

## RUSSIAN PARADIGM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S (NON)FICTION: READING DOSTOEVSKY

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Although the response to Dostoevsky's arrival in English literature in 1881 was cult—like, Dostoevsky's art, nevertheless, failed to be recognized by English novelists, “especially by those most dedicated to the art of the novel” (Kaye, 26). Neither D. H. Lawrence, Arnold Bennett, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, John Galsworthy, Henry James nor prominent literary critics of the day struggled hard to grasp Dostoevsky's genius. For instance, Joseph Conrad detested Dostoevsky, “the grimacing, haunted creature, who is under a curse” (Zyla and Aycock, 1974, 57). Henry James shared Conrad's antipathy disapproving of Dostoevsky as a “creator of fluid puddings” and his narrative as a “mad jumble, that flings things down in a heap” (James, 1920, 237). D. H. Lawrence, too, expressed his repulsion: “I don't like Dostoevsky. He is like the rat, slithering along in hate, in the shadows (...)” (Zytaruk, 1970, 13-37)

Virginia Woolf's approach to Dostoevsky's writing was ambivalent, her reading of Dostoevsky led to exciting discoveries and major disappointments. In 1912, in her letter to Lytton Strachey<sup>1</sup>, Woolf wrote: “It is di-

rectly obvious that he is the greatest writer ever born” (Woolf, 1975-80, 5). However, in yet another letter to Strachey, Woolf's opinion on Dostoevsky's narrative manner, is no longer distinctly positive. Having read *An Adolescent*, she now writes: “Dostoevsky more frantic than any, I think, twelve new characters on every page and the mind quite dazed by conversations” (ibid., 26).

Although this remark contains Woolf's discontent with Dostoevsky's compositional principles, Woolf did grasp the essential faculty of Dostoevsky's stylistics, i.e., she grasped its plurality: the co-existence of many independent voices and their dialogic relationships. In other words, in her 1912 letter to Strachey, Woolf articulated what fifty years later, in 1963, Bakhtin, in his study on the problems of Dostoevsky's poetics, defined as “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses”, “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” (Bakhtin, 1984, 6). Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky created a new—polyphonic—type of artistic thinking that found its expression in Dostoevsky's novels, and touched upon several “basic principles of European aesthetics” (ibid., 3).

<sup>1</sup> A British writer, literary critic, member of Bloomsbury Group.

Unlike Bakhtin, Woolf was less enthusiastic about Dostoevsky's polyphonic narrative, she was nothing if not ironic. In her essay "A Minor Dostoevsky" (1917), Woolf's irony (Woolf, 1987, 165) acquires open forms:

"all the characters – that is, a whole room full of Russian generals, their tutors, their stepdaughters, and the friends of their stepdaughters, together with miscellaneous people whose connection is scarcely defined—are talking with the greatest passion at the tops of their voices about their most private affairs."

Woolf's heavy irony, it can be argued, seems to be rising from her adverse disposition to fully appreciate Dostoevsky's artistic intention: each time she would read a novel by Dostoevsky, Woolf would find herself outraged by the high speed of Dostoevsky's narrative as well as the emotional outbursts of his characters. Woolf found Dostoevsky's world chaotic, poorly managed. Woolf argues that Dostoevsky is incapable of keeping the narrative in control, his method is so difficult that "no one but Dostoevsky is able even to attempt this method successfully" (Woolf, 1987, 166). This method entails such fearful risks that Dostoevsky himself, as Woolf implies, makes mistakes as he wants to grasp "the psychology of souls flying at full speed" (ibid., 166); then the "writer's passion rushes into violence, his scenes verge upon melodrama, and his characters are seized with the inevitable madness or epilepsy" (ibid., 166). According to Woolf, in Dostoevsky, unlike Tolstoy, there is no "central purpose which brings the whole field into focus". The high narrative speed is exhaustive, it seems that as if from exhaustion Dostoevsky cannot "concentrate his mind sufficiently to exclude those waifs and strays of the imagination" (ibid., 166).

