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Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy: Genre and Modernity in Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin

ILYA KLIGER

THIS ESSAY TREATS AN ASPECT OF THE EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY literary-critical rubric that might be entitled “Dostoevsky and Tragedy.” Starting with Dmitry Merezhkovsky’s remarks in *L. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (1900) and, a decade later, spurred on by Viacheslav Ivanov’s 1911 lecture “Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy” (“Достоевский и роман-трагедия” [published in 1916]), discussions about Dostoevsky’s status as a great tragedian gained momentum well into the 1920s, recruiting prominent participants among poets, literary critics, philosophers, and philologists.¹ The discussions became particularly urgent during the decade that witnessed the apocalyptic destruction of the European war alongside the promise of revolutionary transformation in Russia. In the face of a fundamental crisis of Western rationalism and humanism, many argued, young Russia promised to bring cultural and spiritual regeneration to Europe. The success or failure of this regeneration was frequently seen to depend on Russia’s capacity to transcend European modernity, with its instrumental rationalism, cultural eclecticism, imperialistic expansionism, and, most important, solipsistic individualism—all of which were supposed to have brought Western civilization to a murderous dead end. The success or failure of Russia’s transcendence of modernity, in turn, could be gauged by its ability to resuscitate Attic tragedy as the oldest and most powerful symbolic form for exploring the dynamics of individuation (Vernant 237–47).

Such then were the world-historical stakes of the seemingly parochial question of the proper genre of Dostoevsky’s works.² This paper does not aim to give an exhaustive account of Dostoevsky’s reception as a “tragic poet.” Instead, I propose to explore the three farthest-reaching interventions in the debate: the keenest defense

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of the novel-tragedy thesis, by the leading figure of the symbolist movement in Russia, Vyacheslav Ivanov; the most engaging refutation of Ivanov's claim, by the philosophically minded literary historian Lev Pumpyansky; and the consequential transposition of the subject by Mikhail Bakhtin, the author of the most formidable analysis of Dostoevsky's poetics to date and one of the most influential twentieth-century theorists of the novel.

By placing these three visions of Dostoevsky side by side, I hope to discern the outlines of a constellation of views on the place and function of tragedy in contemporary Russian modernity, on the nature of that modernity, and on the characteristics of Dostoevsky's poetics most relevant to these larger historiographical concerns.³ Staging a dialogue among these three visions of Dostoevsky casts the early formulation of Bakhtin's influential theory of the novel in the light of approaches he did not adopt. An understanding of these approaches' influence on—as well as their refusal in—Bakhtin's theoretical framework will allow us to appreciate the extent to which widespread assumptions about the features of the novel as the proper genre of modernity remain conceptually linked to the largely occluded theory of the tragic.

Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin are linked by more than a concern with establishing the generic characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels. At the time of their engagement with the question of the novel-tragedy, Pumpyansky and Bakhtin were friends and leading members of what came to be known among scholars of the period as the "Nevel school of philosophy" or the "Nevel philosophical circle." The circle existed for a decade, from 1918 until Bakhtin's arrest and exile to Kazakhstan in 1929, periodically bringing together—in the Belorussian towns of Nevel and Vitebsk and in Leningrad—young Soviet intellectuals and artists. Among them were the linguist Valentin Voloshinov, the literary critic Pavel Medvedev, the poet and novelist Konstantin

Vaginov, the future renowned concert pianist Maria Yudina, and, perhaps most important, the philosopher Matvey Kagan, who studied in Germany with the neo-Kantians Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer.⁴

Ivanov did not belong to this circle. A symbolist poet and theorist and the host, between 1905 and 1907, of the most influential intellectual salon in prerevolutionary Russia, Ivanov was part of an older generation and had become, by the time the Nevel school was formed, a towering figure in Russian cultural life. Ivanov studied in Moscow with the medievalist Paul Vinogradov and in Berlin with the classicist Theodor Mommsen, and in 1921 he received a PhD in philology for his work on early Dionysianism. Like Kagan and the Marburg neo-Kantians, he had a deep and fruitful influence on the Nevel school. But while Kagan and the neo-Kantians contributed the dominant philosophical paradigm, Ivanov was probably the most authoritative inspiration in questions of literary criticism, classical philology, and, of perhaps greatest import for us, philosophy of history.

