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“(SUR)REALISM IN A HIGHER SENSE”: CONVULSIVE BEAUTY IN DOSTOEVSKY’S THE DOUBLE

The question of Dostoevsky’s departure from the nineteenth-century poetics of Realism has often been addressed by the scholarly community. This reading offers a new insight of Dostoevsky’s novella The Double (1846) that departs from the context of the nineteenth century in which the novella was initially written, and places it into the wider contextual framework of the twentieth century. Through a systemic analysis of the madness characterising The Double’s protagonist Golyadkin, this article treats The Double as a text whose poetics depict an early model of representation of André Breton’s “Convulsive Beauty” aesthetic which he proclaims in his novel Nadja in 1928.

Modern criticism has already managed to characterise Dostoevsykas a novelist who depicts the world of the psyche and who pre-empts some of the discoveries later developed by Freud in the science of psychoanalysis. This criticism includes Louis Breger’s Dostoevsky: The Author as Psychoanalyst, who outlines the protagonist Golyadkin’s problem as a psychological rather than social one. Applying Meredith Skura’s reading of psychoanalysis in literature in The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process, Breger argues that Dostoevsky’s characters are actively engaging in a world where the psychoanalytic process of free association, in which psychic contents are analysed and treated, is being depicted. Exploring the novella’s depiction of dreams, hysteria and the unconscious, Breger’s reading situates The Double as profoundly ahead of its time. In a similar vein, others have also given due attention to Dostoevsky’s deviation from the traditional trajectory of realism. This lens incorporates many of the ideas posited by Dostoevsky’s portrayal of the subject in The Double, which has been a topic of great interest to critics. Konstantin Mochulsky has read Golyadkin as an “underground man” who, “goaded and insulted, lives through repressed feelings,” Mochulsky contends.

1. This article is an edited version of a graduate thesis, supervised by and mentored for publication by Associate Professor Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (Slavic Studies, Monash University).
that Golyadkin is a subject riven by madness and paranoia, and that Dostoevsky was a master of portraying “the depths of the subconscious” that would later be picked up by modern psychoanalysis.\(^5\)

There have also been attempts to treat the *sujet* of Dostoevsky’s fiction in light of the trope of the unconscious. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin analyses the language employed in *The Double* as a representation of the protagonist’s inner [un]conscious state.\(^6\) Bakhtin argues that everything we see in *The Double*’s polyphonic structure is merely an extension of Golyadkin’s inner conflict, and not a mimetic object in its own right.\(^7\) This reading situates the story as one which takes place within the unconscious, where three intermingling voices (Golyadkin’s, the narrator’s and the Double’s) vie for superiority. This ultimately characterises Golyadkin as a fragmented and “disunified speaking subject,”\(^8\) rather than a closed-up, finished or ‘typical’ character of Realist fiction. Whilst these readings indicate an awareness of Dostoevsky’s digression from the tenets nineteenth-century Realism, there has not been an attempt to situate the novella’s representation of a new episteme that conforms to twentieth century cultural aesthetics that are associated with Modernism and Surrealism. Through André Breton’s Surrealist concepts of madness emphasised in his *First Manifesto of Surrealism* and his novel *Nadja*, this article presents Dostoevsky as a writer whose works capture many of the pioneering insights into modern subjectivity which were to become the material for aesthetic representation in early twentieth century European culture.

**Reception of Dostoevsky’s novella**

Dostoevsky’s texts are traditionally treated in their Russian framework. The reception of his work, *The Double* – the second novella with which he emerged on the Russian literary scene in 1846, was not favourable. In January 1846 the term ‘Natural School’ was introduced by Nikolai Nekrasov in his “Physiology of St. Petersburg” which highlighted the new Realist genre of the *fiziologicheskiiocherk* [Physiological Sketch] and *povest* [short narrative].\(^9\) The Russian Natural School [натуральнаяшкола – Natural’naia Shkola], which is distinct from the later *fin-de-siècle* Naturalism, depicted everyday scenes from national life, with typical characters representing the different classes and professions of the nation. The emphasis was on giving voice to the disaffected lower classes. Through this kind of literature readers would be given access to a sense of philanthropy and altruism that often evoked an empathy with the underprivileged classes, and a critique of the dominant forces which promoted social inequalities. Apollon Grigoriev called this literature

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5. Ibid., p. 649.
9. This information is found in Harrison, “Duality,” p. 60.