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The Roundtable Game: An Introduction

The roundtable panel on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky at the XIV International Dostoevsky Symposium in Napoli (June 13-20, 2010) evolved from something that I now affectionately think of as “the roundtable game.” The idea comes from our Society President, Deborah Martinsen, who in January 2010 suggested to Robert Belknap, Ellen Chances, William Mills Todd III and me that we write a “description by committee.” Thus was born the roundtable game. In our case, at its earliest, most ungrammatical stage, it went like this:

Deborah: “In honor of the 100th anniversary of Tolstoy’s death, this IDS roundtable will explore...”

Robin: “Hmm. . . Successive generations of readers engage with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as though there were some riddle about the two of them to be at last unraveled. Certainly the two were in a prolonged, indirect conversation with each other through their writing.”

Bill: “Looks fine, but it seems to require a follow-up ‘but’ sentence. For example: But it may also be time to explore the limits of this pairing, aspects of their work lost when one seeks a lowest common denominator or a set of topics on which they may have indirectly ‘conversed.’ The panel will explore ways in which one loses as well as gains by setting the two against each other.”

Since our other two panelists agreed that this exchange sufficiently reflected their own thinking about the future roundtable, our subject came into being effortlessly through dialogue—something each of our authors would have approved of in different ways. All of us agreed that conversation would be essential to our roundtable, so despite the somewhat longer presentations that appear here, each panelist limited him or herself

to fifteen minutes of remarks. Members of the audience then contributed trenchant insights of their own which have, in fact, helped shaped the subsequent version of the presentations offered here.

My own thinking for this roundtable led me to the following preliminary observations about the significance of animals in the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and the ways in which change occurs.

If, for example, one considers how animals figure in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, is it more compelling to search for shared areas of interest between them or to take stock of the differences in the role animals play in their work? Can one even generalize? It seems that in this case the differences between the ways in which animals appear in their writing are frequently more interesting to consider. Tolstoy spent his life learning from animals—whether from bees, horses, cows, hares, wolves, birds, dogs, ants, or chickens, to name a few. But for Dostoevsky, although he admired how ants, bees, flies and animals generally seemed, to paraphrase Myshkin, “to know their place in the general chorus” in a way that humans generally did not, nevertheless, what seems to have preoccupied him most powerfully were the instances when human beings practiced cruelty on animals. In *The Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky remembers from his childhood a boy who loved to kill chickens and to tear off the heads of sparrows, but who feared the mother hen who would spread her wings to defend her chick. This childhood memory resonates with his fictional preoccupation with the boundless love of mothers for their children and with the horror of gratuitous cruelty to animals. Zosima warns eloquently against such cruelty, “Do not torment them, do not take their joy from them.” Acts such as feeding pins to a dog or the pointless killing of a goose can figure as essential moral underpinnings to a novel.

Tolstoy, on the other hand, although he writes even more frequently about animals than does Dostoevsky, does not emphasize their interaction with people as much as he does his conviction that the lives of animals offer us a living text from which we can learn. Thus, for example, for Pozdnyshev in *The Kreutzer Sonata* a mother hen can set an example for a human mother: she cares for her chick tenderly when it is sick, defends it against predators, but does not grieve to excess when it dies. She clucks for a while and then goes back to her usual pursuits. A chasm yawns here between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: Tolstoy strains to promulgate the shining example of the mother hen who does not indulge, as human mothers do, in immoderate grief. How different this is from Dostoevsky’s preoccupation in *The Brothers Karamazov* with the sufferings of parents who lose a child. The novel virtually celebrates a

mother's tears (or a father's) as a precious testament to human love: they are pearls scattered throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*. The late Tolstoy and the late Dostoevsky diverge widely at this point.

