

Thomas Gaiton MARULLO, *Fyodor Dostoevsky – The Gathering Storm (1846-1847): A Life in Letters, Memoirs, and Criticism* (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2020) (= NIU Series in Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies), 251 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-7021-0

In the pantheon of Russian realist writers, Fyodor Dostoevsky is the one whose life and literary career developed the most unpredictably. Lacking the financial support from a landowning family, which formed the background to Ivan Turgenev's and Leo Tolstoy's rise to literary fame, he made matters worse for himself by turning down the personal security that government service provided to other writers such as Ivan Goncharov for pursuing his artistic interests. Consciously, if not instinctively, Dostoevsky opted for a career path dependent upon the constant need to promise, bargain, and deliver, which inevitably also included breaking up with former patrons and partners, as well as running away from creditors in his more mature years. In view of the rather mercurial circumstances of the early stages of Dostoevsky's development as a writer, in *Fyodor Dostoevsky – The Gathering Storm (1846-1847): A Life in Letters, Memoirs, and Criticism*, Thomas Gaiton Marullo claims that existing studies of the young writer "do not discuss adequately [...] people, places, and events that influenced Dostoevsky in this period" (p. xii).

This publication follows Joseph Frank's lead in breaking up Dostoevsky's complex oeuvre into various periods, represented by separate volumes. However, in terms of contents, Marullo adopted an approach entirely different from Frank's, as his book is essentially a popular digest of excerpts from documents highlighting Dostoevsky's thorny path to literary recognition from both Dostoevsky's own point of view and from the perspectives of his contemporaries. In addition, it includes passages from memoirs of relatives and people acquainted with the writer in later years of his life. The author divides this material, which has not been published in English translation in one single volume so far, into three chronologically defined sections that indicate the course Dostoevsky's career and personal maturation took ("Pride before the Fall", "Havens from the Storms", "The Psycho-Spiritual Turn"), prefacing each of these chapters with a short round-up of biographical background information about the people involved and their relationship with Dostoevsky. Complete with a preface, a general introduction, and a conclusion, the book also contains an appendix consisting of four parts: "*Directory of Prominent Names*", "*Notes, Source Notes*", and "*Index*" (italics used by Marullo).

If Frank presents all of Dostoevsky's life up to his deportation to Siberia in one volume,¹ Marullo focuses on a much shorter period of time. This text is the second volume out of three published by the author so far, and it deals with the two years following the unexpected success of Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, stopping short of the events that led up to Dostoevsky's conflict with the Tsarist regime in 1849, a consequence of which was being exiled to Siberia for almost a decade. The "gathering storm" referred to in the title of the book is Marullo's gloss for the interval when several of the fledgling writer's well-connected patrons, most prominently Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolay Nekrasov, turned away from the former object of their guardianship, whom they increasingly perceived as putting on airs and steering away from the course they expected young Russian writers of their day to follow. Marullo seems to be right in suggesting that if Dostoevsky had cared more about the advice of his erstwhile benefactors and less about his own artistic experiments and hard-earned experience in 1846 and 1847, "he would not have become the national and international figure he would be twenty years later" (p. 204).

It may well be that the fictional works written and published by Dostoevsky during the time period highlighted in Marullo's monograph – i.e., the tales *A Novel in Nine Letters* (written in 1845, published in 1846), *Mr Prokharchin* (1846), and *The Landlady* (1847) – will elicit less critical interest when compared to the main body of Dostoevsky's literary oeuvre as the historical distance to their time of origin increases. However, the tale explicitly criticized by his contemporaries, *The Double*, has spawned a steady flow of both critical and artistic reactions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thus proving Belinsky's and others' assessments wrong that this work was essentially a failure. If any positive proof of this ongoing fascination with *The Double* is needed, it could be seen in the fact that Italian composer Lucia Ronchetti (born 1963) has recently completed an opera adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel that is currently touring Germany and Switzerland. Marullo rightly points to the fact that some of the protagonists featured in Dostoevsky's early fiction reappear in later works by the author that have a more justified claim to literary eternity. For instance, Golyadkin, the protagonist of *The Double*, displays features that became prominent in the anonymous hero of *Notes from the Underground*, whereas "Prokharchin prefigures Alexey in *The Gambler* and Arkady in *A Raw Youth*" (p. 139).

The other, better-known piece from the period in question, the novel *Poor Folk*, is mostly remembered as Dostoevsky's literary debut today, and not be-

1 See Joseph FRANK, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt 1821-1849* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

cause of the originality of its plot. Dostoevsky's contemporaries could not yet foresee what later generations would recognize as the unique features of Dostoevsky's art. As can be expected, given the biographically-oriented approach, in Marullo's book, a lot of attention is given to reviews of *Poor Folk* discussing issues which have since become obsolete, as is the case in a review by a certain Eduard Guber who claims that *Poor Folk* "is a simple tale from genuine life which is repeated, perhaps, every day in one of the dark back streets and corners of our noisy, cold, and indifferent city" (p. 170). The social romanticism of the critics of the Belinsky school, which was the dominant reading among Dostoevsky's contemporaries and hence also in the reviews quoted by Marullo, highlights the writer's indebtedness to the writings of Nikolay Gogol, Friedrich Schiller, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. In light of Dostoevsky's later fiction, however, it was precisely his emancipation from these antecedents that turned the author of *Crime and Punishment* into one of the forerunners of modernism. It is clear that such far-sightedness cannot be expected from the writer's immediate social environment, which was more focused on interpersonal relations between real people than on the intellectual originality of fictitious characters. As a result, what Marullo's collection of reminiscences and criticism, as well as of Dostoevsky's responses to it, can do is allow readers to form their own understanding of Dostoevsky's often difficult relationships with the people around him. What it cannot do is help them understand why his works continue to fascinate readers and inspire creative people the world over up to the present day.

