



YE.B. RASHKOVSKY

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY — A Dialogue for the 21st Century

Jottings on the book
by ROWAN WILLIAMS
“Dostoyevsky: Language,
Faith and Fiction”¹

...both the Karamazovs,
and the demons, lived in him...

Innokenty Annensky, “Towards a portrait of Dostoyevsky”

THREE DIFFICULTIES

The author of this book about Dostoyevsky is not simply an academic working with Russian originals of his works, and not simply a thinker. The author is a priest and not only that, he is the head of the Anglican Church — the Archbishop of Canterbury. Thus this book is the result of the combined experience of an academic philologist, social thinker and theologian. Nonetheless, to say something new and meaningful about Dostoyevsky is not an easy task. Not so much volumes as entire libraries have been written about Dostoyevsky. However, the dialogue of the Russian author with the world goes on. And for this reason — that he demands of the world ever newer readings and responses. For each great text is so saturated with images, ideas and insights that at every turn of history it continues to demand from people both new questions, and new answers. And here we are certainly not talking about postmodernist “reading” into the great text of some kind of new insights drawn from elsewhere, but about the actual open nature of human thinking and creative activity. I venture to say a nature open in terms of time and open in terms of Eternity. And, thus about the ability of a great text to converse with us afresh each time through the centuries.

On a careful reading of R Williams’s book, then, at the least, three difficulties can be noted which the author could not fail to encounter in working on a modern account of the creative legacy of Dostoyevsky.

Now the first difficulty is a *difficulty of language*. This is not simply a matter of the difficulty of the Russian language as such. It is also that, as it were, the most lively element of Russian speech of the century before last, with its inversions, barbarisms, colloquialisms and puns, with the imperfections of grammatical structure typical of everyday speech, with grotesque “word distortions”², had burst into the very heart of Dostoyevsky’s narrative”. And our author was working with Dostoyevsky’s books in the original...

The second difficulty is the multiplicity of schools and styles of English language translations of Dostoyevsky, resulting in a multitude of dissimilar interpretations of the original. If you will — *the difficulty of translation as comprehension and interpretation*. A typical example: the very name of the novel “Besy” is reproduced differently by English language translators and commentators: as “The Devils” and as “The Possessed”. For our author, the first translation is closer: not “possessed ones”, but precisely “devils”.

I would define the third difficulty as *the difficulty of discipline*. After the second edition (1963) of the book by M.M.Bakhtin “Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics”, the cognitive perspective of the study of the great writer’s legacy itself underwent a fundamental change³. The “multiplicity of voices” in the works of Dostoyevsky (multiplicity not only in the thoughts, the words and the very complexity of the actions of the interacting characters, but also “multiplicity” in the inner speech and in the inner motivations of the individual heroes) described by Bakhtin excludes the possibility of unambiguous and absolutist treatment of his works. But that is not all. The study of Dostoyevsky cannot be “defined” on the basis of individual disciplines. Not only that, but discipline-based “differentiation”⁴ turns out to be a more or less insurmountable barrier between Dostoyevsky and contemporary culture. The Dostoyevsky monopolised by philologists, psychologists, philosophers and theologians is already not Dostoyevsky but, rather, a part of the history of one academic discipline or another.

¹ Williams R. Dostoyevsky. Language, Faith, and Fiction. – L.: Continuum, 2008. – XIII, 290 pp.

² Here is an unforgettable example from “The Village of Stepanchikovo” (conversation of the Narrator with the servant Vidoplyasov:

— It’s not a respectable name, Agrafena, sir.

— What do you mean not respectable? Why?

— Everyone knows, sir: Adelaide is at least a foreign name, high class, sir; but every last peasant woman can be called Agrafena, sir.

— Now have you gone crazy or what?

— Not at all sir, I’m in my right mind, sir/.../” (Complete Collected Works Vol.3 – Leningrad: Nauka-LO, 1972. p.41)

The hysterical vaudeville “Stepanchikovo” was written in 1859. But the name of “every last peasant woman” took its revenge two decades later in Dostoyevsky’s last great novel “The Brothers Karamazov”. Agrafena was the Grushen’ka’s full name.

³ The first edition came out in 1929. In spite of the fact that M.M. Bakhtin’s book was welcomed in the pages of “Novy Mir” by A.V. Lunacharsky, the book was nonetheless — owing to the conditions of those times — not seriously perceived and apprehended.

