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*Stages of Development of Dostoevsky's
Narrative System: from Early
Correspondence with his Brother
Mikhail Mikhailovich
to A Writer's Diary*

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**STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF DOSTOEVSKY'S
NARRATIVE SYSTEM: FROM EARLY
CORRESPONDENCE WITH HIS BROTHER
MIKHAIL MIKHAILOVICH TO A WRITER'S DIARY**

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RIASSUNTO: Oggetto del saggio sono le tappe in cui si evolve il sistema narrativo dostoevskiano lungo l'arco della sua intera opera. Come punto di partenza cruciale si identifica la ricca corrispondenza tra Fëdor Dostoevskij e il fratello maggiore nel periodo precedente all'esordio letterario, avvenuto nel 1846 con il romanzo epistolare *Povera gente*. Infatti, pur derivando da ricca tradizione letteraria che Dostoevskij aveva ben presente, la forma epistolare del romanzo è debitrice alle strategie narrative elaborate nelle lettere reali indirizzate al fratello. *Povera gente* rappresenta l'esaurirsi di questa soluzione narrativa in nome del passaggio dalla prima alla terza persona; nelle opere successive lo scrittore cercherà delle modalità per fare emergere la dialogicità implicita nell'epistolario, sperimentando vari tipi di rapporto "mittente-destinatario", e in particolare, con il *Sosia*, trasferendo quel rapporto in un unico personaggio, sdoppiato in personalità opposte.

ABSTRACT: The object of this essay are the stages in the progress of the narrative system in Dostoevsky's work during his whole literary career. The crucial starting point is determined by the rich correspondence between Fyodor Dostoevsky and his older brother in the period that precedes his literary beginnings, which started in 1846 with the epistolary novel *Poor Folk*. Even though it came from a rich literary tradition that Dostoevsky knew very well, the epistolary form of the novel owes a lot to the narrative strategies that he elaborated in the real letters addressed to his brother. *Poor Folk* represents also the end of this narrative device by passing from the first to the third person; in his following literary works, the writer will try to adopt some new strategies in order to emphasise the dialogicality, which is implicit in his letters, experimenting different types of relationships "sender-addressee", and in particular, with *The Double*, shifting this type of relationship inside one single character, split into two opposite personalities.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Fëdor M. Dostoevskij, Michail M. Dostoevskij, corrispondenza, strategie narrative, *Povera gente*, *Il Sosia*

KEY WORDS: Fëdor M. Dostoevsky, Michail M. Dostoevsky, correspondence, narrative strategies, *Poor Folk*, *The Double*

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The first work of a writer, independently from how gifted they are, is created by a literary amateur in a state of limbo and devoid of their reader. This is why of particular significance for interpreting the genre of the first work are the general motives that determine the very attempt of creating a fictional text and the commencement of an artistic and aesthetic dialogue with an unfamiliar reader. The form that encapsulates the process of development and growth of a young author's self-awareness plays a crucial role for his further creative endeavors. For the authors of sentimental epistolary novels (Voltaire, Rousseau, Richardson etc.) the form of their works was only 'shaded' by their actual genre prototype, the letter, at the same time being dramatically alienated from any real letters written by someone. This was not the case with Dostoevsky. The letters written by him while his novel *Poor Folk* was actually being designed made a direct impact on the choice of the form of his first work. And while the above mentioned authors of sentimental novels deliberately chose the epistolary form for their texts, Dostoevsky's modus of writing, being the basic way of self-expression during these years, defined the genre which was adequate to his creative goals.

According to Andrey Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, the brothers Fyodor and Mikhail were fond of literature from early ages: by the age of 16 both had known all Pushkin's poems by heart, reread Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* several times, learnt Zhukovsky's ballads, read the newest French and English writers (Balzac, Sue, Hugo, Maturin, Dumas), as well as Russian authors (Zagoskin, Lazhechnikov, Masalsky, Begichev). They were particularly keen on Walter Scott, and also read Veltman, Narezhny, Polevoy, Derzhavin.¹ The brothers enjoyed reciting poetry and sharing what they had read and/or created, being in constant search of the ap-

1 *Dostoevsky v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov*, vol. 1, Moskva, Nauka, 1990, p. 84-87.

appropriate wording for their thoughts and feelings. This permanent literary and aesthetic dialogue became a highly significant form of their spiritual and intellectual life and soon transferred from entertainment to a necessity having become an integral part of their lives.

