

**Lindsay CEBALLOS, *Reading Faithfully: Russian Modernist Criticism and the Making of Dostoevsky, 1881-1917* (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2025) (NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies), 215 pp. ISBN 9781501782770**

Lindsay Ceballos's study explores the reception of Dostoevsky in late Imperial Russia, starting from the famous theory of the "two Dostoevskys" – the novelist and the thinker – which emerged in critical debates at the end of the 19th century. She reinterprets this distinction in light of the ideological and spiritual tensions on the eve of the 1917 Revolution, paying particular attention to several leading figures of the so-called Silver Age (Vasily Rozanov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Sergey Bulgakov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrey Bely). These intellectuals challenged the dominant critical paradigms of the previous century, which emphasized autobiographical elements and the civic value of Dostoevsky's work, trying instead to highlight its religious and spiritual significance and free it from any suspicion of collusion with Tsarist ideology.

Ceballos proposes to interpret these interventions through the concept of *faithful reading*, a reworking of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading" as opposed to "paranoid reading". While Sedgwick developed her approach in the context of gender and queer studies, Ceballos adapts it to explore Dostoevsky's religious dimension. This method implies an intimate and creative engagement between critic and text, aimed at uncovering the expressive and spiritual potential of the work while avoiding purely encyclopedic, biographical, or psychopathological frameworks. Faithful reading thus emerges as a form of "restorative criticism", resisting what Rita Felski, drawing on Paul Ricœur, calls the "hermeneutics of suspicion", and favoring an emotionally resonant response to the text. In this context, according to Ceballos, the Silver Age becomes a privileged lens through which it is possible to observe the tension between Dostoevsky's dual legacy and the evolution of his symbolic capital in late-imperial Russia. As Ceballos notes, Symbolists' faithful reading inevitably entailed a reconfiguration of the authorial figure, negotiating his politics and ideology. What emerged was a "compilation", removed from historical reality yet instrumental in legitimizing and anticipating broader cultural developments. According to Ceballos, this postcritical reading may have contributed to the perpetuation of Dostoevsky's legacy, enhancing its polysemous nature and ensuring its survival – even in its most controversial aspects.

The volume opens with an exploration of theatrical adaptations of Dostoevsky's works in late 19th-century Russia. While these productions largely con-

formed to the conservative and patriotic values endorsed by the Tsarist state, they also revealed subtle deviations from such ideological frameworks. Ceballos argues that these adaptations initiated a process of “deauthorialization”, ultimately facilitating a redefinition of the religious meaning of Dostoevsky’s works. By secularizing the religious concerns embedded in the original novels, these dramatizations served as vehicles for broader cultural reinterpretation and paved the way for the Symbolists’ faithful reading of Dostoevsky’s work. Although insightful, Ceballos’s analysis leaves open some questions about how these adaptations intersected with the concurrent reconfiguration of Dostoevsky’s legacy within the editorial sphere, and in what sense they might be considered more “reparative” than other forms of adaptation. Moreover, a more nuanced consideration of the intended audience of these adaptations would have enriched the discussion, particularly given the suggestion that these performances reached a broader public.

This process of authorial reimagining continues with the critical interventions of Vasily Rozanov and Dmitry Merezhkovsky between 1899 and 1903. Drawing on Vladimir Solovyov’s emphasis on the prophetic dimension of Dostoevsky’s *œuvre*, both thinkers sought to position themselves as his legitimate heirs, embedding him within an intellectual genealogy that culminated in their respective visions. Rozanov reoriented Dostoevsky’s mysticism toward Judaic and ancient Egyptian matrices, identifying in Old Testament rituals a primordial form of religious authenticity. Merezhkovsky, by contrast, envisioned Dostoevsky as a precursor of a new Christian era, culminating in an eschatological revelation of New Testament inspiration. These interpretations contributed to the creation of an “authorial fiction” that extended beyond the original texts, endowing Dostoevsky with a symbolic and prophetic function that served the interpreters’ spiritual and ideological agendas.