⁴ “Differentiation” — this was how the late Russian philologist and philosopher V.V. Bibikhin used to translate the category “la difference”, one of the pivotal categories of Jacques Derrida.

And it seems to me that as it happens one of the premises for the value of R. Williams's book lies precisely in the fact that the author has seriously recognised all three of these difficulties and attempted to fight his way through to that Dostoyevsky who, while remaining a Russian author and Orthodox believer, objectively speaking, has his place "above the barriers" of research disciplines, countries and confessions.

THE PERMEATING THEMES OF HISTORY

R. Williams begins his book by establishing the relevance of man's legacy for contemporary thinking and for the contemporary reader.

Indeed, those problems from which the present-day world is suffering — terrorism, child abuse, disintegration of the family, the loss of the sense of the Sacred, the "sexualisation of culture"⁵, the clash of local cultures, the disintegration of traditional human identities — all this is fully present in the thoughts and writings of Dostoyevsky. And not only (and even not so much) in his sometimes "soliloquising" and tendentious journalism and pamphleteering as at the incomparably more profound level of his artistic narrations, with their themes of human doubts, sufferings, failings, inner desolation and efforts at redemption (see p.1).

Analysing the whole system of plot development, thought and speech characteristics in Dostoyevsky's novels, R. Williams finds that Dostoyevsky perceives and describes his heroes in a state of a somewhat *double* and in many ways irreversible *crisis* so exactly characteristic of the present-day world. And this double crisis is linked not only with the erosion of the concepts and sacred things of traditional society⁶, but also with symptoms of the disintegration of that liberal-enlightened world view founded on rationalistic grounds which also falls into the circle of "sacred things" and of the mores of contemporary society (see pp. 58-60). In the actual plot development and verbal behaviour in almost every one of Dostoyevsky's novels, the weakness and indecisiveness of the "liberal-idealists", incapable, in the author's view, of giving any serious response to the ominous challenges of life and thought, is underlined.

In the great conflict between rationalism and traditionalism, which continues to this day, Dostoyevsky, it would seem, is ready to take the side of the latter. On the contrary, far from it!⁷ The terrifying images of the traditionalist world — the holy fool Semyon Yakovlevich in "The Devils" or the monk Ferapont, consumed with the malice and arrogance of ignorance in "Brothers Karamazov" are in their own way images of those same "devils", obsessed by loveless self-righteousness. In other words, by a lie. In other words, by the striving to simplify and demonise the whole wealth of human experience, feelings and problems (see pp.70-72).

Indeed, as the Archbishop insists throughout the whole of his book, Dostoyevsky's "demonology" is itself unique. Not so much metaphysical as, rather, historical, a "demonology" growing out of the rifts and cultural traumas of human history. The machinations of the "evil one" are ever-present in the pages of his novels; but all this is rather far from the absolutism of mediaeval, renaissance or baroque demonology. The "Evil One" plays with our life situations not as himself, but through the fallen nature of historical man. The demonic in the works of Dostoyevsky is above all else our loveless obsession with our own particular inclinations, our own obsession, obsession with our own flesh (baron Svidrigailov, nurtured on the

⁵ If I had my way, I would put it even more bluntly: the bestialisation of culture.

⁶ As R. Williams notes, it is not by chance that the criminal plots in Dostoyevsky's novels (murders, thefts, insults) are complicated by descriptions of a multitude of sacrilegious actions (premeditated abuse of a woman or a child, cynical blasphemous utterances, desecration of icons...).

⁷ Dostoyevsky sees almost no serious conservative opposition to the tidal wave of nihilism bearing down on the country. In the draft editions of "The Devils", the writer attributes the following words to the liberal-conservative Karmazinov: "I've taken a closer look at our conservatives, and this is the result: they only pretend that they believe in something and stand for something in Russia, but in fact we conservatives are even worse than the nihilists." In Karmazinov's words, the whole ideal of the majority of people in the conservative circle is: "a good cook, and property". And thus, in the event of a threat of social upheaval, "I rush to cash my property and get away". (Complete Collected Works, Vol. 11, 1974, p.289).

fruits of serfdom), cognition (Ivan Karamazov)⁸, justice and order (Shigalyov, Grand Inquisitor), or our own emotional world (Liza Khokhlovskaya). And even religion, in the end. And it is just this human obsession with our own loveless passions which is chosen by the “evil one” for his manipulations, for his own “vaudevilles” of the grotesque and the merciless. And then the obsessed person, having played his part (in truth — the possessed!) is sometimes discarded by the “evil one”, like a card that has been played. As Svidraigailov, Stavrogin and Kirillov⁹, and Smerdyakov are discarded in acts of suicide.