Like her contemporaries J. Conrad, H. Ja-

mes or J. Galsworthy, Woolf yearned for a harmonious and unisonous form of the novel. In her essay "The Russian Point of View" Woolf remarks that such novels as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed* demand "an effort on the part of an English reader" (Woolf, 1983, 178). The novels of Dostoevsky, as Woolf colourfully writes, "are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture" (ibid., 178).

Although Woolf found Dostoevsky's polyphonic narrative complicated and unmanageable, demanding the writer's ability and power to firmly control the narrative sequence, Dostoevsky's polyphony did enter the room of Woolf's novels, and made itself at home in different forms of intensity reinforcing, firstly and foremostly, Woolf's approach towards a new definition of the quality of the relationship between character and narrator (as it no longer serves as a mouthpiece for the author's voice), and towards a new form of character.

Like Dostoevsky, Woolf had no interest in character as a social or psycho-physiological manifestation of reality which is composed of fixed socially or individually typical characteristic traits that provide the reader with the answers to the questions of who the hero is, what the hero is like, what his social status is, what he looks like, what his likes and dislikes are etc. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's interest lies not in what his hero is in the world, but what the world is for his hero, "how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself" (Bakhtin, 1984, 47). Both writers—Woolf and Dostoevsky—were concerned with how their character perceives his everyday surroundings rather than the

surroundings as a feature of reality. In her essay “Character in Fiction”, Woolf therefore criticizes her contemporaries for concentrating on the characters’ surroundings rather than the characters themselves:

“That is what I mean by saying that the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of the things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. (..) But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it” (Woolf, 1988, 430).

In Dostoevsky’s novels, what the author used to do is now done by the hero who illuminates himself from all possible points of view; the author no longer illuminates the hero’s reality but the hero’s self-consciousness, as “a reality of the second order” (Bakhtin, 1984, 49). In Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, for instance, the hero, too, illuminates himself from different possible perspectives and the author no longer illuminates the hero’s reality but, to use Bakhtin’s words, “the hero’s consciousness, as a reality of the second order”. Neville and Susan speak:

“I am one person – myself. I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore. I am the most slavish of students, with here a dictionary, there a notebook in which I enter curious uses of the past participle. (..) That would be a glorious life, to addict oneself to perfection; to follow the curve of the sentence wherever it might lead, into deserts, under drifts of sand, regardless of lures, of seductions’ (..) I am asking you (as I stand with my back to you) to take my life in your hands and tell me whether I am doomed always to cause repulsion in those I love? – said Neville” (Woolf, 1992, 65).

“But who am I, who lean on this gate (..) I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate,

on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn – said Susan.” (ibid., 73)

The consciousness of the character—the consciousnesses of Neville and Susan—as well as the consciousnesses of the other characters—serve as “a reality of the second order”, as what Woolf saw as what reality is. The imperative of a “reality of the second order” or revision of what reality is approached in her essay “Character in Fiction” where Woolf asks: “But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?” (Woolf, 1988, 426). Woolf’s interest, as Alex Zwerdling notes, “in the forces of society certainly did not mean that she considered them more fundamentally real than those that dominate our mental and emotional life” (Zwerdling, 1986, 4) which, might otherwise be called, to use Bakhtin’s words, “the hero’s consciousness, a reality of the second order”.

Moreover, it is not the specific existence of the hero, not his fixed image, but “the sum of total of his consciousness and self-consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984, 48) that must be taken into account in Dostoevsky’s and Woolf’s novels. Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, the novel in which Dostoevskyan polyphonic forms are most conspicuously assimilated, signifies that Woolf, like Dostoevsky, sees and constructs the character as a sum of self-consciousness, as a point-of-view, i.e., as a point-of-view to the world and himself. Such method demands specific means of character construction. For instance, in Woolf’s novel *The Waves* the consciousness of the character is not objectified, i.e., it does not become “a simple object of the author’s consciousness” (ibid., 7). Oddvar Holmesland, a researcher of Woolf’s oeuvre, too, underlines the individuality and independence of Woolf’s

characters. According to the scholar, these characters exist as “independent consciousnesses that seek to interpret themselves and the world around them” (Holmesland, 1998, 151). In Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, for example, like in Dostoevsky’s writing, the image of the character is not a usual image of the objectified character. Like Dostoevsky’s character, he is unusually independent in the structure of the novel, his voice sounds “alongside the author’s word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters” (ibid., 7). In Woolf’s novel *The Waves* all seven characters possess independence, their voices are heard alongside the writer’s voice which in this novel is highly economic, and is reduced to the formula “said Bernard”, “said Susan” or “said Jinny” and so on.

