ARTICLES/СТАТЬИ

PETER MATHEWS and BRYAN COOKE

DOSTOEVSKY: EXPRESSIONS IN SILENCE

Perhaps more than any other figure in the canon, Dostoevsky is equated by literary and critical discourses with an absolute encapsulation of the psyche and the world – life as a “whole,” unabridged and unfettered, life with not only warts, but boils, pustules and syphilis. The contribution of Mikhail Bakhtin’s metalinguistic theories to the field of Dostoevsky studies marks the belated arrival of an “open” hermeneutic and the possibility of a heterogeneous interpretation.

Bakhtin’s analysis ranges widely, from the Menippean tradition in such ancient authors as Plato and Apuleius, to the carnival tradition of the medieval period in Dante, Rabelais and Cervantes, to the apex of these traditions, as he sees it, in the modern novels of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin analyzes the historical rise of the novel in concert with a movement away from the epic mode. The epic, argues Bakhtin, was a way of writing rooted in the “monological,” where all elements of the narrative conformed to an architectonic, unifying logic. The novel, therefore, was not merely a stylistic break (because it allowed the incorporation of various registers of literary discourse into a single body of work) but also a philosophical break, since the literary work now conforms to a single logic. The novel, according to Bakhtin, is the literary mode of the “dialogical” and of the “many voices” (polyglossia). Bakhtin’s approach thus represents a break with traditional ways of reading literature in general and Dostoevsky in particular. We suspect that Bakhtin’s analysis has a double target, that by tracing the transformation from monological to dialogical in the field of literature, he is pointing an accusatory finger at criticism’s failure to emulate this paradigm shift. It is the literary critic who has held back the dialogic reading of literature by subjecting it to monological “inquisition”.

The scramble to assign motives (in other words, to extract a confession in the inquisitorial tradition) which characterizes monological reduction has cluttered the field of Dostoevsky studies with numerous attempts to allocate reasons for Raskol’nikov’s murder of the old woman in Crime and Punishment and Nastasia Filippovna’s failure to marry in The Idiot. The hermeneutical methodology seems dedicated to the inquisitorial assignation of mo-
tives: not simply the motives of characters and actions presented in the novels, but also the motivations of Dostoevsky himself as an ostensibly comprehensible (read: translatable) *deus ex machina* which may be used to totalize and systematize its products in terms of motives, intentions and socio-psychological roles. This technique has usually been tied to a mode of discourse in which critics play the part of Legion, taking possession of Dostoevsky’s characters, having them chained and placed under the heavy guard of the academy, only breaking free occasionally in order to gleefully skulk around the local graveyard. The critic was required to place himself or herself “in the shoes of” Raskol’nikov, Roghozin, Stavrogin, Dmitri Karamazov, as an “excarnation,” a “flesh made god.” This methodology proclaimed itself “objective,” merging the critic with the character by identification, bringing to consciousness reasonable motives for his or her actions. The ethical imposition of this method was its liberatory claim of allowing the characters to express what could not be said openly in the novel. What these critics of the “search for the motive” overlook is that they are doing no more than replicating the power relationships already established in the texts. Their claim is neither “liberatory” nor “objective,” but is correctly labelled “inquisitorial”. An anthropomorphic god (the critic as “flesh made god”) is advantageous insofar as “it” provides a useful and (so psychoanalysis tells us) sufficiently paternal visage for an inquisitor. It is a natural outcome of inquisition, within its logic of moral reprehensibility, law, structure and free will, to assume that the creation of anything so diverse and pluralistic as a world or a work of art demands a law that codifies and totalizes: “In the beginning there must have been a commandment.” The search for motives is linked directly to the power of the confessional, secular or otherwise, in the ecclesiastical tradition, exemplified by Ivan Karamazov’s allegory of the Grand Inquisitor. Dostoevsky writes in his notebooks: “They call me a psychologist: this is not true. I am merely a realist in a higher sense, i.e., I depict all the depths of the human soul.”

Analyzing this claim, Malcolm Jones writes: “What he may be disowning is the kind of two-edged psychology which Porfiry Petrovich tries successfully on Raskolnikov. Porfiry’s success derives from the fact that he does not regard it as a sure method of working out the truth, but rather as a *strategy for provoking a confession*. This is an important distinction.”

1. The allusion to “Legion” has a double resonance. Firstly, it refers to the biblical story of the demon-possessed man told in Luke 8: 26-39. When Jesus asks the demon its name, it replies “Legion” because many demons had possessed the man. Dostoevsky quotes verses 32-36 as the epigraph to *The Devils*, and uses the metaphor of demon-possession in relation to the political nihilists in the novel.