If one listens carefully to the inner semantic dynamic of Dostoyevsky’s novels, the conflict of the Divine and the demonic in man in many ways itself not only determines history but is also continuously generated by history. And indeed the Christological theme in the novels of Dostoyevsky, according to the English researcher’s thinking, has little in common with his pamphleteering conservatism.

Christ cannot be straightforwardly represented in any one of Dostoyevsky’s literary heroes — be it Prince Myshkin, Tikhon or Zosima. But if he is indeed represented — then it is only by a hint about Himself, as in the “poem” about the Grand Inquisitor. For Christ, in His uniqueness, in his inimitable repeated interweaving of the eternal and the historical — is higher than any of our imaginings and than any external manifestation. However, for the “Evil One” in his intrigues, in his strivings towards disintegration and disorder, it is easiest to express himself through the “devils” of a Smerdyakov or a Stavrogin (see p. 107).

Thus, if one starts from the artistic and spiritual logic of Dostoyevsky, maintains R. Williams, the profound human crisis disturbing the writer is rooted not so much in traditionalism and rationalism themselves¹⁰ and not even only in their historical conflict, but in something else. In the historical erosion of the *feeling of gratitude and grace* attainable not so much by the mind (but also by the mind!) as by intuition and suffering. Or, in other words, the experience of reverence. Every page of Dostoyevsky’s last novel, dedicated both to the Elder Zosima and Alyosha and to the late and tragic enlightenment of Mitya Karamazov, is not only the basis for vital concepts of grace but, to recall the words of Mitya, a “hymn” to these concepts. After all, it is precisely thanks to these concepts conveyed with such difficulty to everyday consciousness that some mutual understanding between people and some human measure of our existence is possible.

In any of the historical periods, erosion of just these feelings of gratitude/grace, erosion of these vital and, in essence, Christological concepts is found to be a precondition for the self-destruction of culture in man and of man in culture. And Dostoyevsky, precisely as a creator of artistic narrative, is aware of the immutability of this historical rule, or as the English historians say, this regularity.

In this connection, R. Williams reminds the reader of the story of the weak-willed and capricious Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, that, in Williams’s words, “liberal guru” (p. 230) who against his will had nurtured both Stavrogin and the “devils” (after all, they are the circle of “our own”), and — because of his own inner irresponsibility — had been indirectly guilty of the evil deeds of his former serf Fedka-Katorzhny, whom he had once lost at cards (see pp. 229-231 and 194-195)...

With Dostoyevsky, as the researcher insists, the problem of gratitude/grace is fundamentally linked with the problem of human self-determination in freedom, self-determination in that moral world, where,

⁸ Ivan starts the justification of his intellectual “revolt” against the Most High with the “confession”: “I could never understand how it is possible to love one’s neighbours” (“Brothers Karamazov” Pt.2, Book 5, Chap. IV — Complete Collected Works, Vol. 14, 1976. p. 215).

⁹ In the literature it is for some reason forgotten that Kirillov in “The Devils” is not only a logical, atheistic “metaphysician”, but also an indifferent accomplice in the murder of Shatov, and therefore, indirectly, of Maria Shatova and her child ...

¹⁰ As the Hungarian researcher Agnes Dukkon maintains, Dostoyevsky himself assimilated much from the European and Russian “left-wing” discourse of that time, above all from Belinsky. In Dukkon’s opinion, one of the most important influences of Belinsky on Dostoyevsky is connected with the development by Belinsky of a particular language of Russian thought: the language of disputation, a language of disagreement with all ideological, theoretical and utopian fashions and prevailing opinions (see: Dukkon A. On the question concerning certain problems of divergence between Dostoyevsky and Belinsky // Acta universitatis szegediensis de Attila József nominate. Dissertationes slavicae. 15. – Szeged, 1982. P. 71-74).