Indeed, for the Nevel philosophers the particularly interesting aspect of Ivanov's account of Dostoevsky was the implicit historicophilosophical frame placing Russian modernity at the threshold of what, thanks in part to Ivanov himself, came to be known as the third (or Slavonic) renaissance. Pumpyansky's brilliant retort and Bakhtin's later, even more impressive engagement largely addressed the problem of the status of Russian modernity, with Dostoevsky as its paradigmatic incarnation and the novel-tragedy as its most vivid generic paradox.

Ivanov: Anachrony and the Rebirth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of the Novel

Ivanov's essay "Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy" opens with the statement that of all the spiritual teachers of the previous century, Dostoevsky is the most alive, the most

relevant. In fact, when it comes to understanding the essential features of the modern self, Dostoevsky is still showing the way: “he brought us, who have not yet experienced the revelation about personality [личность] that the West has been experiencing for some centuries, one of the latest and last revelations about it, previously unknown to the world” (402).⁵ In other words, what the West has been grappling with for centuries—the entire problematic of individualism—a Russian puts to rest precipitously, all at once.

According to Ivanov, this revelation about personality is manifested in the unique makeup of Dostoevsky’s heroes. Distinct from the social outcasts of Russian novels as much as from the virtuous bourgeois or energetic parvenus populating narratives in the West, Dostoevsky’s protagonists are metaphysically distilled, pared down to the essence of what it means to be human. They stand at the threshold of radical choice: to be with others in God or to go alone against him. Closer to Prometheus and Lucifer than to Onegin or Rastignac, they are centers of gravity “around whom revolve not only the social order that rejects them but also the whole world that they themselves reject” (402). According to Ivanov, they are thus both more archaic and more advanced than any standard Western version of the individual, with the exception perhaps of Nietzsche’s similarly anachronistic Zarathustra.

Dostoevsky’s protagonists are more archaic, to be sure; but in what sense are they more advanced? Perhaps the clearest clues are found in Ivanov’s 1919 essay “On the Crisis of Humanism: Towards a Morphology of Modern Culture and the Psychology of Modernity.” The essay diagnoses the contemporary situation as one of thoroughgoing volatility, a historical dynamism so overwhelming that the individual cannot help feeling “spun about by a fateful storm, like a leaf torn from a tree” (165). The entire contemporary culture undergoes a period of deep skepticism about the postmedieval conception of the individual

as an entity acting freely in accordance with the dictates of conscience and the guidance of reason. A new vision of the world begins to emerge, “a new feeling of divine presence, divine fullness, and universal animation . . . , which I am not afraid to call mythological in a new sense” (167).

According to Ivanov, this coming (or returning) mythology proclaims the unity of all humankind, and its early harbinger is Dostoevsky himself, who, in his manner of staging the age-old problem of spilled blood, converges with none other than the first and greatest tragedian, Aeschylus. Much like Orestes’s submission to the trial of the Areopagus, Raskolnikov’s public confession and kissing of the earth reflect a mode of communion with the whole, a return to the bosom of humanity after a prolonged exile of individuation.⁶ Ivanov concludes:

This mystical socialization of conscience; this placing of *sobornost’* [communality] . . . on a rung higher than all beautiful “humanity” in each individual man; this view of the criminal as one who has rejected society and who is in need of reunification with the whole: this of course is not humanism.

Here, ancient memory and new presentiments converge. (174)

Tenuous as this convergence of a nineteenth-century novelist with a fifth-century tragedian might appear to be, it relies on an elaborate foundation of genre theory. At the start of the essay on Dostoevsky, Ivanov makes clear that the novel owes its status as the properly modern form to its capacity for giving voice to “the deeply revolutionary poison of individualism” (405). Beginning with the Renaissance and reaching its apogee in Dostoevsky, the novel reflects the progressive individuation of the modern self, until, at the height of its power, it begins to register its own self-overcoming. With Dostoevsky’s stories of metaphysically heightened rebellion in musty garrets and redemption in the public square, we find

ourselves at the threshold between two genres. Two epochs, two conceptions of the individual traverse a single narrative, turning it into a transmodern hybrid form, a “novel-tragedy.”