Communication between the Dostoevsky brothers was chiefly oral up to their parting in June 1838. During Mikhail's entry exams to the Main Engineering School the medical commission acknowledged that the climate of Saint-Petersburg was harmful to him. Therefore, he was sent to the Guardsman's School in Revel (Tallinn), while Fyodor was admitted to the «Uchilische» (January 16, 1838) and remained in Saint-Petersburg. The existence of a unique literary and aesthetic environment that the brothers had been creating for many years was under threat. The only possible way out for them was intense correspondence that typically consisted of regular letters (more than one letter a week), which reported on what they had seen, read and thought.

In his article about Dostoevsky's texts of 1840s, G. Chulkov wrote that «the work of a writer does not start when he takes a feather, nor does it when the idea is conceived – it happens much earlier, when he discovers initial creative forces and the special attention to the surrounding world that defines him as a creator».² This close connection between the awakening of a writer's creative potential and his first work was emphasized by A. G. Tseitlin.³ The main type of Dostoevsky's literary activities during the time preceding the creation of *Poor Folk* was correspondence with his brother, Mikhail Mikhailovich Dostoevsky in 1838-1844.

Due to accidental circumstances the literary and philosophic dialogue with his brother Mikhail, which was a highly important form of young Dostoevsky's spiritual life, occurred in writing. It did not impose any specific demands or requirements on Dostoevsky, apart from being sincere and, most importantly, provided an interested and understanding reader. The correspondence with his brother turned out to be a unique mechanism, which allowed Dostoevsky to perfect his skills of expressing thoughts and feelings in writing, to acquire the experience of authorship, and was the genuine debut of his literary life. It is not surprising that the communicative model of the brothers' correspondence in 1838-1844 was later replicated in the form of his first work, the novel *Poor Folk*; in turn,

2 Georgy I. CHULKOV, *Kak rabotal Dostoevsky v sorokovykh godakh*, «Literaturnaya uchyoba», 4, April 1938, p. 46.

3 Alexandr G. CEJTLIN, *Trud pisatelja*, Moskva, Sovetsky pisatel, 1962, p. 104-105.

its narrative structure was an immediate sequel and in a way a product of this correspondence.

The fact that the product of this work was not identified as a 'literary piece', as well as conscious aesthetic reliance on the best examples of world literature, created excellent conditions in order to resist the aggression of an 'alien style' and literary clichés. The possible and dangerous 'look back at oneself' as a 'beginning writer' actually disappeared due to three points. 1. Written dialogue as a record of intimate and friendly communication naturally continued the oral dialogue that had already had a developed tradition in the previous years. 2. The themes and issues that were discussed in the brothers' letters were chiefly literary and philosophic, their correspondence turning into a literary seminar organized as an exchange of replies and reviews; one can find there the names of literary heroes and their authors, hidden and explicit quotes, densely scattered allusions and paraphrases. At the same time the very organization of letters remains totally balanced, free and relaxed. Dostoevsky sticks to spoken style and occasionally gets the feel of the speech of heroes from the literary works he had read, stylizing his own voice to their language. 3. The motivation for correspondence between brothers Dostoevsky did not change in comparison with their oral communication: unrestricted philosophizing based on comprehending the ideology of world literature masterpieces, searching for answers to the 'human issue' (the 'eternal question') assumed to be the primary vector of the brothers' spiritual quests. According to O. M. Freidenberg, it is not the author, but rather the recipient that is the essential condition for narration.⁴ This was guaranteed by constant attention from Mikhail to everything that his brother wrote in his youth.