I would reinforce this judgement by the Hungarian researcher by one more consideration. The works of Belinsky on Pushkin and Lermontov substantiate the problem, so important for Dostoyevsky, of the superiority of poetic feeling in comparison to any forms of ideological doctrinaire attitude. As was indeed demonstrated by poetics of Dostoyevsky himself.

in the words of the American academic specialist in Russian philology Alexander Mihailović, there are no alibis (see pp. 172-173)¹¹. Thus the problem of freedom is by no means a problem of “consumer choice” (p. 237) and not a problem of revenge by force, as respectively discussed in current conservative and revolutionary political discourse. Rather, this is the irrevocable problem of the dignified survival of ourselves, people, and of our history (in its human aspect). The survival of the “first Adam” in the “Second Adam”: in Christ¹². And it is on the basis of these problems that the entire intentional or unintentional artistic strategy of Dostoyevsky is constructed; and it is these very problems that render his legacy relevant also to the present day (see pp. 237-243).

THE REBEL¹³

Thus, freedom — above all the freedom of our self-determination in our own eyes, in the eyes of the world and of God — is a pivotal theme of Dostoyevsky’s thinking and works. It is a redoubtable theme, in principle not allowing any embellishments, any sentimentalisation. Our freedom rends us between our inner “underground” and Heaven. At times, however, both the “underground” and Heaven can be linked in our inner experience in the most fantastic and unpredictable manner. And Dostoyevsky perceived this link in the course of all his life “universities”, both the parental home, and in the St Petersburg slums and in the minutes up to his last-minute reprieve from execution, and in the “mortuary”. And he continued to perceive it in his creative self-knowledge and in the analysis of the life around him until the end of his days.

R. Williams is right in asserting how important the observation of the Russian psyche in himself and in those around him and in the processes of work on his artistic narratives (fiction) was for Dostoyevsky; the observation of an enormous range of suddenly shifting states of reverence and degradation, faith and blasphemy, submission and outbreaks of rebelliousness (see pp. 214-217).

Indeed, Russia with the uncertainty of its historical fate at that time (and indeed now) was Dostoyevsky’s basic artistic and spiritual laboratory. But this is not only a matter of the specific circumstances of history and culture that the writer encountered. These circumstances themselves were an important stimulus to his artistic and religious/philosophical quests, which took on a certain universal meaning. And at this level “*Brothers Karamazov*” — Dostoyevsky’s last novel — attracts the English researcher’s especial attention. In his words, the openness of life, openness of history and the openness of the writer’s spiritual world itself provided the conditions for the novel’s openness, both narrative and ideological. The writer denies both himself, and consequently the reader, the presumption of omniscience. Both the criminal story, and the thematic and ideological conflicts of the novel thus remain incomplete. The “last word” is the prerogative neither of the author, nor the reader, nor the interpreter. The whole architecture of the narrative and plot, and all the verbal characteristics of the heroes are structured such that if the “last word” is entrusted to anybody — then it is to God alone (see pp. 136-149).

Behind this unfinished quality, the researcher proposes, there stands revealed the eternally open problem of human freedom. Freedom not in that it is unconditional and arbitrary, but in that man is called to give his own response to the challenge of the unique circumstances of life and meaning that beset him¹⁴. And this problem of freedom cannot be “babbed out” in tracts and exhortations. As R Williams shows, it is not by chance that the texts of Dostoyevsky’s novels are saturated with such risky parodying allusions to gospel narratives or to rules of Orthodox life which in those days seemed immutable: Stavrogin uncomplainingly tolerates the slap in the face received from Shatov, his former serf (just as,

¹¹ R. Williams is referring to the book: A. Mihailović. *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Theology of Discourse*. – Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1997.

¹² See 1 Cor. 15:45-49.

¹³ The name of this section is a translation of the title of the same name, of the book by Albert Camus “*L’homme révolté*”. As is well-known, Camus was very strongly influenced by the Russian author.

¹⁴ Let us recall: M.M. Bakhtin constantly insisted that Dostoyevsky’s “heroes” are not only the *dramatis personae* of the narrative, but also always (or almost always) “ideologists”.

moreover, even Prince Myshkin tolerates a slap in the face from the untitled Ganya Ivolgin); Versilov, having fasted for the first two days of Holy Week, demands his usual beefsteak on Holy Wednesday, the “loose women” (be it Sonya Marmeladova, Nastasya Filippovna or Grushen’ka) turn out to be ten times more clever and perceptive than the majority of the “respectable” people...

