

Tine ROESEN, *Dostojevskij: En introduktion* [Dostoevsky: An Introduction] (Aarhus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 2021). Paperback, 323 pp., including Bibliography and Timeline. ISBN 978 87 7219 4417

This introduction to Dostoevsky by Tine Roesen, a scholar of Russian literature at the University of Copenhagen, was published in 2021, a year that, as most readers of *Dostoevsky Studies* will know, marked the 200th anniversary of the author's birth. The book is clearly and eloquently written in the Danish language, and it is aimed, as the author states at opening pages, both at a broader public with the wish to become acquainted with Dostoevsky and at readers, and perhaps even scholars, with a good knowledge of Dostoevsky, who are hereby invited to a "renewed reflection" (p. 9) on Dostoevsky's legacy. Well-written introductions can be illuminating also for those who have studied its topic for a longer time, as is no doubt the case here.

Roesen has a long experience as a Dostoevsky scholar. She wrote her PhD on his early, pre-exile stories (University of Copenhagen, 2000), and she has also translated several of his works into Danish. It is evident from this book that she has a profound knowledge of Dostoevsky's texts.

The book is divided into three parts: Dostoevsky's early works (1846-1849), his middle works (1859-1865, ending with *Notes from the Underground*) and his late works, that is the "great novels" (1866-1881). She acknowledges that she has devoted perhaps unusually much space for an introduction like this to his early works, and she has done so not primarily because they represent "anticipations" of later themes and techniques (though they do that to some extent as well), but first and foremost because of the literary value they in fact possess.

In an introductory chapter, Roesen articulates her theoretical perspectives on Dostoevsky. Mikhail Bakhtin is, not surprisingly, an essential dialogue partner in this work, too, while a central thread going through this book is narrative analysis, which often forms the starting point of her readings. She engages in particular Wolf Schmid and John Jones, but also numerous other well-known and lesser-known Dostoevsky scholars. Some attention is given to Danish readings and reception. This reviewer was happy to see how productive it can be to explicitly engage research literature also in a book for a broader public, throughout its discussions.

Even though this is an "introduction", it is a book marked by close readings and closeness to the texts. Roesen positions herself early on as a literary scholar and in opposition to philosophical readings of Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky was not a philosopher, political thinker, or theologian, but a literary writer, and we gain little or nothing by squeezing his works into philosophical, political or theological schemes or reformulating them in a vocabulary drawn from them. In fact, many of his works are about the danger and at the same time impossibility of understanding life theoretically and schematically. Real knowledge of Dostoevsky requires that his works are read as they are written, as closely as possible to the original (p. 12, here and elsewhere the translation is the reviewer's own).

Philosophical readings, Roesen suggests, tend to ignore the literary character of Dostoevsky's works. And as she shows throughout the book, with its persistent interest in narration and narrators, perspectives and points of view, questions of narration are not just a formal matter for meticulous scholars, but important for all readers seeking to understand the very dialogical nature of Dostoevsky's fictional writing. Despite structural flaws that occasionally occur in some of his work (*The Idiot* being the most famous example), Roesen approaches the Dostoevsky novel as a "thought-through literary construction and a unity of form and content" (p. 25). Even articulations of belief are made within a literary framework, from a character's or narrator's point of view.

For instance, Roesen highlights how the combination of a third-person narrator and the fluctuation and zooming-in and -out of the mind of the main character is one thing that makes *Crime and Punishment* such a successful novel. The interplay of form and content is essential also to her readings of *The Idiot* and *The Obsessed*, be it the inherent meanings of the chaotic form of the former or the narrator's presence as a character, if peripheral, in the latter. Let it be noted, however, that Roesen is critical of *The Humiliated and Insulted* and *The Adolescent*. Here, "the combination of a self-obsessed I-narrator and an exaggerated melodramatic plot" (p. 197) poses serious problems for the novels as such.

As for other examples, Roesen emphasizes how important it is *not* to take the narrator's voice in a story like *White Nights* at face value; rather, we must take into account his own interests and role in the story he narrates, and that this in fact is a work of retrospective, long-distance (in time) narration, as it is revealed to the reader towards the end. In a similar fashion, *A Faint Heart* demonstrates that "we cannot listen to what Dostoevsky's characters say only and let us be limited by the perspective bound to particular characters, we also must *see* what Dostoevsky tells us" (p. 94, the author's emphasis). In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, which Roesen regards very highly, it is crucial to take into account that the story is fictionalized, and that the genre is not one of personal recollections and hence not some authorial statement on suffering and

salvation. Selective readings of *Notes from the Underground* as a philosophical treatise without considering the underground man's tragic experiences (for instance in his childhood) are likewise deemed insufficient.

The question of genre is also at Roesen's focus. She proposes a useful typology for his early works with regard to theme and narrator: "novels" of and about an "I"; "notes" of "I" about others; and third-person "stories" (*novestmu*). By the way, "notes" as a genre and narrative technique reemerge in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (cf. above). Other recurrent issues in this book are classic Dostoevsky themes such as "doubles" and family tragedies, and perhaps less classic such as humor and Dostoevsky's obsession with bodily details (toenails, nosebleed etc.), all of which is encountered from his very first stories all the way up to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Roesen takes seriously Dostoevsky's realism throughout the book, defined here as a self-imposed commitment to represent social reality (p. 14), but she also explores his use of melodrama. She writes about the shift from the city as the main literary scene in his early works to the periphery in the later ones. Roesen's method of close reading is consistent throughout the book, whereby she even involves the reader in linguistic details such as Dostoevsky's conspicuous use of the particles *vprochem* (впрочем) and *deskat'* (дескать) in *The Double* or *ved'* (ведь) in *A Faint Heart*. Again, details like these are not marginal, the book suggests; they are essential in order to read and understand better.

Biographical information about Dostoevsky and his times is included to the extent that it sheds light on his works, one example being his interest in trials from the 1860s on, which is reflected in several of his major novels. First and foremost, however, this is an introduction that focuses on Dostoevsky's literary work – as literary constructions. Dostoevsky should, as Roesen concludes, "never be taken at his word" (*ikke bør tages på ordet*, p. 309). Utterances in the novels must always be contextualized and interpreted within the framework that the narrated story makes up.

Even though some sequences of the book may be particularly addressed to a Danish audience, and Danish readings and reception are given some space in it, a translation into English or any other language that would open this excellent book up to an even broader readership beyond Scandinavia is hereby strongly encouraged.

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