depths of French society.⁴

A second form of serialization could only work in a country such as England, which enjoyed high levels of literacy, prosperity, and authorial celebrity. This was so-called "part publication," and it was, in theory, even more of a commercial risk than the newspaper roman-feuilleton, because the twenty parts of a novel were sold as individual 32-page brochures, not by subscription. Consequently, part publication could be attempted only by the most popular novelists, such as Dickens or Thackeray. In the 1860s Dostoevsky dreamed of republishing his most popular fiction, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, in this format, but decided, wisely, against it (28/2:119. Letter to A. E. Wrangel of 14 April 1865). Why? Because the Russian book market was approximately one-tenth of one percent of the English book market. It has been estimated that the readership for books

³ On Russia's early newspaper serials see Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (NY: Vintage Books, 1985) 155, 166-67.

published in England reached 120 million by 1890;⁵ Dostoevsky, by contrast, estimated that only one Russian in five hundred could read the works that he and writers like him produced (5:51). It was only at the very end of his career that Dostoevsky dared attempt something like part publication, and he used it for journalism, not fiction, with “The Diary of a Writer”. But this was a less lavish publication than the illustrated parts of Dickens’ novels, it relied on subscription as well as bookstore sales, and it was such a small-scale enterprise, comparatively speaking, that Dostoevsky and his wife could manage it from their apartment in St. Petersburg. Like the newspaper serials, the novels published in parts offered the writer the chance to modify his text as the novel unfolded, although Dickens and the other English novelists who used these formats typically had finished drafting the novel before beginning to publish. The surprise and suspense that their readers encountered were not surprising or suspenseful to the writers, who generally knew how the fictions would end. Dostoevsky, as we shall see, worked very differently.

The third salient form of serialization, developed in Europe and in Russia, involved publication in journals, weekly or monthly. Like the newspaper serials and part publication, publishing in the journals demanded engaging fictions because the journal’s profitability often rested on the attractiveness of the novels and novelists it published. Dickens was an important figure here, too, as he not only wrote serialized novels, but also founded a journal, *All the Year Round* (1859-95), which published them. Unlike the Russian thick journals, which published pieces on history, science, economics, and many other topics, Dickens’ journal was a resolutely literary journal, and it printed not only some of his own major fiction, but also fiction by such Victorian stars as Wilkie Collins. Given the importance of fiction to the success of the enterprise, it is not surprising that Dickens and Collins should have debated the poetics of serial publication, especially the role of secrets, surprise, and suspense in crafting their fictions. Collins, the more successful serial novelist during the years of their collaboration, insisted on the value of narrative secrets, but, ultimately, both novelists drew on the full range of the serial novelist’s plot devices.⁶

The rewards of serial publication in a “thick journal” were considerable for Russian writers, and it became the dominant mode not only of serial

⁵ J.A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976) 64.

⁶ Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1956) 128. See pp. 223, 257 for an account of Collins’s greater popularity.

publication but of publication in general. The thick journals published every subsequently canonical Russian novel from the 1840s-1880s, except for Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Gogol had feared that serialization would lessen the novel's impact upon its readers, while the other great Russian novelists welcomed the prolonged process of interaction that serialization afforded, to say nothing of the considerable honoraria that the journals provided, honoraria significantly higher than could be earned by publishing novels as separate volumes. Indeed, during Dostoevsky's lifetime, publication in the thick journals was the only economically viable means for a novelist without independent means to make the 2,000 rubles a year in income which the critic Shashkov deemed minimal for an author with a family.⁷ Unlike their English colleagues, Russian writers rarely revised their novels after serial publication, perhaps not wishing to undergo censorship a second time. Consequently the versions we read are generally very close to the ones that the original readers encountered in the journals. They still bear the traces of serial publication.

Publishing in the journals, then, was profitable, but it also had its costs. Meeting deadlines, whether weekly or monthly, put considerable pressure on writers, even those fortunate enough to live in the same city in which the journal was published. J.A. Sutherland has aptly characterized the conditions of English serial writing as "furnace-like."⁸ This was true even for such exceptionally disciplined novelists as Dickens and Trollope, who tended not to begin serialization until they had completely drafted their novels. The far greater stability of British publishing made it possible for them to plan their writing in ways that their Russian colleagues, especially Dostoevsky, could not. Censorship, commercial instability, and government repression, all of which crippled the best Russian journals, were not factors with the leading English journals, and the leading English publishers maintained a steady trade throughout the entire Victorian era. Russian writers, not able to establish the same steady rhythms of their English counterparts, tended to begin serialization before they had completely drafted their novels, and this imposed extraordinary pressures on them.