But can there be an antithesis to this tormenting and unpredictable state of our freedom? Here R Williams — typically for a British thinker, like his countryman Lord Acton or George Orwell — does not hesitate to give an answer. The antithesis of freedom is precisely the arbitrariness of our presumption of omniscience when, having no understanding of the problems and questionings of our own soul, we set to work on the “arithmetic” of a utopian reform of the world (each in his own role, be it Foma Opiskin¹⁵, Raskolnikov, Shigalyov or the Grand Inquisitor). By its inevitable inner logic, a utopia of Great Collective Bliss, a utopia of emotional comfort for the statistical majority of “these little ones”, excludes “inconvenient” people. But in that case, both thinking and freedom, and creativity — are excluded¹⁶. And Christ himself is inconvenient and thus subject to exclusion. It is exactly this which is described in Ivan Karamazov’s poem about the Grand Inquisitor.

However, what is important for Dostoyevsky’s texts is that the Collective Bliss enthusiasts are not only fanatics of omniscience and not only agents of coercion: they are even aesthetes of coercion. Ahead of time, Petrusha Verkhovensky has already been feasting his eyes on the “beauty” (or, rather — monstrous pomposity) of the future dictatorship; he loves lordly comfort and even runs away from investigation and justice, into a first class carriage (see pp. 122-123). And even behind the Grand Inquisitor’s asceticism, it is impossible not to glimpse the voluptuous rapture of power. But, I fear, even Dostoyevsky himself could not imagine what torments can be experienced in the zones of Great Collective Bliss not only by “inconvenient people”, but also by the benefitted masses, reduced to the level of “millions of happy infants”.¹⁷

However, the sophistry of the Grand Inquisitor, directed towards the “unmasking” of human freedom (man is petty, gullible, capricious and thus condemned only to swing between the extremes of revolt and slavish obedience) is not unfounded. And, it would seem, many of Dostoyevsky’s characters — murderers and suicides — move towards their temporary or final ruin directly as a result of the sophistry of their inner mono-dialogues, in which whatever one wants can be found: both intellectual grasp, and the lineaments of a certain worldly common sense, and even a certain minimum of theoretical knowledge, albeit a smattering. But just one thing is missing in them: they are not warmed by authentic experience of contact with another person¹⁸. In other words, the experience of love (see pp. 115-117)¹⁹. But what is important for an understanding of the whole semantic and compositional structure of Dostoyevsky’s novels: authentic dialogue — a dialogue which centres on love (Raskolnikov — Sonya, Raskolnikov — Porfiry, the dying Stepan Trofimovich — Knigonosha, Mitya and Alyosha Karamazov) — turns out to be the precondition for the soul to break out from demonic captivity. “Revolt” is transformed into a “hymn”. Whereas murder (including also suicide) is regarded by Dostoyevsky as the last word of a fallen man, consenting also to his own fallenness (see pp. 184-187).

And indeed even a “hymn” is also in its own way a protest. But a protest against one’s own fallenness and, together with this, against the fallenness of the world.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, no attention has been paid in the literature to the fact that the house of colonel Rostanev in the village of Stepanchikovo is, in its way, a kind of phalanstery, constructed by forced slave labour, where a minor domestic despot — Foma Fomich — favours the “inhabitants” according to his own whims and poverty of fantasy ... It is true that our author does not mention Foma Opiskin, but I cannot resist a reference to the bitter “vaudeville” about the village of Stepanchikovo.

¹⁶ Let us recall Shigalyov’s maxim in the pages of “The Devils”: “Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited slavery. However, I add that apart from my permission, there can be no other” (Part 2, Chap.7. Complete Collected Works, Vol. 10. 1974, p. 311).

¹⁷ “Brothers Karamazov”. Part 2, book 5, chap. V. – Complete Collected Works, Vol.14. 1976. p.236.

¹⁸ Or, if we recall Emmanuel Levinas — “the humanity of the other man (humanisme de l’autre homme)”.

¹⁹ Let us recall: by his madness Ivan Karamazov will, in the final account, pay for the absence of precisely this experience. Even he himself speaks of this to his brother Alyosha: “I have to make one admission to you /.../ I could never understand how it is possible to love one’s neighbours. It is precisely one’s neighbours, in my opinion, that it is impossible to love...” (“Brothers Karamazov”. Part 2, book 5, chap. V. – Complete Collected Works, Vol.14. 1976. p. 215).

* * *

At this precise point in our conversation — a conversation on the strange inter-convertibility of revolt and love in the works of Dostoyevsky — I would like to allow myself to interrupt for a few minutes my presentation of the content of the Archbishop of Canterbury's book and to share with the reader some of my own observations concerning the names of Dostoyevsky's characters.

