

Robin Feuer Miller: *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007.

In his mature years Dostoevsky sought to be a prophet of the Russian Christ, but this ambition was more than balanced out by a much deeper critical spirit trained at almost all orthodoxies and enthusiasms, including his own. In the January 1876 issue of the *Diary of a Writer*, he observes the tendency of any world view, even one ostensibly based on freedom, to become a mental straightjacket. "Liberalism," he complains, "lately has been transformed everywhere into either a trade or a bad habit." He complains that "our liberals, instead of becoming more free, have bound themselves up with liberalism as with ropes," stifling any new or unconventional thinking. At the end of this *Diary* chapter, Dostoevsky delivers an intriguing proclamation: "I will say that I consider myself more liberal than anyone, if only because I have no wish whatsoever to become quiescent" ("совсем не желаю успокоиваться" *PSS* 22:7).<sup>1</sup>

The artist who didn't want to calm down would object to the trade piety asserting itself in Dostoevsky studies, the trend toward producing sanctimonious interpretations of his novels that triumphantly declare doubt defeated and humble faith upheld. For Dostoevsky, nothing was more alien to the true spirit of Christ than this phenomenon of Christianity as a kind of group habit, or the comfortable consensus with which he is now being branded as Christian artist. *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (Yale UP 2007) is a breath of fresh air in this climate, a study informed by an inquiring spirit worthy of its subject matter. Robin Feuer Miller offers thought-provoking meditations on some of our most cherished texts. She zeroes in on topics about which we think we may have achieved some clarity or certainty, and opens up unexpected dimensions of complexity.

At the heart of this book is an attempt to understand a core dilemma: the fraught relationship between the artist/intellectual steeped in Western thought and culture, on the one hand, and the man longing to believe in some kind of Russian way (whatever that might mean), on the other. This contested subject forms the prism through which other central issues are viewed. Miller focuses on the significance of the peasants for Dostoevsky's art and thought; representations of conversions in his texts

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<sup>1</sup> English quote from: Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*, translated and annotated by Kenneth Lantz, with an Introductory Study by Gary Saul Morson. Vol. 1, p. 301 Northwestern University Press 1997.

and the nature of his own conversion experience; and his relationship to Biblical paradigms.

One of this book's most important contributions is a useful way of approaching Dostoevsky's relationship to the Bible (or, by extension, the authority of religious tradition in general). At a time when some critics are trying to reduce Dostoevsky to a kind of passive medium for Gospel texts and truths (as though there were consensus about what those might be), Miller instead asks us to think of Dostoevsky as the creative heir to a parabolic tradition. The chapter dedicated to "The Gospel According To Dostoevsky" identifies a "parabolic impulse" in Gospel and Dostoevskian texts, and studies how he imports "his own idiosyncratic parables into his work, the 'gospel' according to Dostoevsky" (70). Miller offers new readings of several parabolic passages, such as Myshkin's four little stories about faith, arguing that Dostoevsky invents "parables of his own," moments that "exhibit all the complexity of biblical parables in their attention to questions of moral and religious truth" (72).

In Miller's readings, Dostoevsky does not simply quote or allude to a primary Biblical text, but is an equal creator, one who borrows inspiration from that earlier work for subversive or at least transformative purposes. His parabolic passages, she maintains, "are moments when Dostoevsky, through the transforming rhetoric of specific characters, could revitalize and reinvent (and even subvert) the traditional Orthodox heritage and render it immediate, modern, and startling" (xv). This is a valuable model for conceiving of Dostoevsky's relationship to his spiritual heritage in general.

Miller's approach to topics such as Dostoevsky's relationship to Biblical texts is fresh but delivered in an un-polemical way; there are no arguments with other critics to overshadow the careful readings. In true Dostoevskian fashion, however, this is a fact that cuts both ways. If there is a criticism to be made about this book, it is that it is *too* quiet about what it is doing. Because Miller doesn't make her critical moves explicit – because she does not identify the assumptions or trends she is tacitly opposing – someone unfamiliar with Dostoevsky scholarship wouldn't realize what is significant and controversial about many of the ideas presented here. The absence of polemical engagement may also be the source of the book's primary flaw, the occasional tendency to fall short of its own rigor. Readings that open up startling new perspectives on familiar texts are sometimes punctuated by moments when a certain kind of unexamined rhetoric asserts itself, betraying the radical thrust of the book as a whole.