Although Woolf was critical of Dostoevsky’s methods of narrative construction, she did admire Dostoevsky’s mastery of revealing the depth and profundity of human psychology. In her essay “More Dostoevsky” (1917), Woolf speaks about the capacity of the Russian writer to build “the labyrinth of the soul”, “to reconstruct those most swift and complicated states of mind”, to enter “the dim and populous underworld of the mind’s consciousness where desires and impulses are moving blindly beneath the sod” (Woolf, 1987, 85). Such method of character construction did not remind her of the usual and well familiar empirical and *materialistic* methods of character construction used by her contemporaries, most famous and respected writers of the day—H. Wells, A. Bennett or J. Galsworthy.

“This is the exact opposite method adopted by most of their novelists. They reproduce all the external appearances—tricks of manner,

landscape, dress, and the effect of the hero upon his friends—but very rarely, and only for an instant, penetrate to the tumult of thought which rages within his own mind” (Woolf, 1987, 85)

Woolf criticizes A. Bennett, H. G. Wells and J. Galsworthy, and holds Russian literature as an example to be followed. The English writer, Woolf ironises, would make the old lady into a “character”; he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts. Her personality would dominate the book. A French writer would rub out all that; he would sacrifice the individual Mrs Brown to give a more general view of human nature. (...) The Russian writer would pierce through the flesh; would reveal the soul—the soul alone” (Woolf, 1988, 426).

In yet another essay “The Russian Point of View” Woolf seeks to understand the vastness of the Russian soul in Dostoevsky’s writing. With a playful irony, Woolf compares two methods of character construction—the English and the Russian. Woolf writes that if the English writer wished to “tell the story of a General’s love affair, he should begin with the house; he should solidify his surroundings. Only when all was ready he should attempt to deal with the general himself”. By contrast, the Russian writer, and Dostoevsky in particular, sees you as “the vessel of this perplexed liquid, this cloudy, precious stuff, the soul” (Woolf, 1983, 180). The soul is not restrained, as Woolf goes on, “it overflows, it floods, it mingles with the souls of others. The simple story of a bank clerk who could not pay for a bottle of wine spreads into the lives of his father-in-law and the five mistresses whom his father-in-law treated abominably, and the postman’s life, and the charwoman’s, and the Princesses’ who lodged in the same

block of flats (...) Out it tumbles upon us, hot, scalding, mixed, marvelous, terrible, oppressive – the human soul (...) (ibid., 180).

In her 1923 essay “Mr Brown and Mrs Bennett”, Woolf asks rhetorically: “After reading *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, how could any young novelist believe in ‘characters’ as the Victorians had painted them?” (Woolf, 1988, 386). Woolf also notes that unlike Victorian characters, Dostoevsky’s characters—Raskolnikov, Mishkin, Stavrogin or Alyosha are the “characters without any features at all” (ibid., 386). This particular element of character construction, defined by Woolf, is a means of character construction in Dostoevsky’s novels. Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky’s heroes—Raskolnikov, Sonia, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan and Dmitriy Karamazov—stand out as unfinalized (“for self-consciousness cannot be finalized from within”) characters (Bakhtin, 1984, 73). Not only the characters of *The Waves*—Louis, Neville, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda—are unfinalized, unfinalized is the character of, for instance, Jacob (the novel *Jacob’s Room*), unfinalized is the character of Mrs Dalloway, too (Mrs Dalloway is a character created from different points-of-view. Such method of character creation achieves the effect of unfinalization and incompleteness).