The way change occurs in each of their worlds also differs significantly despite the many epiphanies and conversions that their characters each experience. In Tolstoy's world change can occur almost instantaneously. He often describes such changes through compelling similes involving the notion of sight. In *War and Peace* when Pierre is suddenly overcome by the closeness of Helene's sensual presence, Tolstoy's narrator expresses this change through a simile involving vision. "Pierre dropped his eyes, then lifted them, and tried to see her again as a distant beauty . . . but found it no longer possible. He could not do it any more than a man who has been staring through the mist at a tuft of steppe grass and taking it for a tree can see it as a tree once he has recognized it for a tuft of grass." Or, in *Anna Karenina*, when Kitty is at the German spa, Tolstoy describes her sudden changed perception of Madame Stahl with a strikingly similar visual simile: "She felt that the divine image of Madam Stahl which she had carried in her bosom for a whole month had irrevocably vanished, as the figure formed by a cast-off garment vanished once one realizes how the garment is lying."

In Dostoevsky's world, however, the point about change seems to be that however hard one tries to locate a moment of change or conversion, it always seems to have an earlier precursor or hint, so that one cannot with any certainty precisely locate an actual discrete moment of change. Witness, to cite an example which frequently came up at the conference in Napoli, the representation of Cana of Galilee in *The Brothers Karamazov*. By the time this important scene occurs, it has already been prefigured in countless ways. It is thus impossible to describe the exact moment when Alyosha's grief and anger gave way to joy.

Each writer has his own elaborate "labyrinth of linkages" in which "everything is connected."

Robert Belknap's starting point ("Two Techniques of Hostile Criticism: Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's?") is that both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky "wrote some of their finest prose while doing demolition jobs on writings that others honored." He goes on to scrutinize the different methods each writer deployed in this task. Tolstoy, for example, reduces Lear's agony on the heath to a humorous and quite brutal ostranenie. "Tolstoy has constructed a brilliantly stupid voice." Belknap finds Dostoevsky's methods of hostile criticism to be "almost the opposite." He demonstrates how the Underground Man, for example, attacks the

doctrine of “enlightened self-interest” through a fivefold repetition, though different modes of discourse, of a single interrogative statement. Belknap here precisely exposes the mechanics of rhetorical strategy in a way that has become a signature of his unique contribution to our field. The lowest common denominator here is the shared intention of both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky not to engage in dialogue with but rather to “demolish” important writers with whom they disagree and to make them look ridiculous..

Ellen Chances (“Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: Links between *Brothers Karamazov* and *Anna Karenina*”) analyzes a wide variety of correspondences and shared areas of interest in the two novels. She explores with particular originality how in each work, the matter of judging or not judging is of vital importance. Despite, for example, the strongly differing views of the two writers on “the eastern question,” they each nevertheless “deal with the same question: is it for the human being to judge, or for God?” Chances concludes her presentation with a comparison of how the “authentic life filled with meaning” is depicted within each novel. In each case, surprisingly, reflections about the world of insects help suggest to characters where to find clues to such authenticity: Levin follows the movements of a green insect and thinks about the meaning of life, and Zosima teaches that “[e]very blade of grass, every insect, ant, and golden bee all so amazingly know their path . . . they bear witness to the mystery of God.”

William Mills Todd III (“Dostoevsky and Tolstoy: The Professionalization of Literature and Serialized Fiction”) takes us to a different realm entirely: Where do Tolstoy and Dostoevsky fit within the profession itself? He explores the material significance of the printed page and of the fact of serialized fiction generally. Like Chances, Todd focuses on *Anna Karenina* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, but he sets himself the task of investigating the process of serialization and how each author subsequently moved from a serial version to a separate edition of his novel. Overarching Todd’s analysis is his careful research into what the profession of literature meant at the time with regard to the vocation of the writer and the impact of the fact that writers were paid for their writing. He defines and analyzes the ethical expectations and norms of behavior of a writer generally. Todd then delineates how these three criteria interact and even conflict in complex ways for Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. In addition, he has constructed an invaluable appendix describing the serialization of each novel which will, without doubt, serve Dostoevsky and Tolstoy readers everywhere.

No summary does justice to these three innovative presentations, but I hope this short account can give ample testimony to the enduring and endless array of possibilities for reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in tandem, as well as to the creative, incisive and wide-ranging minds of our three roundtable presenters. Finally, may e-mail render “the roundtable game” a productive and pleasant pastime for future panels.