

## DOSTOEVSKY'S NOVELS AS CLASSIC TRAGEDIES

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### I

More than two thousand years separate the types of literature indicated in the heading, but nevertheless a connection between them cannot be excluded – at least not because of all these years. It is well known that literature of the same age as that of ancient Greece – or even older – has had a strong influence on European writing till this day: most obvious the epic and poetry of the Bible.

But Greek tragedies – and Russian novels? The fact is that Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) as distinct from the two other famous Russian romancers of his time – Ivan Turgenev and Lev Tolstoy – never wrote a single play. Yet Dostoevsky's novels and short stories have often been adapted for the stage, for the plots of these works are full of dramatic elements. That is the first precondition for seeking a connection between his works and the first tragedies of European civilization. But also some more specific factors have to be taken into account when we are going to explain why this idea became so popular some 20–30 years after Dostoevsky's death in 1881. Firstly, in this period the Greek tragedies attracted new attention thanks to the publication of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous book *Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* in 1872. Dostoevsky did not know Nietzsche, but Nietzsche later discovered Dostoevsky and found a thinker in whose works he recognized several of his own ideas, although Dostoevsky himself (though not all of his characters) was very different from him. And secondly, in 1905 Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1943) returned to Russia after almost twenty years abroad, mainly in Germany, where he had studied classical philology and history under Theodor Mommsen and other leading scholars of that time. In Germany he had also had the opportunity to become familiar with the works of Nietzsche, who made a strong impact upon him, however without making Ivanov a true disciple, for Nietzsche's markedly anti-Christian attitude was unacceptable for this Russian religious thinker. In the words of James West,

Ivanov was more than well equipped with knowledge of the sources to make his own interpretation of Greek religion, which by no means entirely accorded with that of Nietzsche. (West 1972, 81)

On the other hand, Dionysos and Dionysian culture intrigued Ivanov for the rest of his life.

### II

When Ivanov resettled in Russia, symbolism, the Russian brand of European neo-romanticism, was in full bloom. In the beginning of the eighties the great realists, who had dominated the stage for over twenty years, left literature – Dostoevsky and Turgenev died (the latter in 1883), and Tolstoy declared that he would no longer engage himself with such useless trifles. He was not able to keep this promise, but his writings changed their character as the teacher and prophet got the better of the belletrist. Materialism and positivism, the

philosophical systems which had held sway of Russian intellectual life – though not so much affecting the great writers – quite suddenly lost their grip on the “creative intelligentsia.” Writers, poets, composers, painters – all were looking for new foundations for their thoughts and lives. And in Friedrich Nietzsche they found very much of what they sought; he became the master-philosopher of the time, i. a. preparing the ground for Knut Hamsun’s extraordinary popularity in Russia – till his power was violently overthrown by the followers of another German philosopher, Karl Marx, in 1917.

This does not mean that Nietzsche’s philosophy was accepted without any reservation, for his pointed antichristian position was offensive not only to Vyacheslav Ivanov, but to the Russian audience in general. However, many of his ideas became popular and were combined with thoughts of very different origin. Especially seductive was Nietzsche’s notion of an Apollonian-Dionysian opposition in ancient Greek culture, the Dionysian element associated with orgiastic practices, a notion which by analogy could be applied to other cultures as well. For Russians it offered a complement to the stern asceticism of the Orthodox Church. In these years Russia experienced a new interest in religious problems which brought together representatives of the official church and of the secular intelligentsia – two segments of the nation which had been in very little contact during the preceding period. However, not only official Orthodoxy attracted the attention of the new intelligentsia. Even more they seem to be interested in the Old Believers and the variegated multitude of Russian sects, where both asceticism and orgiastic elements were to be found. Moreover, a hundred years ago Europe and America saw a veritable boom of “New Age” phenomena – spiritualism, theosophy (a doctrine established by the Russian Elena Blavatskaia), its offspring anthroposophy etc. No matter how these phenomena should be evaluated, they undoubtedly offered a plethora of new approaches to literature (and other works of art).

During his stay abroad Ivanov had been more or less in touch with the leading intellectual circles at home, and after his return to Russia he became one of the central figures of Russian symbolism, giving new momentum to the movement’s more religious-minded wing. His flat on the top floor of a luxurious apartment house overlooking the Tauride Palace and Gardens in St. Petersburg became one of the favourite meeting places for the intellectual elite of the northern capital. This position Vyacheslav Ivanov – supported by his second wife Lidiya Zinovyeva-Annibal – could maintain due to his brilliant education, his familiarity with most aspects of ancient and modern European culture, and his remarkable talent as a poet and writer.