One of the main arguments running throughout the book is that Dostoevsky the artist was superior to the thinker or journalist who tried to say things directly, outside the transformative structure of art. Drawing attention to the “Disconcerting disparity between Dostoevsky’s journalistic voice and the way he depicted similar ideas in his fiction,” Miller argues passionately for the superiority of texts where the artist has the upper hand (13). When considering the relationship between the man longing for faith, who put his writing in the service of religious didacticism, and the “wily novelist” steeped in Western culture, she thus usually highlights evidence pointing to the ascendance of the latter. The “hallmark of Dostoevsky’s fiction,” she asserts, is to be found in “doubly charged moments” that “strain away from the impulse toward directly expressing, as he did in his journalism, the values of the ByzantoSlav tradition and veer toward the literary traditions and narrative strategies of Western Europe” (72-3).

Despite her preference for the Western-oriented novelist, however, Miller sometimes seems to back down from her own assertion about the supremacy of cosmopolitan art over nativist religiosity. Various incompatible images of the relationship between religious didacticism and artistic freedom are put forward without really engaging the conflict among them. Bonding, rather than straining, is also offered as an explanation for the relationship: we can discern “a powerful binding together of the deliberate strategies of the artist, well aware of the tastes of his audience, and the didactic, passionate Russian Orthodox believer struggling, as Zosima puts it in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to ‘scatter the seeds of God’s world’” (xv). Another passage describes the relationship as one of collision: Miller sets out “to decipher within them (*parables—S.M.*) the collisions between authentically Russian spiritual affirmation and Dostoevsky’s predilection for expressing his ideas through Western European literary strategies and forms” (69). Without any elucidation, the phrase “authentically Russian spiritual affirmation” represents a moment of foggy group-think. What does this mean? Some segments of the field may think this phrase has an unambiguous referent, but Miller’s own intellectual rigor highlights the unacceptably vague quality of this language.

The relationship between the artist and religious teacher may well encompass straining, bonding, and colliding, but Miller doesn’t clarify how she perceives the interaction among them. Finally, although she argues for the primacy of aesthetic impulses, Miller at one point contends that the Orthodox propagandist controlled the artist: “Dostoevsky often

found that he could best ‘sweeten’ the fundamental Orthodox religious truths he wished to convey by ‘resorting’ to the large repertoire of narrative forms that other writers of fiction of his century, particularly writers of Western Europe, made use of as well” (72). Dostoevsky’s art was merely a front or candy-coated pill for Orthodoxy? The spirit of the book – written as a passionate defense of the primacy of vital, even subversive art – contradicts this disappointing formulation.

Such moments pop out as distracting intrusions amidst a sustained progression of thought-provoking ideas. One of this book’s boldest moves is its insistence that at the heart of Dostoevsky’s spirituality, we find the dilemma of conversion, and that the closer we look at Dostoevskian conversion, the more we find Western literary parallels, inter-texts, and influences. Identifying Western sources as significant for Dostoevsky’s spirituality is of course not new, but it has a new urgency in today’s critical climate, and Miller’s erudite readings are consistently interesting and persuasive.

The really exciting aspect of her approach, however, lies in how she links conversion and Dostoevsky’s engagement with Western sources: she analyzes representations of spiritual conversion as instances of literary transformation, when Dostoevsky creatively appropriates elements of his wide-ranging cultural heritage. Her focus, she declares at the outset, will be on “paradigms of conversion, both textual and spiritual,” and she argues that “spiritual conversions” in Dostoevsky’s writings are inextricable from “literary transformations” (xiii, xv-xvi). Rendering literary and spiritual transformations similar in this way – insisting that the aesthetic and religious are linked as textual phenomena of transformation – is a fascinating gambit that will provoke further discussion.

Miller goes right for the tabernacle of Dostoevsky’s faith, finds some very interesting Western figures lurking inside it, and persuasively argues that their presence renders his conversions quite complicated. Thanks to his engagement with authors like Rousseau, Swift, Poe, and Dickens, “he ends by offering up his own extremely idiosyncratic and perplexing literary rendering of a spiritual conversion” (xvi). Miller’s cosmopolitan approach and emphasis on the simultaneity of literary and spiritual transformation result in valuable new readings of central passages. The Grand Inquisitor chapter and Alyosha’s dream in “Cana of Galilee,” for example, are interpreted as “striking instances of simultaneous literary transformation [. . .] and a depiction of the process of spiritual conversion. Dostoevsky’s novel at these two key moments – moments that we tend to

think of as ‘pure Dostoevsky’ – vibrates with a strong resonance of Maturin’s” novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (xvi). The discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* in light of concepts of the fantastic, uncanny, and anxiety illuminates the novel from a new perspective: the familiar problem of faith vs. doubt is recast as an issue of “metaphysical hesitation” common to Gothic novels (145).