Whereas the essay on Dostoevsky contains an account of the history of the novel culminating in tragedy, in the earlier “Presentiments and Portents: The New Organic Era and the Theatre of the Future” (1906) Ivanov’s story of the dissolution of tragedy narrates the emergence of the novel. Here tragic drama is said to arise with the separation of the protagonist from the chorus of the ecstatic Dionysian throng and with the fictionalized depiction of “the suffering fate of the hero condemned to die” (102). But this is only the first in a series of divisions that the original sacrificial rite undergoes during its secularization: the division of the choral dithyramb into lyric song and dramatic performance; the separation of participants into performers and viewers, precipitated by the emergence of footlights (рампа); the crystallization of the Dionysian hero into the individuated Shakespearean character and further into the statuesque heroes of French neoclassicism. In short, the narrative is one of progressive differentiation within an original totality. The outer limit of this differentiation in the aesthetic realm is surely the novel itself, with its remote author telling the story of a solitary hero to a reclusive reader.

Ivanov’s accounts of the rise of the novel and the end of tragedy link the two genres like a Möbius strip, a one-sided figure creating the illusion of having two sides.⁷ As soon as the hero separates from the chorus, tragedy finds itself on the road to disintegration, and at some point (perhaps with Shakespeare and Cervantes), it turns out to be—to have always been—the novel. As the long modernity dawns and the novel emerges and matures into a genre of world-historical significance, tragedy fades away until, at the point of the novel’s greatest triumph, we glimpse the mythic promise of the older form once again. Tragedy then is both in the distant past and

imminent; like Dostoevsky’s hero, both pre- and transmodern, it is our archaic future.⁸

As products of the novel’s self-overcoming, Dostoevsky’s works are tragic because they are novelistic in the extreme. What allows them to perform the unlikely feat of hitching together the two genres is not just a vision of the protagonist but also a narrative shape. In the essay on Dostoevsky and the novel-tragedy, Ivanov writes:

The consciousness of the sacred realities of being was, to begin with, native to Raskolnikov; and only for a time did his vision of them become dimmed. . . . Raskolnikov even killed the old woman only to test his idealistic self-sufficiency, and through this test he became convinced that he could not be self-sufficient. The experience of love, being an experience of mystical realism . . . , helped him, in the person of Sonya, to resurrect in his soul “the visions of the early pure days.” (431)⁹

In his essay “On the Essence of Tragedy” (“О существе трагедии”), Ivanov argues that the logic of tragedy is tripartite. It starts with an original communality, which is disturbed by the self-individuating hero, who then suffers in solipsistic isolation until he comes to reaffirm the reality of humankind outside himself (240).¹⁰ This recognition of the other as a subject rather than an object is not, according to Ivanov, just an epistemological claim but a disposition of the will, a spontaneous “thou art” (“ты еси”) that serves as a vehicle for the ascent to what in another context Dostoevsky himself called the “allman” (“всечеловек” [Ivanov, Достоевский 419, 423]). The end of the novel-tragedy is thus the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* and the reunification of the hero with the chorus.

But, according to Ivanov, Dostoevsky does more than simply represent the hero’s redemption; he prophesies the coming redemption of humanity. How can a novel, carrying the “poison of individualism,” give voice to a new organic age, the age of the cho-

rus? Ivanov's answer would seem to be linked, once again, to the principle of "thou art," this time as a matter of the reading experience. He writes in "Presentiments and Portents," "[I]f before our very eyes a solitary hero battles and perishes, where can the current of Dionysian orgiastic communion between him and us lie if not in the potential or real choral consciousness and unity of feeling?" (110). The hero is thus no longer merely an object of knowledge or of disinterested aesthetic contemplation but an ethicometaphysical conduit for the reader's catharsis (Bird 216).