Returning to Petersburg from exile, Dostoevsky soon experienced the full range of possibilities for success and failure that Russia's "thick journals" afforded. He found it difficult to place his first novellas in the

⁷ S.S. Shashkov, "Literaturnyi trud v Rossii (istoricheskii ocherk)," *Delo* (1876:8) 43.

⁸ J.A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*, 172.

leading journals. *Notes from the House of the Dead*, got off to a slow start with only two chapters appearing in the obscure weekly "Russian World".⁹ But then Mikhail Dostoevsky was able to begin the long planned publication of "Time", a new monthly "thick journal," and Dostoevsky found a venue for his diverse talents. Dostoevsky immediately committed himself to a range of activities for his brother's new journal, activities which rival what Dickens did for *All the Year Round*: editing, polemicizing, writing critical journalism, and composing serialized fiction. The first issue alone included four pieces by Dostoevsky: a critical article, an introduction to three stories by Poe, a feuilleton, and the first installment of his full-length novel, *The Insulted and the Injured*. For this, his first post-Siberian novel, Dostoevsky drew upon the full repertoire of characters and incidents from the Gothic fiction and romans-feuilletons that made serialized fiction engaging to contemporary readers throughout Europe: seduction and abandonment, a dying child with secret parentage, an impoverished factory owner, financial schemes, etc. And he draws upon the device of abrupt serial endings which leave the reader in suspense. Because the novel was written by Dostoevsky, subsequent readers have searched -- and found -- moments of the author's future greatness in the psychological development of the characters and in the self-consciousness of the author, a failing novelist. Contemporary critics were not so generous, and Dostoevsky himself conceded that the characters were "puppets" and "walking books," not people (20:134).

In "Time" and in its successor "Epoch", Dostoevsky enjoyed his greatest critical success and failure. The serialized work which followed immediately after *The Insulted and the Injured*, *Notes from the House of the Dead* could not have been more distant from the manner and matter of the roman-feuilleton, except to the extent that its characters were criminals and except for the opening presentation of the mysterious, deeply wounded hero Gorianchikov. Dostoevsky crafted this unconventional pseudo-memoir without the surprising and suspenseful plot twists which characterized newspaper serials and part publications. The hero's crime is revealed in the opening pages and so is its impact upon Gorianchikov. But the installments incorporate many non-fictional types of journalistic writing: reportage, combined descriptions, character sketches, social criticism, theater criticism, essayistic commentary, a first-person narrative of

⁹ See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 28-29, for an explanation of Dostoevsky's choice of "Russian World", namely that it gave him a chance to test the work's acceptability with the censorship.

discovery. For many contemporary readers, the work's power resided especially in their sense of the book as Dostoevsky's personal reporting on his prison experience.

If *Notes from the House of the Dead* was Dostoevsky's greatest success at combining fiction with the enterprise of journalism during these years, *Notes from Underground* was his greatest failure. It appeared in "Epoch" in two installments, Part I in March in the delayed first issue of 1864, Part II in the fourth issue in June.¹⁰ Aside from a cutting parody by Saltykov-Shchedrin, it was totally ignored by the critics, and it failed to attract a viable number of subscribers to this new journal, a continuation of "Time". Dostoevsky's lending of topicality to the roman-feuilleton in *The Insulted and the Injured*-- e.g. references to the "woman question," to the ascent of capitalism, and to the Emancipation of the serfs -- had been moderately successful. Dostoevsky's lending of slight fictionality to the novel-memoir *Notes from the House of the Dead* had been a resounding success. Why did *Notes from Underground*, which combined brilliant journalistic polemics in Part I with an incisive parody of novelistic social romanticism in Part II, fail so badly? Modern readers, critics, and scholars have joined in celebrating the intricate cross-references between its two parts, the profound psychological development of its "antihero," and the philosophical sophistication of its attack on materialism and rational egoism. The easy explanation to the contemporary failure of reading is to blame it on the distance between the two installments, which prevented them from being read together, especially since they are so different in genre. It may be that the readers of the time were not prepared to accept a critical send-up of the past twenty years of so-called "progressive" thought and literature. Or it may be, as Joseph Frank has argued, that Dostoevsky's critique was too oblique.¹¹ Whatever the case, the novella's combination of polemical journalism and parodistic roman-feuilleton stretched the limits of both genres and failed to launch the journal "Epoch", which itself soon failed. Dostoevsky never again attempted so radical a combination of fiction and journalism.

