

Bowers, Katherine / Doak, Connor / Holland, Kate (ed.): *A Dostoevskii Companion: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018) (= Cultural Syllabus). Paperback, 535pp. ISBN 978-1-61811-727-4.

The latest contribution to an increasingly diverse body of Dostoevsky companion literature is the above-mentioned book, which brings together a large collection of shorter texts and documents tracing Dostoevsky's development into one of the world's best-known nineteenth-century prose writers. Unlike the majority of previous Dostoevsky reader's companions, this publication does not attempt to approach the work of the Russian author primarily on the basis of his individual works of fiction. It is also not a book offering quick access to reference texts in the form of encyclopedic entries, as is the case with Kenneth Lantz's popular *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* and its Russian counterpart published by Nikolai Nasedkin.¹ Rather, it follows a thematic route in helping students and readers "navigate" (as the cover text promises) "the writer's fiction and his world". In line with the general design of the Cultural Syllabus series, *A Dostoevskii Companion* aims to present its target readers, undergraduate students, with the textual basis for forming their own opinions about the Russian writer.

The volume's ten chapters focus on various aspects of Dostoevsky's life and work: "The Early Dostoevskii", "Dostoevskii and His Contemporaries", "Aesthetics", "Characters", "The Novel", "From Journalism to Fiction", "Captivity, Free Will, and Utopia", "Dostoevskii's Others", "Russia", and "God". As this list shows, this book focuses on Dostoevsky's public and literary personae rather than the individual novels and prose tales for which he has become famous.

Each chapter starts with a general introduction by the editors, followed by suggestions for further reading. The character and origin of the texts that follow, most of them under 10 pages in length, are fairly heterogeneous. They include excerpts from works of fiction that shaped Dostoevsky's taste and thinking as well as from relevant letters to his brother Mikhail and others. Apart from this, some examples of Dostoevsky's journalism, in particular some excerpts from commentaries and feature articles published in his popular *Writer's Diary* (1876-1877) are presented to English-speaking readers, the majority of whom likely do not know the novelist was also a lifelong journalist. In addition, the three editors have also decided to include short excerpts from a number of Dostoevsky's works of fiction (notably *House of the Dead*, *Notes from*

¹ See Kenneth A. LANTZ, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport, Connecticut, et al.: Greenwood Press, 2004); Николай Н. НАСЕДКИН, *Достоевский: Энциклопедия* (Москва: Алгоритм, 2003).

Underground, The Idiot, The Adolescent, The Meek One, and The Brothers Karamazov).

In their short introductory texts, the editors mostly refrain from commenting on the various points of view represented in the ten thematically-defined chapters. Only when readers need additional information to understand the texts' cultural context do the editors provide a supplementary footnote. The two chapters where the editors abandon this general tendency towards unbiased presentation of various, often conflicting, viewpoints are Chapters 8 and 9 – “Dostoevskii's Others” and “Russia.” While Chapter 8 deals with Dostoevsky's attitude towards religious and ethnic minorities, Chapter 9 focuses on his increasingly chauvinistic views on Russia's relations with other nations. The editors stress that Dostoevsky's attempts to justify himself with respect to accusations of antisemitism in the essay titled “The Jewish Question” are “troubling” and “alarming” (pp. 377-378), while his nationalism generally “makes modern readers in the West uneasy” (p. 430).

Apart from Jews, the marginalized communities dealt with in these two chapters are the Muslims and Catholics, as represented by “Tartars” (a term Dostoevsky uses as a collective noun to denote all adherents of Islam) and by the Poles, who rarely appear in a positive light in the writer's fiction. It could be added that the Germans who figure in many of his literary texts are not typically shown in a positive light either. A Dostoevsky novel well-known for its many national stereotypes is *The Gambler*, which, however, has not been included in the selection of texts made by the editors to illustrate the writer's repeated use of national stereotypes in his fiction. It seems that the European perspective, which generally juxtaposes many European ethnic groups, is not sufficiently interesting for North American college students focusing exclusively on one European culture: namely, Russian culture. If more of the editors taught at European universities (and not just Connor Doak, who teaches at the University of Bristol), the choice of texts in Chapters 8 and 9 would most probably be different.