Therefore, in this correspondence Dostoevsky made his first steps in interpreting the 'mystery of human', which allows us to consider the letters to his brother the real start of the creative life of the future classic of world literature. Hence is greatest significance of every letter to Dostoevsky, who was intensely working on their form striving for the most accurate expression of thought. There is no doubt that these letters were first drafted, just like real literary texts. The draft of a letter to Varen'ka that Devushkin accidentally dropped (from the novel *Poor Folk*) is Dostoevsky's cryptogram.⁵ This correspondence naturally grew into his first nov-

4 Olga M. FREIDENBERG, *Mif i literatura drevnosti*, 2nd edition, Moskva, Vost.lit. RAN, 1998, p. 262-286.

5 Dostoevsky had this habit of writing drafts of his letters all his life. See e.g., his

el keeping many of its formal characteristics. It is not only the genre that they share, but also stylistic features, range of themes. Numerous verbal figures from Dostoevsky's letters were later paraphrased in the novel.⁶

Upon completion of the *Poor Folk* novel the potential of epistolary narrative was exhausted and it was excluded from Dostoevsky's creative arsenal. Further works feature a varied set of storytellers and chroniclers, who inherit the image of the first eyewitness and narrator on the actual problems of the universe, Makar Alekseevich Devushkin. In this respect it is symptomatic that the letters written by Dostoevsky upon completion of *Poor Folk* significantly differ from those of 1838-1845, resembling everyday letters in their function and style.

Previously Dostoevsky declared the urgent necessity of correspondence with his brother persuading him to write more regularly and in greater volume. After the epistolary novel *Poor Folk* had been completed his attitude to letters changed dramatically: now he was saying that writing letters was «pure torture» for him. The reason was that the new situation required mixing two types of narratives – first-person letters and third-person story. The impossibility of such combination was later noted by Dostoevsky: «There is nothing more terrible for me than to write a letter. If I do something, i.e. write something, I completely get absorbed by it and after writing a letter I am never capable of starting to work».⁷ This attitude to letters remained during Dostoevsky's whole life after he had completed *Poor Folk*: «As to the letters, I am dull in this respect: I can't and am afraid of writing a letter», wrote Dostoevsky to L. A. Ozhigina in 1878.⁸

Dostoevsky experienced this new condition right after he had completed the first version of *Poor Folk*. By the end of 1844 already his letters to Mikhail had changed beyond recognition starting in a very untypical manner: «I'm in a hurry to answer as quick as I can (I'm out of time)» (September 30, 1844); «You must have been waiting for my letter, dear brother» (March 24, 1845); «I'm sorry I haven't written for a long time»

letter to N. M. Katkov (September 10-15, 1865) from Wiesbaden, with the project of *Crime and Punishment* (Fyodor M. DOSTOEVSKY, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, t. 28/2, Leningrad, Nauka, 1985, p. 136-139).

6 See Konstantin A. BARSHT, *Literaturnyi debyut F.M. Dostoevskogo: tvorcheskaya istoriya romana Bednye lyudi*, in Fyodor M. DOSTOEVSKIJ, *Bednye lyudi*, Seriya «Literaturnye pamyatniki», Moskva, Nauka, 2015, p. 379-515.

7 Fyodor M. DOSTOEVSKY, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, t. 30/1, Leningrad, Nauka, 1985, p. 220.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

(May 4, 1845); «I've had neither time, nor mood to inform you on anything to do with me» (October 8, 1845); «I'm writing in haste now; besides, time is scarce» (November 16, 1845); «First of all, don't be mad at me for not writing so long. God knows, I've had no time...» (February 1, 1846).⁹ In one of the letters from this period (April 1, 1846) Dostoevsky provided the following characteristic of the change he had experienced: «My friend. You must be reproaching me for not writing for so long. But I totally agree with Gogol's Poprishchin: "Letters are nonsense, written by pharmacists". What was I to write you? I would've had to write volumes if I'd wanted to speak the way I wanted».¹⁰

Dostoevsky was totally aware of the fact that the epistolary form had exhausted its potential in his debut novel *Poor Folk*. While working on *The Double*, which was his first narrative as such, Dostoevsky realized the narrowness of the epistolary form, which required «volumes» in order to deal with the new creative tasks. In search of the form of his sophomore work, he refused from the epistolary genre; it was his aesthetic resistance to this form that gave birth to the new narrative model, which Dostoevsky was moving towards in *The Double* and which brought him the world fame. The new texts, the «volumes», would actually be written later, but none of them would turn back to the roots – the epistolary form. Summarizing the meaning of changes he had experienced after the novel *Poor Folk* had been completed, Dostoevsky wrote: «Brother, in terms of literature I am not the one who I was two years ago. Then it was childish, it was nonsense. Two years of studies have brought and taken away a lot».¹¹