Understood as a mode of reception, "thou art" implies a denial of standard aesthetic objectification and allows the works to spill over into life. When it comes to Dostoevsky, the reader of the novel is no longer a novelistic reader. No longer an isolated individual following the story of a solitary hero, the reader now participates in the great tragic event, the rite of suffering individuation and ecstatic redemption, and can share in the experience of the all-human I. Just as those who took part in early Dionysian festivals experienced the separateness of the mask from the chorus and of the performers from the viewers as merely provisional and tentative, so, on the other side of history, Dostoevsky's readers are granted the choral, transaesthetic, and transmodern experience that the novel, as the form of absolute loneliness, would appear unable to provide. At one end, historical existence was beginning to ossify into a work of art; at the other, the work of art starts opening out onto historical existence.¹¹

According to this world-historical emplotment grounding the novel-tragedy thesis, the tripartite tragic plot of the Dostoevskian novel recapitulates the triadic movement of world history and of the history of genre. Here the original separation from the organic state of embeddedness in a community is followed by the solitary torment of modern individualism and culminates in the coming organic age. And on the level of the history of genre, the hero's separation from the chorus at the birth of

tragedy develops into his increasingly psychologized adventures in the European novel and ends with his final homecoming in the novel-tragedy of Dostoevsky. The novel-tragedy thesis thus depends on and, in turn, buttresses an anachronistic emplotment of Russian modernity as transmodern, as both archaic and prophetic in its world-historical orientation.

Pumpyansky: Synchrony and the Dissolution of the Tragic Form

Of all direct responses to Ivanov's vision of Dostoevsky as a great tragedian, Pumpyansky's short book *Dostoevsky and Antiquity* (Достоевский и античность [1922]) is surely the richest and most sustained. Given that Pumpyansky ultimately disagrees with Ivanov's thesis, the extent to which his understanding of the Dostoevskian hero follows that of his older contemporary is striking. For Pumpyansky, as much as for Ivanov, Dostoevsky's protagonist finds himself in solipsistic isolation. He is an idealist, a dreamer, distinct from and higher than the characters that surround him. He is, furthermore, an "aesthetic initiator," a plotter, an author (513). "In the end," writes Pumpyansky, "instead of a dream in which the chorus sees Raskolnikov's tragic fate, Raskolnikov himself sees a dream about the chorus" (515).

Pumpyansky sees the hero in Dostoevsky as a descendant of the skeptic, poet, and master plotter Hamlet, who, unlike his ancient forebear Orestes, when confronted with the demand for revenge finds himself unable to act. Having become self-conscious, the hero of what Pumpyansky calls "the Hamletian Renaissance" can no longer be sacrificed for the restoration of community but is compensated with a prodigious imagination that allows him to envision such a universal good and to plot the path to its achievement. Thus, in *Crime and Punishment*, as in *Hamlet*,

the prophetic dream (dreamed by the hero) blends together with every moment of the act

dream (dreamed by the poet himself) and poisons every moment of the aesthetic life of the plot. . . . The unstable aesthetic territory, which can be read both the way Dostoevsky wants it read and the way Raskolnikov wants it read, is the actualization on a grand scale of what Euripides envisioned when he discovered in his soul the Russian theme at the end of tragic culture. (516)

Alluding to Nietzsche's distinction between Aeschylus, who epitomizes Attic tragedy, and Euripides, who brings about its dissolution, Pumpyansky's invocation of Euripides is polemically addressed to Ivanov (516). To be sure, insofar as Dostoevsky takes up the key motifs of the tragic tradition—spilled blood and trial, suffering and redemption, sacrifice and recompense—he, too, is a tragic poet. But insofar as his hero descends from the “Hamletian Renaissance,” his works are only privately tragic, representing the last throes of a great form, the collapse of tragic consciousness in modernity (521).

According to Pumpyansky, this collapse is detectable as a deformation in the shape of the motif. Thus, unlike Orestes, Raskolnikov kills a woman who is not his mother; unlike Oedipus, Mitya only almost kills his father. And Smerdyakov, who does commit parricide, is less a son than a lackey. Instead of a tragedy about a family curse, we have a novel about familial degeneration and class struggle. “Dostoevsky's conceit,” writes Pumpyansky, “has a Dionysian source and is purely tragic; only the resistance of the hero . . . leads the great artist, against his own will, to [write] a sociobiological novel” (525). Under the pressure of the modern hero, the tragic plot fails to sustain the purity of its classical model and is updated in significant ways, adapted to the conditions of contemporary modernity.

Pumpyansky summarizes the path of European culture from classical Athens to Dostoevsky's Saint Petersburg—still classical, but barely—as “the full circle of the god Dionysus's journey” from “the Areopagus's

righteous judgment of Orestes to the wrongful conviction by the jury in [*The Brothers Karamazov*]” (526). The means for guaranteed justice have been exhausted: what was once divine retribution and reestablishment of universal balance is now a mistake, redeemable only from within the hero's—Mitya's—converted consciousness, a piece of gratuitous suffering by subjective, unauthorized choice.