One of the most salient features of *A Dostoevskii Companion* is the heterogeneity of the contributions' authorship and genre. Out of the almost one hundred texts assembled, more than one third were written by Dostoevsky himself, and the editors make little systematic distinction between his fictions, letters, and journalism. They defend this approach in the introduction to Chapter 6, which bears the title “From Journalism to Fiction”, where they claim that Dostoevsky's *A Writer's Diary* “is an unparalleled creation that blends journalism and literary fiction into a new artistic form” (p. 257). What *is* new about Dostoevsky's style of writing, however, is not so much this constant role-switching

between Dostoevsky the commentator on political issues of his day and Dostoevsky the creator of fictional worlds but his incorporation of contemporary issues discussed in the journals of his day into his highly complex dialogic novels (to borrow Bakhtin's terminology). As a result, Dostoevsky departed from the shallow and increasingly limited perspective of a conservative, at times reactionary, *homme de lettres* engaging in political debates about the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 or current affairs such as the "Woman Question" or the emancipation of Jews. This capacity for creating complex narrative pictures of the human condition seems to be the reason Dostoevsky is still read all over the world today. Most modern readers do not care whether he publicly advocated particular views from the political debates of his day.

These topical issues, however, appear to have been the initial focus for the texts included in the new publication. As the acknowledgements note, *A Dostoevskii Companion* developed out of an initially smaller project devoted to the critical literature on *Crime and Punishment* assembled on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the novel's publication. This original focus has given way to a much broader approach to Dostoevsky's oeuvre, one that synthesizes various readings of individual texts, as well as passages from primary sources, into a veritable dialogue of texts resembling the dialogic structure of Dostoevsky's novels themselves. Since the editors largely withhold judgment to let other authors speak for themselves, what does their book offer? Most of the texts included are already available elsewhere to the English-speaking public. Nonetheless, the indubitable advantage of *A Dostoevskii Companion* is that it collects in a single paperback material from sources published in the course of more than one hundred years of Dostoevsky criticism, as well as excerpts from Dostoevsky's novels in translation.

The non-Russian secondary sources chosen for this publication cover a period of roughly 120 years – starting in the early 1900s – more or less when the Czech expressionist Emil Filla created the painting *Reader of Dostoevsky* reproduced on the book's cover. To a large extent, Dostoevsky owed his discovery in the English-speaking world to Constance Garnett's famous translations, some of which are excerpted for the volume.² Along with some later translations of Dostoevsky's fiction and critical literature, for which copyright has been obtained, the editors have included documents that were specifically translated for the current publication by a graduate student assistant supported by various Canadian research funds.

2 One may argue that later translations are oftentimes more accurate, but copyright restrictions are presumably also an issue to be considered.

In conclusion, *A Dostoevskii Companion* will likely offer guidance to at least one generation of undergraduate students facing the arduous task of getting to know the Russian writer's multi-faceted oeuvre. This may help them avoid the condition of Emil Filla's *Reader of Dostoevsky*, who, as the book cover shows, has fallen into a state of torpor like Raskol'nikov after the murders. From an ever-expanding corpus of approaches to Dostoevsky, the three editors have chosen thought-provoking examples of criticism illustrating certain aspects of his life and works. The choice of texts makes it clear that this book is aimed at a western readership, which is more inclined to identify with the Underground Man than with the Gogolian heroes found in Dostoevsky's earlier works of fiction. Some more western Dostoevsky criticism could have been included, e.g. Sigmund Freud's controversial study on the patricide motif³ in *The Karamazov Brothers* or Albert Camus's existentialist readings.⁴ This lacuna, however, should not detract from *A Dostoevskii Companion's* usefulness as an in-depth view of the writer who many Russians see as an exemplar of a Russia ambivalently poised between East and West.

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- 3 The standard English translation of Freud's 1928 essay *Dostojewski und die Vätertötung* as *Dostoevsky and Parricide* is not fully accurate since Freud does not claim that there are any matricidal tendencies tangible in *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- 4 A suitable text to include would have been Camus's *Pour Dostoïevski* (1955). Entrusting a student with translating this 650-word essay might be a worthwhile task for a possible second edition of *A Dostoevskii Companion*; procuring financial support for this should not be an unsurmountable problem in bilingual Canada.