Miller strikes a blow at the current tendency to find this problem of faith vs. doubt definitely resolved in favor of faith or its representatives. She adopts a more sophisticated stance, arguing that the relationship between faith and doubt – and, by extension, other oppositional pairs in Dostoevsky’s universe, such as good and evil, beneficence and malevolence – may be one of disturbing proximity. “Rather than the polarity between conversion and perversion that one might expect to find,” she writes, “there exists a troubling mutuality or symbiosis between them – a homeopathic rather than allopathic relationship, if you will – that is, a relationship of like to like rather than one based on difference” (150). The introduction of homeopathic notions to the discussion of faith and doubt is just one instance of how Miller expands our understanding of Dostoevsky’s cultural field.

A welcome emphasis on the fragility of conversion, and the blurring of seemingly clear distinctions, informs Miller’s compelling analysis of biographical conversion as well. She suggests that a conversion happened even before Dostoevsky left for Siberia. Basing her argument on his December 22 letter to his brother Mikhail and his farewell to Alexander Miliukov, she argues that he had “an intentional program for his prison years” before exile (6). This is a startling suggestion that prompts a range of important questions. If the conversion is pushed this far back, how much of a “before” state remains? What exactly was overturned? Perhaps faith in change from below, she suggests. The new post-conversion status, which begins according to this reading after Dostoevsky’s mock execution but before his departure, is a condition of wanting to believe in the people, God, Orthodoxy: Siberia “lay at the end of a long road already paved with intention and conviction,” Miller argues; “Dostoevsky was determined to make this discovery about the Russian people before his penal servitude in Siberia” (5, 27).

Perhaps the most important question raised by her discussion of Dostoevsky’s ostensibly biographical conversion is this: should we take analysis entirely out of the realm of biography, and, as she suggests doing for understanding spiritual conversions in his fiction, approach it as another one of his compositions, one deeply shaped by literary paradigms

of transformation? Miller's analysis implies that we can't speak of it as an event or experience, when its location and nature are so evasive, and when it is so thoroughly entangled in the textual web of Dostoevsky's literary creations: "we cannot locate with certainty the actual moment – the critical moment – of conversion for Dostoevsky in his biography, for the 'Dostoevsky' of 'The Peasant Marey,' for the ridiculous man, for Ivan, or for Alyosha or for any of his other characters; we can only witness their journeys and watch their subsequent efforts to transmit their experience to others" (155). The Dostoevsky we feel comfortably familiar with is thus liberated from the constraints of biography, and reborn as a literary character about whom we still have much to learn.

Her opinion that Dostoevsky's "after" period was a condition of longing or seeking will hopefully prompt fresh analysis of texts that have been interpreted in light of a biographical paradigm of conclusive conversion. Miller provides an inspiring example of analysis that frees a familiar text from the constraints of ill-fitting biographical models with her chapter on *Notes from The House of the Dead*. She advances our appreciation for the uniqueness of this text, for what makes it difficult to assimilate into the master narratives Dostoevsky and his critics have retrospectively spun around it. Here, she demonstrates, "Dostoevsky treats the double-faceted question of guilt and repentance in a manner that bears little resemblance to the way these themes work in the rest of his novels" (24). Later Dostoevsky claims that the people act as moral guides to the elite, but here, in 1860-61, he shows the peasants existing beyond good and evil; in Miller's formulation, they are "able to step over precisely those barriers that Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* would find himself unable to cross" (24). *House of the Dead*, she concludes, is "unique and unfinalized" within Dostoevsky's oeuvre, for "the pieces of this puzzle do not fit compactly together" (27).

Miller's interest in the tug of war between aesthetic and didactic or polemical impulses in Dostoevsky leads her to analyze an intriguing way in which *Notes from House of the Dead* does fit into a bigger picture: she explores the interest in art for art's sake that links this work to Dostoevsky's contemporaneous (and later) journalism. "In both spheres," she argues, "the question of 'art for art's sake' becomes primary." Many of the prisoners, she demonstrates, are artists deeply engaged with the process of their craft – be it smuggling, haircutting, or horse trading, to name a few (30). In Miller's reading, *House of the Dead* offers valuable commentary on the ambiguous nature of aesthetic experience. The pursuit of art for art's sake is shown to have healing properties, yet it is morally

neutral: beaters and executioners can seek the thrill of submersion in process just as readily as smugglers or barbers. This text, she shows, adopts an ultimately ambivalent stance towards art, ambivalence with interesting implications for the opinions Dostoevsky put forth elsewhere.