Although our modest research gives us sufficiently enough evidence to suggest that Dostoevskyan polyphony found its way into

Woolf’s artistic world, it would, however, be unfair to say that Woolf directly and consciously integrated Dostoevsky’s polyphonic thought into her writing and made it the form of her own novels. Dostoevsky’s influence on Woolf was big but not as big as it was on D. H. Lawrence or J. Conrad. Peter Kaye, a scholar of Russian literature, too, suggests that Woolf, in a sense, exploited Dostoevsky; she capitalized on the interest in “all things Russian” to justify and defend the nascent modernists. Woolf used Dostoevsky when “all things Russian” in England were not questioned (Kaye, 1999, 192). Without Dostoevsky, Woolf would have reached the same destination.

On the other hand, it would be dishonest to suggest that Dostoevskyan polyphony was not absorbed in one way or another in Woolf’s aesthetics. Dostoevsky’s influence on the development of Western European literature is difficult to measure, but one thing is clear—it is immeasurably big. As Kaye writes, Dostoevsky’s writing exerted a significant influence on the works of J. Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. Kaye asks: “Could Lawrence have become the Lawrence we know without the spur of Dostoevsky?” (ibid., 192). We would assume that Dostoevsky, so much admired in West Europe and America, served as prop to support Woolf’s rebellion against the Edwardians. Dostoevsky was a prop to support her own literary experiments (Kaye, 1999, 192).

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## RUSŲ LITERATŪROS PARADIGMA VIRGINIJOS WOOLF KŪRYBOJE. SKAITANT DOSTOJEVSKI

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Santrauka

Šiame pranešime nagrinėjama Dostojevskio kūrybos įtaka V. Woolf kūrybai. Nors Woolf atsargiai vertino Dostojevskio pasirinktą metodą – anot rašytojos, chaotišką, sunkiai valdomą – dostojevskiškasis polifoniškumas, vis dėlto, įvairiomis formomis įsitvirtino Woolf romanuose, pirmiausia suponuodamas naują personažo kūrimo formą, naują požiūrį į veikėją. Dostojevskio ir Woolf meninių pasaulių dialoge tampa akivaizdu, kad nei Dostojevskio, nei Woolf veikėjas nedomina kaip socialinis ar psichofiziologinis tipas ir individualus charakteris, susidedantis iš įvairių bruožų, leidžiančių skaitytojui atsakyti į klausimą, kas ir koks yra veikėjas, kokia jo socialinė padėtis, ir t. t. Woolf veikėjas domina kaip požiūris, t. y. kaip požiūris į pasaulį ir į save. Toks požiūris į veikėją reikalauja ypatingų vaizdavimo metodų. Kaip Dostojevskiu, taip ir Woolf svarbiau paties veikėjo refleksijos, „savimonės funkcija“. Abu rašytojai kiekvieną veikėjo bruožą įveda į jo paties – t. y. veikėjo – akiratį,

„sumeta į jo savimonės tigli“. Be to, tiek Woolf, tiek ir Dostojevskio skaitytojas mato ne pačią veikėjo tikrovę, bet kaip jis tą tikrovę suvokia. Woolf romanuose, kaip ir Dostojevskio kūryboje, veikėjo paveikslas nėra įprastinis „objektinio veikėjo paveikslas“. Dostojevskio ir Woolf veikėjai yra neįprastai savarankiški romano struktūroje, jų balsai „skamba tartum šalia autoriaus žodžio ir savitai santykiauja su juo bei su tokiais pat pilnakraujais kitų veikėjų balsais“. Tačiau būtų neteisinga sakyti, kad Woolf tiesiogiai perėmė Dostojevskio polifoniškumo principą. Woolf buvo kūrėja, estetė; ji jokiais būdais nebuvo imitatorė. Ji buvo inovatorė. Kita vertus, būtų ne visiškai teisinga sakyti ir tai, kad Dostojevskio polifoniškumas nebuvo viena ar kita forma asimiliuotas Woolf meniniame pasaulyje. Manytume, kad Dostojevskis, kuriuo buvo žavimasi ne tik Rusijoje, bet ir Vakarų Europoje bei Amerikoje buvo stiprus užnugaris Woolf literatūriniais eksperimentams.

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