Based on the meaning of those changes that were taking place in the sphere of Dostoevsky's self-expression and conditions of his personal communication with the outer world one can suggest a chronological typology of epistolary forms that accompanied his literary activities:

1. The letter as an everyday document, before the breakage of oral communication with his brother Mikhail in 1838, as well as after this year with all correspondents except M. M. Dostoevsky, and after 1846 with all correspondents. It was the primary genre which generated meta-letters (essays, confessions, reviews etc.) in the correspondence with his brother.

9 Fyodor M. DOSTOEVSKY, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, t. 28/1, Leningrad, Nauka, 1985, p. 99, 106, 108, 112, 115, 117.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

2. Letters to M. M. Dostoevsky as a special type of narrative based on an everyday letter; the original form of Dostoevsky's authorship, the natural way to his first literary attempts, a trial of 'style', 'projects' and 'artistic ideas' (1838-1844).

3. The epistolary novel *Poor Folk* as a literary debut, whose imaginary narrative registered the style and artistic ideas outlined and tried out in Dostoevsky's correspondence with his brother (1844-1845).

4. After 1845 the epistolary form exhausted itself and was excluded from Dostoevsky's written practice, its function having been fulfilled. The letter retains the former modus of a communicative act with all correspondents, including M. M. Dostoevsky. It serves as a basis for a narrative of a storyteller-chronicler in its variety of types (works of 1846-1881, starting from *The Double*).

5. The revival of the old genre of correspondence with brother Mikhail in *A Writer's Diary*; such level of trust in addressing the recipient was determined by the possibility of getting, for the first time in Dostoevsky's literary life, a reader, who was, even if not equal, close to Mikhail Mikhailovich Dostoevsky in terms of the degree and quality of spiritual intimacy.

Of course, the borders between the periods are not distinct and in a number of cases it is impossible to give an exact date of transformation from a usual everyday letter into a 'literary diary' and back. This process is a part of the general integral and continuous process of creative realization of F. M. Dostoevsky within the global communicative situation that defined the formats of his dialogue with the surrounding world.

These formats of Dostoevsky's written word were, each on its stage, of great significance in this process, but each consecutive would not have been feasible without the previous one. The stages of development of Dostoevsky's creative writing are not equivalent for a scholar in literary history, especially in terms of comparative studies of various authors, literary trends, schools and directions; most attention has traditionally been paid to the fourth period, the one of Dostoevsky's professional literary life.

Starting from *Poor Folk* and onwards, during all his creative life, the storylines and events Dostoevsky's works were based on moral and ontological imperative marked as «the image of Christ», as well as heroes' approaching or, on the contrary, conscious or unconscious distancing from it. The characters' steps towards the realization of their aims can be referred to as ethical metaphors: shifts along (forwards or backwards) or perpendicularly to the central axis, thus forming the plot lines. What the

narrator Dostoevsky was searching for can be described as an imaginary and ethical presentation of an ethically ideal value system, which, from the writer's point of view, endows life with meaning through the very fact of its existence and influence on the people around. This is the starting point for 'a highly realistic' text, in which the first, second and third persons turn out to be essentially equal in their ontological value and functionally defined by each other. Dostoevsky had been searching for such a hero and storyteller all his life and in this narrative 'ladder' of his, from *Poor Folk* to *A Writer's Diary*, one can indicate twelve basic steps.

1. The immediate testifying which is typologically close to the lyrical discourse – the correspondence with brother Mikhail Mikhailovich from 1838 to 1844. While the first letters were purely monological, working as everyday documents and registering a simple exchange of opinions, those after 1839 start to incorporate Dostoevsky's literary and philosophic themes, replies to his own questions, which were reflected in Mikhail Mikhailovich's comments. The brother turned out to be both an author of texts and a recipient capable of appropriately assisting Dostoevsky's dialogic narrative discourse, which was being created at this time. This is how the structural prototype of 'mirror narration' was created, which would later be used in *Poor Folk*.