Throughout the book, Miller injects her scholarship with personalism and attention to the real world, to our experiences as teachers and readers. It is hard to make this work, but Miller pulls it off: as she moves between analysis and reflections about reading and teaching, we become engrossed in a conversation, comparing our own thoughts and experiences to hers. In addition to reaching out of the frame herself, Miller is interested in moments when Dostoevsky's texts do this, when they "reach out of the work and into a fictionally unconceived, more everyday space that usually serves as a buffer between reader and text," such as the passage comparing Smerdiakov to the peasant contemplator of Kramskoy's painting (177). She moves seamlessly from reflection about the transgressive quality of such moments to pondering the problem of Smerdiakov, asking whether the topic of Smerdiakov as bearer of evil in the novel is really as resolved as it may seem.

The potential benefits of this conversational effect and attention to the world of teaching and reading are most evident in the discussion of *Crime and Punishment*. The chapter on *Crime and Punishment* is a multifaceted jewel, an inspiring model for what literary criticism can be. In one chapter, Miller ranges from speculations about the role of literature in cultivating civic responsibility to close reading of Dostoevsky's preparatory notes for the novel, where she uncovers details with the potential for changing our perception of this familiar text. Taking her cue from one of the novel's central metaphors – air as medium of incubation and transmission of ideas and disease – Miller ponders what happens to *Crime and Punishment* in the air of our classrooms. She suggests several ways of opening students to "infection" by the novel, each of which represents a new line of inquiry begging for further study. The most provocative new angle may be that opened by her discovery that Dostoevsky's notes emphasize Lizaveta's motherhood and pregnancy. The fact that Lizaveta may have been pregnant when she was murdered is buried in the novel as a tiny detail. "Such trifles and blind spots," Miller contends, "are the crux of the matter" (65). Our understanding of the novel as the affirmation of Raskolnikov's rebirth – the traditional Christian reading of the novel – is undermined by the implications Miller draws out of this seemingly trivial fact.

Miller's chapters on other texts follow the basic structure of her discussions of *House of the Dead* and *Crime and Punishment*: provocative questions are posed, conventional wisdom is challenged, and the essential ambiguity of Dostoevsky's art is embraced. When Miller shows that neither the artist nor the prophet has the meaning of his communicative acts under his control – when she shows the meaning of a passage, image (such as Marey), or entire text exceeding or even contradicting his intentions – her voice is persuasive and distinct. This fascinating project is at the heart of the book. *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* will reward re-reading, inspire debate, and prompt further work as we continue on the open-ended journeys it maps out for us.

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Katalin Kroó „*Tvorčeskoe slovo*“ F. M. Dostoevskogo – geroj, tekst, intertekst. Sankt-Peterburg: Akademičeskij proekt 2005 (=Sovremennaja zapadnaja russistika; t. 54). 288 pp.

Die ungarische Slawistin Katalin Kroó hat sich bereits mit mehreren Arbeiten zur russischen Literatur einen Namen gemacht. So sind von ihr auf Englisch die Beiträge „Some Aspects of the Meaning of the Word in Dostoevsky's novel ‚Crime and Punishment“<sup>2</sup> und „On the Problem of Narrative Perspective. Ivan Turgenev: ‚Home of the Gentry“<sup>3</sup> erschienen, die den literaturtheoretischen und philosophischen Zugriff deutlich erkennen lassen. Die nun vorliegende, Dostojewskij gewidmete Monographie liefert einen maßgebenden Beitrag zur internationalen Dostojewskij-Forschung innerhalb der in Petersburg verlegten Buchreihe zur „Zeitgenössischen Russistik des Westens“. Behandelt werden in folgender Reihenfolge *Der Spieler*, *Verbrechen und Strafe*, *Der ewige Gatte* und *Die Dämonen*. Jedem dieser Texte ist ein eigenes Kapitel gewidmet, und jedesmal wird der behandelte Text mit einem anderen Text in Beziehung gesetzt, auf den er reagiert hat. Diese Reaktion des Textes auf einen anderen Text herauszuarbeiten, ist das Ziel der Verfasserin.

Konkret gesagt: Für den *Spieler* wie auch für *Verbrechen und Strafe*

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<sup>2</sup> In: Zeichen, Sprache, Bewußtsein. Österreichisch – Ungarische Dokumente zur Semiotik und Philosophie; Bd.2. Wien und Budapest 1994, 187-208.

<sup>3</sup> Valami mas. A Collection of Papers of the Finno-Hungarian Semiotics Symposia. Helsinki 1995, 876-92.