Additionally, Marullo's choice of material is sometimes slightly confusing, as it mostly follows chronological order. Although Marullo sometimes adds excerpts from sources published later, the text does not give any indications as to why he chose the topics discussed or why certain people are quoted and referred to, while others are apparently omitted.² It might have helped the reader to add a few sub-headings to explain the thematic context of the sources included in the book. Moreover, Marullo's selection mixes texts which contain elements of fictional writing with those that are clearly written in a critical mode. For instance, it quotes from notes in which the Russian author adopts the habit of speaking about himself in the third person about conversations he had had with Belinsky years before. This is duly explained in a footnote, though (cf. p. 46; p. 217, footnote 26).

On later occasions, however, the mode of speaking about the writer in Aesopian language does not become sufficiently clear, as lengthy quotations are

2 One of the people that could be mentioned in this context is Ivan Shidlovsky, Dostoevsky's close friend in his student years. Shidlovsky's name appears in the "Directory of Prominent Names" (cf. p. 212), but not in the book's index.

given from a spoof authored by Nekrasov lampooning Dostoevsky because of his alleged pride and vanity. Based upon the first footnote referring to this piece, it appears that some important information is missing (cf. p. 215, footnote 2). It is only many pages later that the reader learns that in his piece, Nekrasov caricatured real-life figures associated with Belinsky's circle under fictitious names: himself as Trostnikov, Belinsky as Mertsalov, and, least flattering of all, Dostoevsky as a conceited literary novice named Glazhievsky (cf. p. 221, footnote 54). An explanatory note would definitely have been helpful at the first mention of Nekrasov's disparaging tale, which is known under various titles (*The Stone Heart*, as well as *How Great am I!*, and *On That Day at Around Eleven O'Clock in the Morning*) (cf. p. 10). However that may be, with the benefit of hindsight, it may have been a lucky coincidence that Dostoevsky apparently had no knowledge of the existence of this lampoon,³ and his creative talent could not be sidetracked by his irascible nature to engage in any retaliatory reactions to Nekrasov's covetous pasquinade.

After decades of steering away from any theoretical approach distantly reminiscent of the "biographical fallacy", western Dostoevsky studies are currently witnessing a resurgence of interest in the writer's biography.⁴ Paradoxically, this comes at a time when the Russian and western perspectives on Dostoevsky, which merged during three decades of globalization following the breakup of the Soviet Union, are clearly drifting apart over the issue of whether Russia should be part of a universal system of values or whether the claim to being able to create a value system of its own should be accepted in western countries, as well (if any doctrine that follows primarily national interests can be called a universally acceptable "system of values" at all, of course). Marullo's book was published in 2020 and reflects the state of affairs in Dostoevsky studies before the Russian attack on Ukraine, which caused many western scholars to reassess nationalistic tendencies in Dostoevsky's writing.⁵ As could have been ex-

3 See Николай Н. НАСЕДКИН, *Достоевский. Энциклопедия* (Москва: Алгоритм, 2003), с. 656.

4 This tendency can be seen in the recent publication of a comprehensive new biography of Dostoevsky in German. See Andreas GUSKI, *Dostojewskij: Eine Biographie* (München: C. H. Beck, 2018).

5 Until fairly recently, the discussion of chauvinistic aspects in his fiction had been only a minor stream in the bulk of Dostoevsky studies, whose focus on antisemitism, as far as English-language criticism is concerned. See Susan McREYNOLDS, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky's Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008). McReynolds puts Dostoevsky's antisemitism down to "cycles of debt and redemption [which] began when he resigned from the army in order to pursue a career as a professional writer" (*ibid.*, p. 61).

pected, little can be felt of this scholarly and public debate in the publication reviewed, where only some passages quoted from Dostoevsky's early feuilletons published under the title *The Petersburg Chronicle* give some premonition of the anti-western attitudes adopted in Dostoevsky's later publicist writing (cf. pp. 183-189). They may never have been deep below the surface anyway, even in the writer's pre-Siberian years.⁶

Fyodor Dostoevsky – The Gathering Storm offers a wealth of insights into the formative years of Dostoevsky's literary career to readers for whom the original sources published in Russian are inaccessible. At a time when archives in the Russian Federation, as well as the collections of the writer's material heritage housed by the various Dostoevsky sites, are no longer within easy reach for western researchers, it can be a helpful source of inspiration for anyone trying to approach the Russian realist through biographical documents. However, since almost one and a half centuries after the writer's demise have passed, new discoveries in the field of biographically-oriented Dostoevsky studies are less and less likely. If anything, they will likely only be possible only in Russia itself. Interested scholars outside the author's home country will have to focus on fictional texts and their intermediary and cross-cultural reverberation, rather than factual material, if they wish to understand why Dostoevsky continues to attract attention from a wide range of creatively-minded people all over the world.

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6 This is suggested by Sarah HUDSPITH, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness: A new perspective on unity and brotherhood* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004) (= BASEES/RoutledgeCurzon Series on Russian and East European Studies 6), p. 17.