There is no shortage of studies on this subject in the literature.

Researchers always underline the fact that Dostoyevsky bestowed the name of Mary, the most beautiful female name in the world, on "Khromonozhka" [= "limper"] — the insightful but touched Maria Lebyadkin.

However, when they write about the uniqueness of the name Maria-Kromonozhka in Dostoyevsky's novels, they usually forget about the other Maria — the nihilist Maria Shatova. Like the first, the second Maria was also a victim of Stavrogin, and indeed in addition to that had also involuntarily taken upon herself the pinnacle of human suffering: the death of her own husband and her own child.

Dostoyevsky also had heroes on whom he bestowed his own name: Fedka Katorzhny and Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov. Both are criminals, but at the same time they are also paradoxical thinkers. Fyodor literally means a gift from God.

Both Fyodors are bearers of the gift of life and, albeit in sophisticated form, a nonetheless acute and provocative gift of thinking. And both, like both Marias, forfeit their gifts through a violent death, which however they bring upon themselves...

Overall, the more we think about the naming of Dostoyevsky's characters and about the connection between these names and the whole structure and progression of his narrative, the more there opens up the strange architecture of his novels and stories, changing its perspective in each depiction and, with the changing architecture of the narrative, also the internally dynamic and multifaceted image of man.

* * *

But let us return to the monograph by Rowan Williams.

Investigating the problems of revolt, love and freedom in the works of Dostoyevsky, R. Williams draws attention to the fact that with Dostoyevsky, as indeed with a multitude of European thinkers of recent centuries (from Kant to the existentialists), the problem arises of a certain fundamental unresolvability, but for that reason also openness, of the basic problems and contradictions of earthly human existence²⁰. However, if academic philosophy attempts to find ways out of this unresolvability in thinking and the inner world of the individual (or else — I myself add — in attempts to substantiate the necessity to the individual of his external social activity), with Dostoyevsky the matter is somewhat different. No prescription, no preconditions from on high for a "resolution" in itself has been given to man. Only *Love given to a person* comes as a promise of such a "resolution". In themselves, in their separation from God and the World, in their separation from the other, there is no salvation, (or, at least, no "resolution") (see pp. 149-150).

To love one's neighbour or to love another person at all, notes the English researcher, is a difficult art. To love a neighbour is not simply to love his "ideal image", but to love in that same "neighbour" his problematic freedom, his inner incompleteness. And it is exactly such love for the indefinability of the other person in his freedom that is some kind of spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle in that sense in which Sergei Bulgakov used this word in the pages of "Vekh" (see p. 183)²¹. Without the inner experience of spiritual struggle, our love for another person risks turning either into an ideological abstraction or into the indulgence of any baseness on the part of the "other" (see pp. 183-185).

In Dostoyevsky, particularly in the last novel, the theme of "Moist Mother Earth" emerges as it were as a symbolic theme of this open love, omnipresent but so difficult to perceive with our antinomic consciousness. The mysticism of "Mother Earth" in the novels of Dostoyevsky, insists R. Williams, is in no

²⁰ Indeed it was not by chance that the philosopher Ya.E. Golosovker (1890-1967) described the problem of the antinomicity of thinking and — more broadly — the antinomicity of the existence of man as the pervading and basic problem both in Kant and in Dostoyevsky. He described it, nonetheless giving preference to Dostoyevsky in the treatment of this problem (see: Golosovker Ya.E. Dostoyevsky and Kant. Moscow: Izd. AN SSSR, 1963).

²¹ R. Williams translates the Russian concept "podvizhnichestvo" as "spiritual struggle".

way a likeness of the chthonic, “cult of the soil”, to which the writer fully paid tribute in his ideological constructs. In his artistic narration, however, under the control of no ideologies whatever, this mysticism is linked with suffering and the justification of the importance to man (so as to justify man in himself!) of feeling, suffering and understanding the beauty and the purpose of the Divine Presence in the Universe (see pp. 170-171)²². But this feeling-knowing, the Archbishop continues his train of thought, also presupposes an inner responsibility towards the fullness of life. That same inner responsibility which Mitya Karamazov, lyingly accused of parricide, but on whose conscience there lay the mutilation of the old servant Grigory Kutuzov (ibid.) and — I myself add, the death of the child Ilyushechka Snegiryov and the spilling of the womanly secrets of Katya Verkhovtseva, took upon himself.