In defending himself and his brother against Grigor'ev's charge that he was dangerously overworked, Dostoevsky did concede that the pressures of writing fiction for the journals had compelled him to begin the serialization of *The Insulted and the Injured* before the novel was

¹⁰ V.S. Nechaeva, *Zhurnal M. M. i F.M. Dostoevskikh "Epokha": 1864-1865* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975) 254-55.

¹¹ Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation*, 316.

completed: "It happened very often in my literary life that the beginning of a chapter of a novel or novella was already being typeset while the ending was still in my head." He confessed that he had told his brother that the plan of *The Insulted and the Injured* was completed when it really was not. He was willing to live with this, he wrote, because he was confident that there would be at least two or three strong passages in the novel, that the most serious characters would be depicted truthfully and even artistically, and that there would be some "poetry" in the novel, even if it didn't succeed (20:133-34).

After the closing of "Time" and the failure of "Epoch", Dostoevsky wrote for the thick journals of others, primarily Katkov's "Russian Herald". Despite the pressures of debt, illness, and life abroad, Dostoevsky did well by his publishers. He had a far better record of meeting deadlines than did Tolstoy, and his novels completed serialization more promptly than those of such novelists as Saltykov-Shchedrin or Mel'nikov-Pechersky. His novels brought new subscribers to the journals; Katkov, for example, estimated that *Crime and Punishment*, earned his journal five hundred new subscribers.¹²

As we turn in conclusion to Dostoevsky's final novels and to a few aspects of their composition, we see how much Dostoevsky had learned from his work with his brother's journals. As he had done with Mikhail, Dostoevsky did sometimes play fast and loose with the editors and publishers of journals, especially with Katkov. Dostoevsky was generally far from finished with composing or even with planning his novels by the time he started submitting installments to the journal. In this he translated the habits of the least reputable serial form, the roman-feuilleton, to the most reputable, the serial for a thick journal. Yet we see how he was often able to turn the events of the day into arresting, but also profound, even prophetic fiction. Part I of *Crime and Punishment* was submitted, but not yet printed, when the Moscow student Danilov murdered a moneylender. Dostoevsky thus anticipated the events of the day in his new novel, and he gave them a psychological depth that the newspaper accounts could not rival. To this actual murder, which seemed not to be ideologically motivated, Dostoevsky added ideological and incipient political dimensions. The historian Claudia Verhoeven has persuasively argued that Karakozov's attempt to assassinate Alexander II on 4 April 1866, at the outset of the

¹² Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995) 46.

novel's serialization, echoes through the novel's presentation of Raskol'nikov's psyche and motives and then into Dostoevsky's plans for future novels.¹³ This failed assassination was devastating for Dostoevsky, and he was unable to make the deadline for Part III of the novel, intended for the April issue of "The Russian Herald". But the delay in publishing this third part gave Dostoevsky a chance to sharpen the political, religious, and ideological dimensions of Raskol'nikov's first conversation with Porfiry Petrovich before submitting the installment to the journal. Such dialogues, relatively brief and deftly presented in *Crime and Punishment*, took the novel far beyond the plot twists and sensational thematics of earlier romans-feuilletons. Nevertheless, the endings of the novel's installments still reflect the attention-compelling plot devices of that type of writing, as they inevitably conclude on moments of violence, suspense, or surprise, on moments when the characters are most vulnerable.¹⁴

More than any other of his serialized novels, Dostoevsky's next major novel, *The Idiot*, shows the hazards of this mode of composition. Dostoevsky began serialization with Part I completed, and it is some of his most energetic, tightly written prose. But he came to the end of the part, the scandalous scene of Nastasia Filippovna's birthday party, and he did not know where to go next. His notebooks, carefully analyzed by Robin Feuer Miller, show a desperate flurry of quickly rejected plans.¹⁵ Dostoevsky's solution was highly innovative, to turn the narrative over to a narrator who, while occasionally able to look inside the characters' minds, was more a narrator-chronicler, who follows closely upon the events, reporting them much like a gossip-columnist by drawing on rumors, letters, visits. The principal characters who best understand the prince, Nastasia Filippovna and Rogozhin, disappear for much of the novel's middle two parts, and the

¹³ Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) 85-103. Verhoeven's account is remarkable not only for its historical research, but also for its grasp of literary technique and literary theory.