Recalling the immediate intellectual context out of which Pumpyansky's essay arose helps bring out the implicit historiographical framework that supports his claims about genre. In this work as well as in others from the period of his participation in the Nevel philosophical circle, Pumpyansky relied on the distinction, aesthetic and historical, between the classical and the Romantic. The distinction, common among members of the circle, was most thoroughly elaborated in one of Bakhtin's early philosophical manuscripts, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (early to mid-1920s), in relation to two fundamental principles of character construction.

Character for Bakhtin derives from the relation between the author and hero, not in the ordinary sense of actual creator and heroic individual or protagonist but in the tactical sense of an authorial and a heroic “function” (“Author”). The hero is the part of the character responsible for his outward- and future-directed impulses and activities: his goals, his values, his manner of perceiving and interpreting the world. The author, or the authorial function in the construction of the character, is responsible for the character's external features, both spatial and temporal: his appearance, his biography, his environment in space, and his “shape” in time. Literary characters are thus products of author-hero ratios, some tending toward the authorial pole, others dominated by the heroic. Author-centric characters are vividly located in space, coherently distended in time, naively unself-conscious. The more heroic characters are less well-defined in space, do not tend to fit organically into their envi-

ronments, and are self-conscious and temporally open-ended (unpredictable, unfinished, less thoroughly “incarnated”).

Bakhtin refers to these two principles of character construction as “classical” and “Romantic,” implying that the authorial character will find its most paradigmatic instantiations in classical Greece or neoclassical France while the heroic character is most widespread during, and in the aftermath of, European Romanticism. More generally, the authorial character is associated with the archaic, the heroic with the modern. According to Bakhtin, the classical principle of character construction takes root in a social world that is “constituted by the value of one’s kin, conceived as a category of the validating being of otherness” (“Author” 178). In such a world, action is never perceived as initiated by the subject, who is instead interpolated into a sequence of events transcending his consciousness and will. The bonds of kinship determine the subject; action and responsibility depend on where one fits into the dense network of ancestral relations. The Romantic character, by contrast—and this type is familiar to us from Georg Lukács’s conception of the novelistic hero in *Theory of the Novel*—prevails in the world of uprooted subjects, free to initiate action and bear sole responsibility for it, undetermined by kin or kind.¹² Such a character is a “homeless wanderer, a sojourner, a seeker,” whose life is a quest for meaning and value. The creation of this character “is an attempt . . . to do without God, without listeners, without an author” (181).

In the light of this distinction, Pumpyansky’s and Ivanov’s readings of the Dostoevskian hero fit naturally into the category of the Romantic. Uprooted from the absolute values of kinship, capable of initiating actions and imposing forms, the protagonist is a thoroughly modern creature, no longer a product of the chorus but its creator. The author’s competitor for Pumpyansky, the titanic recluse for Ivanov, he possesses a formidable

subjectivity (the self of a god), magnetically organizing the world he inhabits around himself. But while for Ivanov this type of hero is ripe for tragic treatment,¹³ for Pumpyansky he is appropriate for such treatment only conditionally, privatively, as a subject for a specifically modern tragedy, paradigmatically described by G. W. F. Hegel as the tragedy of “knowing consciousness.”¹⁴

The generic status each critic assigns the Dostoevskian hero reflects a distinct mode of historical emplotment. While for Ivanov Dostoevsky signals a reconstitution of classicism, Pumpyansky’s narrative is one of disintegration. Thus, Pumpyansky begins with Muscovy’s early encounter with Renaissance Europe. The “natives” who “believed” the Western travelers were overtaken by Dionysian ecstasy, which formed the core of Russian tragic culture, “naively, over the heads of the Renaissance, stretching its hand toward antiquity. . . . The sincerity of this new culture led to the creation of a trusting pre-Pushkinian poetry, not falsely classical but naively classical—that is, ecstatically trusting.” But with the Renaissance, Russia received into itself the Hamletian problem: “the guests from overseas were disorganized, Hamletian types.” Thus, a critical spirit arose with Pushkin, whose credulous rapture, “like the credulous fatherhood of the murdered Hamlet,” was already mixed with the crisis of impostership, of filial suspiciousness and guardedness. According to Pumpyansky, Russian literature’s nightmare about its own death as classical begins with Pushkin. With Dostoevsky, it ends in that death: “His world-historical significance consists in the fact that, in his art, Europe is being forced to end the history of its Renaissance, of its literature” (Достоевский 508).