The understanding of the importance of reverence and grace in human experience is as it happens also what saves Dostoyevsky’s striving to defend human freedom both from deterministic compulsion and from voluntarism in the complex and open context of Being. In other words, the same thing which imparts to the writer’s work the features of a profound — not everyday — but truly spiritual, Christian realism. In the final analysis, freedom and reverence (the “will” and the “hymn”, to recall the vocabulary of Dostoyevsky’s heroes) each specify the other in human experience. Although most often they specify in a complex and externally unforeseeable manner.

And this, R Williams is convinced, is perhaps the most important of the Russian novelist’s artistic and spiritual discoveries.

CONCLUSION: LIVING GOTHIC

Much can be said of the incisiveness and originality of Rowan Williams’s discussions of the problems of knowledge and faith, rationalism and tradition, fallenness and the Sacred in the novels of Dostoyevsky... However, no analytical review will be a substitute for reading the book. Thus I have unwillingly confined myself to just one problematical line in the English researcher’s monograph. A line connected with the artistic justification of the inner incompleteness and freedom of the person.

From an inquisitorial, totalitarian viewpoint, a person is simply an “imperfect test creature”²³; whereas from the viewpoint of the Christian values arrived at by Dostoyevsky a person is precious both in his strivings and even in “breakdowns” and errors. The instantaneous and the eternal come together at critical moments, in the situational uncertainty of human life, in the swings of the person’s heart and mind between “Karamazov-like degradation” and the light of Eternity. Such perhaps is the most important lesson of the creative work of Dostoyevsky and the work of his researchers for the present century of lost faith. If you will, a lesson of hope.

R. Williams strives to put before us the entire contradictory complexity of the world of Dostoyevsky’s novels — complexity both in language and in plot, in the description of characters, in the drama of ideas and in openness of judgements. And all this in the vivid textures of the novels, in the reciprocal “echoes and legacies” (p. 94) of words, characters and situations.

* * *

Researchers into the manuscripts of Dostoyevsky have drawn attention to one important circumstance casting some light on the poetry and spiritual meanings of his works. The main subjects of the drawings in the margins of his manuscripts are gothic arch windows.

In this connection, I have long been tormented by the following question: what forces and thoughts were at work in the creative subconscious of this vehement Orthodox critic of the western branches of

²² In sharing this idea of the Archbishop’s, I would like also to quote a poem by Vl. Solov’yov:

*Our Lady Earth! To you I bowed my head,
And through your fragrant cloak
I felt the flame of a well-loved heart,
Heard the pulsing of universal life. . .*

²³ “Brothers Karamazov”, Part 2, book 5, Chap. V — Complete Collected Works, Vol. 14. 1976. p. 238.



Christianity when he was working on his texts? Was it only the love of a Russian ideological “back to the soil” enthusiast for the “holy stones” of Europe? Or was it only the inner tension itself of the emotional world of the writer which was expressing itself in some kind of hieroglyph?

I believe that there is more to it than this.

Anyone who has strolled through the spaces of ancient gothic cathedrals has probably become convinced not only of the austerity and intelligence of their architecture, but also of a certain inner mobility of these spaces themselves. Moving through the cathedral and changing our viewpoint, we begin to perceive these spaces as internally mobile, dynamic, variously illuminated, intersecting at various angles... as conversing with us.

In immersing ourselves in the creative spaces of Dostoyevsky, we involuntarily remember, permeating us ourselves, the mystic realism of the gothic cathedral, where the deep meanings of knowledge and faith converse with the inner dynamic of our human worlds. And this conversation is open, and continuing. Rather, it places before us, people of the 21st century, ever newer and newer questions “of time and of self”²⁴, rather than giving ready answers.

And now it only remains to thank the head of the Anglican church for his courageous and penetrating research.

...But Dostoyevsky’s conversation with us, with our century, when in economics, in social life, in art and in the human spirit itself, the illusions of a “bright future” and a “bright past” have been exhausted, but when the problems of faith, thought and freedom, and together with this also the problems of history, confront each of us with renewed force this conversation, posing more questions than it provides answers, goes on ...

05.03.09.

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²⁴ The gentle reader will forgive me a quotation from the poet revolutionary Vladimir Mayakovsky. However, the link between the “revolutionary” artistic problems of Mayakovsky and the novels of Dostoyevsky has been noted in the works of several Russian authors (L.Yu. Brik, V.V. Kozhinov and others)