¹⁴ The novel's eight installments end on Raskol'nikov's return to his apartment after the murder (January 1866), Raskol'nikov's fainting spell in the police office (February), Svidrigailov's appearance at the end of Raskol'nikov's nightmare (April), Svidrigailov's eavesdropping on Raskol'nikov and Sonia (June), the eviction of the Marmeladovs from their quarters (July), Svidrigailov's telling Raskol'nikov about the eavesdropping (August), the suicide of Svidrigailov (November), and the possibility of a "new story" (December).

¹⁵ Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 46-89.

narrator lamely introduces Part II with an account of his own ignorance, Part III with an essay on the type of the “practical man,” and Part IV with an essay on types of “ordinary people.” All this while the world of the novel is disintegrating around him. The narrator “lays bare this device” when he writes “our argument is beginning to resemble a critical review in a journal” (8:383). He soon surrenders his right to explain the characters and events to the well-meaning, but superficial and materialistic Radomsky. By now Dostoevsky has moved far beyond the romans-feuilletons, writing past his narrator-journalist and staking his trust in the reader to make sense of the novel. Out of the desperation born of the demands of serialization, Dostoevsky becomes one of the principal inventors of the modern novel, with its contingent plotting, ellipses of crucial events, opaque explanations, and limited narratorial omniscience.¹⁶ His novels, unlike the romans-feuilletons, foreground not action and plot but psychology, dialogue, the discovery and interpretation of ideas. All of this is made possible by the particular type of serialization that the Russian thick journals empowered.

Where Dostoevsky sets his innovative fiction beyond and in opposition to the world of journalism in *The Idiot*, he returns to journalism to help craft his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, written just after and then during his work on “The Diary of a Writer”. The novel, to be sure, presents the world of periodicals in a negative light: Saltykov-Shchedrin and “The Contemporary”, Ivan’s “little pictures” from the newspapers and journalistic writing, Rakitin’s scurrilous articles and life of Zosima for an eparchial journal, to give several examples. This novel more than Dostoevsky’s previous ones bypasses the sensational cliff-hanger endings of serialized fiction. Dostoevsky turns to a different sort of journalistic activity, his own periodical, “The Diary of a Writer”. This successful experiment gave him confidence to write the parts of *The Brothers Karamazov* not as the sensational, suspenseful installments of romans-feuilletons, but rather, self-consciously, as individual “books” which rigorously realize the thematics of their titles. Each part, he promised his editor, Liubimov, would have a “something whole and finished” (Letter of 30 April 1879). As was not the case in his earlier fiction, except for *Demons*, the books and the chapters within them have titles, as do the topics in “The Diary of a Writer”. Dostoevsky writes of the novel’s books in terms of their “ideas,” “themes,” “meaning,” and “culminating points” (Letters of 30 April 1879, 10 May

¹⁶ For a narratological analysis of the contrast between classic and modern texts, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

1879, 19 May 1879, 11 June 1879, 8 July 1879, 7 August 1879, 9 August 1879, 8 September 1879, 16 September 1879, 17 November 1879, 8 December 1879, 29 April 1880). As Robert Belknap and Diane Thompson have shown in their books on the novel, Dostoevsky developed structures to enable the reader to relate these parts of the novel to each other, giving it a coherence that the episodic, action-oriented romans-feuilletons could not hope to achieve.¹⁷ In developing these structures of thematic repetition, Dostoevsky adopts the poetics of *The "Diary of a Writer"*, which also counts on thematic repetitions from issue to issue, to keep open a dialogue with its readers.

By now we celebrate Dostoevsky as a great canonical novelist in dialogue with the great works of Western literature, classical and modern. Apollon Grigor'ev, it turns out, did not have to fear for Dostoevsky's literary health. In this brief survey I have hoped to convey a sense of how Dostoevsky's novelistic art developed and matured alongside his journalism. My principal focus has been on his evolving poetics of serialized fiction, but I hope to have shown that this fiction cannot be viewed independently of his career-long engagement with the multi-faceted practice of journalism.

¹⁷ Robert L. Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967); Diane Oenning Thompson, *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).