2. On the other hand, Dostoevsky was also considering the tradition of Balzac's novel, whose 'realistic' narrator owned a high degree of competence and introspection. In Dostoevsky's translations from Balzac, Sue and George Sand events are assessed from the angle of social value system. This kind of adoption did not strike root in Dostoevsky's further texts, although it was priceless experience in building the narrative based on 'I-for-you', where 'you' is not yet a 'brother of mine' but a citizen and a relative, a «companion of life's event», as Bakhtin would have said.

3. The *Poor Folk* novel is a combination of the first and the second stages, where the situation is doubled: the intensely subjective and intensely objective narrators, Devushkin and Varen'ka, represent these narrative guidelines by exchanging written utterances and forming a common text thereby. This creates the effect of 'mirror narration': the implicit author and implicit reader of the text designed for a concrete reader get interchanged. Instead of himself, Devushkin presents an 'abstract author' of his letters, while Varen'ka provides the necessary 'abstract reader' to Devushkin. In Varen'ka's letters the situation is structurally opposite. One should note here that as Devushkin's 'personal style' is being formed, the abstract, concrete authors and the narrator, which were unified in an eve-

ryday letter, get gradually separated. The abstract author in *Poor Folk* exists on two levels: on the first one it belongs to the text of the novel, whereas on the second one it is split into the abstract author of Devushkin's letters and that of Varen'ka's letters.

4. *The Double* story determines the next stage in Dostoevsky's search for the ideal narrative system. The writer refused from splitting the subject of narration (*Poor Folk*) and comes to splitting the object of narration: in *The Double* two different characters form two different sides of one hero which breaks into two separate fates and create two axiologically opposite viewpoints. Still, it must be noted that there is no complete functional equality between the doubles: the narrative sphere retains connection with senior Golyadkin, while junior Golyadkin acts as a clean character devoid of any narrative functions. Senior Golyadkin is a prototype of Dostoevsky's chroniclers, humble witnesses and describers, who is of the minimum social status and maximum ethical competence. However, *The Double*, which was the first attempt to break out of the 'mirror narration' to the desired 'fantastic realism' 'I-for-you', still does not own the features that would distinguish the later Dostoevsky: unity, synchrony and axiological equality of several viewpoints, of the look at oneself and the world around.

5. *A Novel in Nine Letters* is a step back in Dostoevsky's creative evolution, from the narrative system of *The Double* to the earlier 'mirror narration' of *Poor Folk*. The attempt to turn back the history of his creative quests did not prove to be successful: Dostoevsky managed to recreate the narrative structure of *Poor Folk* but the work itself was not excellent. Dostoevsky had the right to suppose he had mastered this form, comparing his text with N. V. Gogol's *The Lawsuit*,¹² but the fictional system of this text turned out to be, even though fairly familiar, outdated in regard to the new goals that Dostoevsky pursued.

6. The group of *Petersburg Stories* of 1846-1849 (*Netochka Nezvanova*, *A Weak Heart*, *White Nights* etc.) proves that having refused from the 'double narration' system of the unsuccessful *A Novel in Nine Letters* and at the same time from a highly perspective narrative system of *The Double*, which got cold reception from Belinsky's group and contemporary critics, Dostoevsky turned his attention back to Balzac's narrative system, which was tried and examined in his translation of *Eugénie Grandet*. In these stories he again tried to transplant Balzac onto Russian ground, not his texts this time, but rather his poetic language and narrative system.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

7. The crisis connected with looking for a new storyteller that Dostoevsky was experiencing at the end of 1850s is clearly seen in his genre searches and aspiration for drama; the narrator acts only as a point of view being excluded from the plot. In *The Village of Stepanchikovo* and *Uncle's Dream*, which resemble drama in their structural features, the narrator is practically devoid of authority owning a low level of introspection and, at the same time, a high level of competence, the ability to understand what is happening. In these works the storyline is created by the description of the ways the hero diverges from the ideal value system, whose bearer he is thought to be.