It was quite natural that the Russian symbolists were attracted by the two great masters of the word who in the recent past had investigated the problem of life’s meaning with the utmost penetrating skill and energy – Fyodor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy (who, by the way, was then still alive). In the years 1900–1902 Dmitry Merezhkovsky, one of the instigators of the whole symbolist movement in Russia, published his voluminous treatise “L. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky,” with which he inaugurated a long series of works, both Russian and Western, dedicated to the juxtaposition of these two giants of literature – with so many points of contact, but also with profound differences. However, it turned out, especially after the dominating figure of Tolstoy had passed away in 1910, that Dostoevsky exerted a stronger attraction on the Russian intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century, first and foremost because the treatment of the great questions of human existence in his works offered a broader field for further speculation than Tolstoy’s writings with their constant stress on simplification.

Vyacheslav Ivanov was infatuated with Dostoevsky already as a schoolboy, and occupation with the writer’s works – or, more specifically, with their underlying philosophy – accompanied Ivanov for the rest of his life. His acquaintance with Dionysian culture was of a later date, but it, too, became a prominent trait of his intellectual profile. Together these two

“infatuations” prompted him to coin the term “novel-tragedy” (roman-tragediya), a term which was to be used by so many later Dostoevsky scholars.

However, it is not quite right to say that Ivanov “coined” the term, for it had already been employed by other critics, i. a. Merezhkovsky. But it was Ivanov who gave the concept a consistent basis so that today it is associated primarily with his name. He wrote many articles on Dostoevsky, the first important being “Dostoevsky and the novel-tragedy” from 1916, based on a lecture given in 1911. But his definitive work on Dostoevsky appeared years later, in 1932, when Ivanov had already emigrated to the West: *Dostojewsky: Tragödie – Mythos – Mystik*.<sup>1</sup> Here the author assembled, augmented and revised his earlier writings on the topic, the result being an extraordinary influential book, praised by both Western and Eastern scholars.

Perhaps the finest example of the ontological and metaphysical school of Dostoevsky criticism that flourished in Russian writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. [...] At the same time, Ivanov’s study stands on the threshold of modern Dostoevsky criticism,

says Robert Louis Jackson of Yale University (1993, 251), and Georgy Fridlender of the Russian Academy of Sciences joins in:

In a certain sense one may with perfect justice maintain that in V. I. Ivanov’s writings on Dostoevsky is contained nearly all that has been articulated in Dostoevsky criticism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by scholars from all over the world. (Fridlender 1995, 396)

However, the book had to wait another twenty years for the real fame to come with the English translation (from the German) in 1952: *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*. This title was set by the translator, Norman Cameron (or by the editor, S. Kononov), and it apparently had a stronger appeal to the literary audience than the old German one. Moreover, publication in the cheap series Noonday paperbacks also contributed to the wide distribution of Ivanov’s study in America and Europe. The Russians, however, got the opportunity to read the book in their own language only in 1985 – in a Belgian edition which reached very few Russian readers (Fridlender 1995, 396).

When studying Ivanov’s book the reader is immediately struck by the author’s solid erudition which allows him to move easily from period to period, from language to language, from one national culture to another. The text abounds with quotations in various languages – classic and modern, references to a wide range of literary works – and reminiscences of Nietzsche. The reader likewise soon realizes that this is not only a book about tragedy, not even only what the German title announces: tragedy, myth and religion. Ivanov’s familiarity with Greek culture enables him to elucidate many phenomena relevant not only to tragedy in a strict sense. In fact, the book is no less than an interpretation of Dostoevsky’s worldview as it presents itself in the five great novels written over the last fifteen years of his life.

### III

The chapter on “the novel-tragedy” covers only sixteen pages in Ivanov’s book, and no detailed analysis of this or that novel compared to any of the ancient Greek tragedies is presented, as his main interest concerns “the tragic principle in Dostoevsky’s philosophy of

<sup>1</sup> The book was published in Tübingen in a German translation, supervised by the author himself. But the Russian original has disappeared and then been restored or remade. See Jackson 1993, 330.

life,” the title of the ensuing chapter covering twenty-three pages. However, more detailed investigations of connections between novels by Dostoevsky and Greek tragedies have since been undertaken by several scholars, among whom Konstantin Mochulsky deserves special mention. His influential book *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work* from 1967<sup>2</sup> contains, quite naturally, also a chapter on “Crime and Punishment,” the central part of which has been reissued under the title “A novel tragedy in five acts” (1986). Of all Dostoevsky’s novels this is the one that offers the most convenient material for such an investigation.

Here a comparison with another novel written approximately at the same time – Émile Zola’s “Thérèse Raquin” (1867) – demonstrates Dostoevsky’s special affinity to the classic Greek tragedy. These two novels present similar stories: a murder that is successful in so far as the culprits are not detected by the police, but disastrous because the murderers are not able to live with the memory of the misdeed so that they either confess to the police (Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov) or commit suicide (Zola’s Thérèse and Laurent). At first sight Zola’s novel may seem the most “tragic” of the two, for only there the awful death (by Prussic acid) is shown; Raskolnikov is sent to jail, but not executed. However, the crux of the matter is not the course of actions, but the minds of the acting persons. Like Dostoevsky’s other heroes Raskolnikov possesses a level of consciousness that allows him to calculate – and therefore also to miscalculate – the objective circumstances (including the structure of his own mind), while Thérèse and Laurent are simply urged to commit the murder by irresistible carnal lust, and their ensuing torments are rather of a pathologic than a moral kind. Thus they lack the dignity which makes the fate of the philosophical murderer Raskolnikov tragic.