For Pumpyansky, then, Russian modernity is ultimately European modernity. Dostoevsky’s novels, insofar as they are tragedies at all, are modern tragedies, foreshadowing the final dissolution of classical literary culture, the decisive end of what might be termed

“the long antiquity,” its disintegration into the alternative spheres of politics (the transmodern hero as a revolutionary) and ethics (the transmodern hero as a saint).¹⁵

Politics and *ethics* are indeed Pumpyansky’s terms for the dissolution of the aesthetically representable hero in Dostoevsky. *Politics* names a major temptation for the Dostoevskian hero: to eschew tragic martyrdom within a higher external design and to reemerge in the position of the designer, delegating (as Ivan does to Smerdyakov), sacrificing (as Raskolnikov does the old pawnbroker), rearranging the world according to a better plan. In *Dostoevsky and Antiquity*, the political act is born “from the very heart of disorganized tragedy” (511). The posttragic alternative to the political in Dostoevsky is the saintly, the reign of ethical reality (нравственная реальность), most vividly presented in Prince Myshkin, whose “noncoincidence with the goals of aesthetic culture” is a function not of “the murder of the poet by his own hero” but of the fact that Myshkin’s spiritual motherland is elsewhere, in the domain of pure, unaestheticizable, ethical action (528).

Ivanov and Pumpyansky provide two divergent emplotments of Dostoevsky in world history and, correspondingly, two generic designations for his work. For Ivanov, the tragic in Dostoevsky turns out to be the proper form for staging the crisis of the modern self and resolving it in the coming chorus. This new communality would not only eliminate boundaries between solipsistic selves but also extend the frontiers of art, letting it inform life the way religious festivals organized it in ancient Greece. His Dostoevsky is a covenant of Russia’s classical future, a token of its ability to overleap the path of European modernity. For Pumpyansky, the terms are reversed. Instead of taming the open-ended Romantic hero, the classical form collapses around him, unable to contain that most distant brood of the Hamletian Renaissance. As tragedies, Dostoevsky’s works represent the last instantiation of the

form’s modern, privative avatar, synchronously positioned vis-à-vis European modernity as an era characterized by what the Nevel school referred to as “the crisis of authorship”: the crisis of authoritative meaning and form.¹⁶

Bakhtin: Polyphony as the Asynchronous Projection of the Tragic

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, Pumpyansky and Bakhtin seemed to share a set of basic philosophical positions. It does not come as a surprise, then, that when Bakhtin takes up Ivanov’s thesis early in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* (Проблемы творчества Достоевского [1929]), he opposes it.¹⁷ While accepting as insightful the idea that Dostoevsky’s realism is founded on the principle of “thou art,” Bakhtin rejects Ivanov’s conclusions about genre. He believes that the author’s recognition of the hero’s full independence presupposes that the hero is uprooted from the absolute values of kinship and is capable of initiating action, creating meanings, and imposing forms. Such a hero cannot be “encased” in “a firm and stable monologic framework” inherent to tragic drama (17). In other words, if it is true that Dostoevsky decisively says “thou art” to his hero, it cannot be true that he writes novel-tragedies:

The hero’s self-consciousness, once it becomes the dominant, breaks down the monologic unity of the work. . . . The hero becomes relatively free and independent, because everything in the author’s design that had defined him and, as it were, sentenced him . . . now no longer functions as a form for finalizing him, but as the material of his self-consciousness. (51–52)

So far, at least, Bakhtin seems to agree with his Nevel interlocutor. Disagreements arise when it comes to the way Dostoevsky deals with the self-conscious hero, who surprises and “talks back.” According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky invents a new form so that he can treat such a hero artistically. In a curious passage in *Prob-*

lems, Bakhtin emphasizes the specificity and consistency of the principles of Dostoevsky's character construction by comparing it with Racine's: "Racine's hero is all objective existence, stable and fixed, like plastic sculpture. Dostoevsky's hero is all self-consciousness. Racine's hero is an immobile and finite substance; Dostoevsky's hero is infinite function. . . . But artistically Dostoevsky's hero is just as precise as Racine's" (51).