8. The positive result of Dostoevsky's Siberian exile (1850-1859) was the fact that he had a chance to study and feel the narrative system of Evangelical stories: unsophisticatedness, humble intonation of the storyteller, sincerity, frankness and intrepidity in depicting what they have witnessed. The apostle's narrative intonation was the main acquisition for exiled Dostoevsky; the period of permanent and attentive reading of the Gospel presented to him by N. D. Fonvizina became the time of formation of the narrative system of his future five novels. Relying on the ideal of modest and artless witnessing on the Divine Providence registered by the evangelical storytellers, Dostoevsky started moving towards creation of a similar type of narrative, which is based on witnessing without anger or condemnation. *Humiliated and Insulted* was the first step in this direction, close in its ethical competence to the idealization of the 'good sentimental' type, like in case of *Poor Folk*.

9. The next step of Dostoevsky's way to a perfect narrator was his attempt of directly addressing the reader in his magazines «Time» and «Epoch» (1861-1865). The possibility to unify the abstract author and the narrator, which Dostoevsky recognized in journalism, attracted him as a way of realizing his creative potential in a most natural and direct form of testifying, which most adequately reflected the narrative ideal formed in his mind during the time of exile in the penal settlement. The feature of this kind of aesthetic communication was the possibility of using an alien cultural outlook as a chronotope for the heroes of one's own narrative.

10. A special place in Dostoevsky's search of the ideal narrative belongs to the *Notes from Underground*. Having already realized the value of speaking and assessing from a morally impeccable point of view, the writer fulfills an ethically opposite model. The story offers ruthless self-examination of the human that is oriented towards the high degree of objectivity and precision in his description of the world he sees. However,

this narrative starts to fight back against the hero's consciousness, which makes him naturally reveal the catastrophic condition of his inner world due to the outstanding narrative resources he owns (introspection, credibility, reliability). In fact, Dostoevsky turns back to the model of *Poor Folk* and *The Double*, but modernizes it by removing the effect of physical splitting and leaving the 'senior' and the 'junior' underground hero as a single entity in two images – the narrator and the actor.

11. The five great novels by Dostoevsky (1860-1870: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *The Adolescent*, *The Brothers Karamazov*): the differences in the narrative options presented in them can serve as a material for independent analysis,¹³ while our attention is focused on these works as one stage in the development of Dostoevsky's narrative model. The main point here is that he made a step forward in comparison with *Notes from Underground*, which implied the fundamental possibility of passing the narrative position to any character, rather than placing the subject and the object of narration within one hero. At the same time this narrative position works in the same way as in *Notes from Underground*, i.e. in two directions at the same time: within the mental outlook and milieu, inside and outside, towards personally ontological interior and exterior. In these conditions the range of depicted events, the plot, becomes a set of mistakes and creative successes of a person who is searching for a positive ethical ideal ('positively beautiful man'). At the same time the preacher's intonation is getting louder from novel to novel and becomes obvious in *The Brothers Karamazov* as a wording for or, rather, imitation of Christ's viewpoint on the depicted events.

12. *A Writer's Diary* does not add anything to Dostoevsky's narrative system being some sort of reduction of that of the five novels: the narrator is placed in the cultural diegesis formed with common time and space for the author of *A Writer's Diary* and its reader. This is where the position of an artless and righteous eyewitness, which Dostoevsky was elaborating during his exile while reading the Gospel, reaches its apogee. *A Writer's Diary* is an attempt to describe the reality from the point of view of a Christ-like narrator. Dostoevsky focused on the new ideal narrative point uniting his books with what mattered most to him – the ethical attitude of the narrator. The one in *A Writer's Diary* is aimed at carefully count-

¹³ See the typology of Dostoevsky's novels from the narratological perspective: Wolf SCHMID, *Narratologiya*, Moskva, Yazyki Slavyanskoy Kultury, 2003, p. 91-92 (English translation: *Narratology: An Introduction*, Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 2010).

ing the number of steps towards the kingdom of God. These steps or otherwise moving backwards are the main events in Dostoevsky's new epistolary world, again like in his early letters to brother Mikhail, when his voice was fixed on an implicit reader who was responsive to his word, trustful and highly competent.