Mochulsky carries out his analysis brilliantly, but when he arrives at the end of Dostoevsky’s novel he parts with its author:

The novel ends with a vague anticipation of the hero’s ‘renewal.’ It is promised, but it is not shown. We know Raskolnikov too well to believe this ‘pious lie.’ (Mochulsky 1967, 312 = 1986, 100)

But how does Mochulsky explain that he and the readers know Raskolnikov better than the man who created him? Here the critic is resorting to biographic material in his interpretation, a procedure which is often observed but also requires documentation. Mochulsky, however, maintains that Dostoevsky added the concluding paragraphs to please the “readers of Katkov’s well-meaning journal in the 1860’s” (Mochulsky 1967, 312 = 1986, 100), but gives no proof. True, the epilogue is written in a mood different from the one prevailing in the rest of the novel, but that fact can well be explained in purely literary terms without taking into account biographic material. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility of Dostoevsky taking his publisher and readers into consideration, but that is not the point, for nobody writes in a vacuum. People write what they write (just as Pontius Pilate did), and the critic is obliged to take the presented work as a matter of fact – if not, he is only criticising an “as if” or a product of his own imagination. Small wonder that Mochulsky’s practice here has been criticised by other scholars, i. a. Jostein Børtnes (1993, 182–183).

Erik Krag points out that “the learned Hellenist and poet Vyacheslav Ivanov has shown that the entire drama of Raskolnikov is related to ancient mythic ideas and to Greek tragedy” (1976, 128). This correct assertion, however, needs a supplement lest the novel is misinterpreted. For the end of a drama is not its least important part. In fact, it has the power to give an unexpected meaning to all that has occurred earlier in the work. “All is well that ends well,” as the saying goes.<sup>3</sup> And how can there be any real tragedy when the ending is a happy one?

<sup>2</sup> The Russian original was published in Paris, 1947.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian equivalent is “the end is the crown of an affair” (konets delu venets).

Roger L. Cox solves the problem by defining a new type of tragedy, the Christian one, which combines a tragic development ending in catastrophe and the “renewal” of the hero thereafter (Cox 1969). The point, however, is not the label, but the content of this Christian pattern which is elucidating the entire novel “Crime and Punishment” without cutting off any part of it and which also can combine Biblical material (in this case primarily from John 11) with so many traits, associated with the classic tragedy.

#### IV

Vyacheslav Ivanov's works on Dostoevsky stirred the interest in the writer's ideology and inspired innumerable later critics to elaborate upon this theme. The title of a book of another philosophizing critic of the same period and, like Ivanov, an emigrant from Soviet Russia, Nikolay Berdyaev (1874–1948), is especially eloquent in this respect: “Dostoevsky's worldview” (*Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskogo*, 1923). Both Ivanov and Berdyaev present such a fascinating explanation of Dostoevsky's system of ideas that the reader can be misled and forget that Dostoevsky was first and foremost a belletrist whose material was the Russian language. But a few years before the publication of Ivanov's German book there appeared a penetrating study of the writer's language, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (1929), which also seeks the roots of his novels in the antiquity and contains several points of contact with Ivanov's treatise (especially in the revised and expanded version *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* from 1960, which gained its author world fame). But when studying Dostoevsky's texts Bakhtin had to treat them as novels, not dramas, and understood that the multitude of voices in an epic work of art is systematically different from that of a play. According to him, real polyphony can only be realized in the novel, not in the drama, be it a tragedy or a comedy (Bakhtin 1973, 28). Still, along different lines these two scholars, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Bakhtin, trace elements of Dostoevsky's novels back to ancient Greece and at the same time lay a solid foundation for further investigation of his art and ideas. But the relevance of their achievement is not restricted to one single writer. In fact, it demonstrates the importance of classical studies for the understanding of modern phenomena.

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### Latin summary

*De Theodori Dostoevsky fabulis ut tragoediis classicis*. Friderici Nietzsche tractatus “De tragoedia ex spiritu musicae nata” (1872) – secundum symbolistam poetamque Venceslaum Ivanov mediatorem magni momenti – validum effectum exseruit in doctrinam Theodori Dostoevsky, quem usque in hodiernum diem sequi valemus. Hac brevi symbolā quidam aspectūs disputantur, qui spectant ad hanc traditionem interpretationis.

### English summary

Friedrich Nietzsche’s treatise “Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik” (1872) has, with the symbolist poet and critic Vyacheslav Ivanov as an important intermediary, exerted a strong influence on Dostoevsky scholarship which can be traced up to this day. The present short paper discusses some aspects of this tradition of interpretation.

### Keywords

Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Friedrich Nietzsche, Russian literature, Tragedy.