Though Racine's statues and Dostoevsky's barely embodied self-consciousnesses are antipodes, they are equally aesthetic creations, equally separated from bare existence, from ethical or political action as much as from religious rite. Dostoevsky's form is new, but it is as rigorous as that of neoclassical tragedy. *Pace* Pumpyansky, then, the paradigmatically modern hero in Dostoevsky does not vitiate form from within but precipitates sense-making mechanisms appropriate to the new historical phenomenon of the modern self.¹⁸

If, as *Problems* suggests, Dostoevsky's novels are a response to the crisis of authorship, what are the central characteristics of this response? To begin answering this question is to notice that significant displacements have occurred since Bakhtin first outlined his aesthetics in "Author and Hero." These displacements go beyond the frequently noted emergence of Bakhtin's sympathetic interest in Dostoevsky and involve a more fundamental change in the historiographical framework for conceptualizing the crisis of authorship in modernity.¹⁹

We have already witnessed, though not sufficiently tarried with, the shift of the tragic genre's historiographical category from "classical" to "monologic." Both categories point to a confidence underlying the authorial position, a solidity and singularity of perspective that allows the hero to appear coherent, finalized, complete. Yet while classicism arises on the archaic soil of tradition, monologism is a distinctly modern form-making principle, affirming "the self-sufficiency of a single consciousness in all spheres of ideological

life" (82). Thus, in shifting from the literary-historical category of archaic, chorus-centered classicism to that of modern, subjectivist monologism, tragedy acquires a new antithesis. No longer opposed to the Romantic, it must now be conceived in relation to polyphony. In other words, we must account for the exclusion of the category of the tragic involved in characterizing Dostoevsky's art as polyphonic.

A number of commentators have suggested that the relation between polyphony and tragedy is not simply disjunctive (Igeta; Kotrelev; Bočarov). They point out that Bakhtin's analysis in *Problems* frequently echoes fundamental categories of Ivanov's poetics. In apparent harmony with his explicit acceptance of Ivanov's vision of the Dostoevskian hero, Bakhtin's use of "рампа," or "footlights"—a key term in Ivanov's aesthetics—renders vivid the hero's ability to agitate and irritate the reader "almost like . . . a living person" (237). Constitutive for *Problems*, *monologue* and *polyphony* are also found in Ivanov, who argues, in "Two Elements in Contemporary Symbolism" (1908), that choral or orchestral polyphony, in which "every participant is individual and, as it were, subjective," invokes the spirit of the organic age, while musical monologue (paradigmatically performed by the piano virtuoso, object of a Romantic cult) prevails in individualistic modernity (20).²⁰ Finally, in speaking of the chorus itself, Bakhtin defers to the keystone concept of Ivanov's aesthetics. By "chorus" both Ivanov and Bakhtin mean a communal receptacle for the solipsistic hero who has overstepped the footlights, as it were, and transcended the boundaries of his self to attain togetherness with others. S. G. Bocharov concludes, "A critical reworking of the idea of the novel-tragedy into the idea of the polyphonic novel became the main event giving birth to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*" (437).²¹

For Ivanov and Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's response to the inflated subject of modernity signals not the end of form (as it does for

Pumpyansky) but the creation of a new form: the novel-tragedy or the polyphonic novel. Both solutions presuppose a sort of communal reintegration, and it is only with regard to the nature of this reintegration that they diverge explicitly. Bakhtin writes:

In general, the reconciliation and merging of voices . . . presumes the attachment of the hero's voice to the chorus. . . . In this chorus [the cry *Hosanna!*] passes from mouth to mouth in identical tones of praise, joy and gladness. But what unfolds on the level of [Dostoevsky's] novels is not a polyphony of reconciled voices but a polyphony of battling and internally divided voices. (*Problems* 249–50)

Polyphony, then, does not achieve anything like an assimilation of the isolated modern individual into a community of the “allman” united in God. Rather, it presupposes a togetherness in isolation, an agonistic unity, a discursive struggle between a number of principled perspectives on the world. When Ivanov says that the participants in the polyphonic chorus are subjective “as it were,” he means this qualification seriously. The participants only appear individual; the discord between them is only “seeming.” In fact, they are teleologically harmonized in “communal authoritativeness” (“Two Elements” 20). In Bakhtin an individual author replaces this communal authorship, joining the polyphony of worldviews as one voice among others—no longer a vessel for the exteriorization and purveyance of communal values but a voice no less solitary and no more authoritative than the rest (*Problems* 98).