A shift in emphasis from author to character is evident in the idealist and anti-Marxist approach of Sergey Bulgakov. His readings foreground figures such as Ivan Karamazov as vehicles for religious and philosophical inquiry, provoking criticism from radical circles more inclined toward pragmatic solutions to contemporary socio-political issues. Ceballos’s discussion highlights the central role of Ivan Karamazov in early twentieth-century Russian cultural debates, revealing the internal tensions within the intelligentsia, divided between socialist aspirations and liberal orientations.

The revolutionary events of 1905 further catalyzed a reassessment of Dostoevsky’s authorial role. Symbolist critics, who had already reinterpreted his religious and aesthetic dimensions, now repositioned his *œuvre* within new cultural and ideological frameworks. Ceballos effectively underscores the po-

larizing nature of Dostoevsky's work, a phenomenon which became especially pronounced during the 1906 jubilee commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the author's death. The preparation of the sixth edition of Dostoevsky's collected works, published by Anna Dostoevskaya, served as a site of confrontation between competing interpretations of his thought. On one side, Dmitry Merezhkovsky attributed political meaning to Dostoevsky's "religious revolution", discerning behind his conservative "mask" a latent support for an emergent theocracy poised to supersede the State. On the other, Sergey Bulgakov used the introduction to the first volume of the edition to articulate a harsh critique of Tsarist autocracy and the official Church. Alongside Merezhkovsky and Bulgakov – both invited by Dostoevskaya to contribute to the introductory essay – Andrei Bely and Vyacheslav Ivanov contributed to the legitimization of Dostoevsky's religious thought, deliberately distancing it from the more controversial aspects of his biography. As Ceballos rightly observes, this approach did not signal a formalist rejection of biographical analysis but rather stemmed from the demands of their radical ideologies, personal religious convictions, spiritual eclecticism, and creativity.

By the early 1910s, the Symbolist interpretation of Dostoevsky as a spiritual and national figure had become firmly established. This is exemplified by the Moscow Art Theater's adaptation of *The Demons*, titled *Nikolai Stavrogin*, which foregrounded the ideal of Russia as a "bearer of God". Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko restructured the dialogue between Shatov and Stavrogin to emphasize its national significance, purging the religious message of Orthodox messianism and adapting it to the prewar political climate.

Ceballos's study offers numerous stimulating insights into the complexity of Dostoevsky's reception – a task especially urgent in light of the current challenges facing Slavic studies and the humanities more broadly. Some inconsistencies remain, particularly in the treatment of Dostoevsky's religious thought, which serves as the book's interpretive core; more direct engagement with key texts such as *A Writer's Diary*, which is mediated exclusively through secondary sources, would have strengthened the discussion. The same applies to the origins of what Ceballos defines as the "two Dostoevskys problem", which emerged well before the rise of Symbolism, following the publication of *The Demons*. An analysis of the context in which Alexander Skabichevsky's theory of the "luminous twin" and the "dark twin" arose would have contributed to a clearer understanding of the problem's terms, as well as of the ideological bias inherent in the original theory. Additionally, certain references to contemporaneity appear somewhat tangential, functioning more as interpretive appendices than as coherent extensions of the central thesis. This, I would argue, points to

the limitations inherent in methods such as reparative reading. While the creative approach of Silver Age critics cannot be disentangled from their historical, political, cultural, and ideological context, Dostoevsky's texts should continue to invite reflection on what they reveal, elicit, and make possible – even beyond interpretive categories that are, in some respects, problematic, such as “love” and “faith”.

Nonetheless, these aspects do not undermine the value of Ceballos's volume, which provides a compelling portrait of the Silver Age. Its originality and meticulous engagement with a wide range of sources – from critical essays and reviews to archival materials – make a significant contribution to our understanding of Dostoevsky's reception in pre-revolutionary Russia, and beyond. Although some epistemological questions remain unresolved, the book succeeds in provoking fresh reflections on an author whose paradoxical nature continues to challenge both readers and critics.

*Raffaella VASSENÀ*