In short, the distinction between choral and polyphonic informing of the self-willed hero of modernity is crucial. The chorus in Ivanov and polyphony in Bakhtin are two very different modes of communality, and the difference between them is best grasped in relation to their historiographical horizons. We have seen how Ivanov envisions the world-historical framework for the novel-tragedy. Let us now turn to Bakhtin's historical em-

plotment of the polyphonic novel. Early in *Problems*, Bakhtin writes:

The most favorable soil [for the polyphonic novel] was moreover precisely in Russia, where capitalism set in almost catastrophically, and where it came upon an untouched multitude of diverse worlds and social groups which had not been weakened in their individual isolation, as in the West, by the gradual encroachment of capitalism. Here, in Russia, the contradictory nature of evolving social life . . . was bound to appear particularly abrupt, and at the same time, the individuality of those worlds, worlds thrown off their ideological balance and colliding with one another, was bound to be particularly full and vivid. (20)

The conception of the polyphonic novel, then, depends on the vision of a modernity that contains the monologic as a residue of classicism. Monologism, as a “classicism in one consciousness,” and polyphony, as a product of socioideological volatilization, do not form a linear historical sequence but emerge simultaneously, the two faces of a single catastrophic modernity. In other worlds, polyphony does not, in Bakhtin's historical emplotment, displace monologism the way Romanticism displaces classicism in Pumpyansky (and earlier Bakhtin) or the way the novel-tragedy fulfills the novel proper in Ivanov. Rather, the two constitute a modernity that must from now on be seen as internally noncontemporaneous.²²

Reminiscent of Leon Trotsky's observations on “combined development” in Russia as “a drawing together of the different stages of the journey . . . , an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (35), Bakhtin's historical emplotment presupposes a present permeated by traces of the past. Modernity here is not a segment of time but a boundary, a threshold on which the hero is caught in an arrested tragic movement: individuated, rootless, and modern only insofar as he is called on to find his place in the dissonant chorus of voices sounding residual visions of the world.

Being residual, these visions are no longer properly classical but monologic, based not on the support of the chorus but on subjective synthesis and thus constantly experiencing a deficit of legitimacy. In the essay “Discourse in the Novel” (1934–35), Bakhtin would argue that consequent to the “verbal-ideological decentering [that] sap[s] the roots of a mythological feeling for language,” any monologic representation is condemned to being polemically or apologetically motivated (370–75). Therefore, the very illegitimacy of residual monologic redemption grounds the hero’s resistance to form.²³ Conversely, under the conditions of combined development the modern itself is not as absolute as it might have been in a more linear employment. The unfinalizable hero is nevertheless not content to remain rootless but ceaselessly solicits absolute, redemptive truth. In fact, this historical paradox, the conflict between residual monologism and modern rootlessness, between imposter redemption and the will to entropy, percolates to the level of a single consciousness and a single utterance. The hero’s word about himself does not follow the other’s monologically finalizing word about the hero, or vice versa; instead, they “are superimposed one on the other and merge into a single [double-voiced] utterance, issuing from a single mouth” (*Problems* 209).

The tragic stakes of this conception of double-voiced discourse as the self’s rebellion against imposter-choral otherness are evident in a passage from an unpublished 1941 lecture, “The Novel as a Literary Genre” (“Роман как литературный жанр”), in which Bakhtin suggests that, along with laughter, tragedy is hostile to all forms of premature and illegitimate harmonization (Popova 463). Perhaps still more suggestive for our understanding of the tragic dimension of polyphony is a section from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) dealing with Georg Simmel’s philosophy of culture. Early in this book, which Bakhtin appears to have written with another friend from Nevel, Valentin Voloshinov, we find a

reference to Simmel’s recently formulated conception of culture as ineluctably tragic. In Simmel, tragedy characterizes the logic whereby the cultural forms generated by individuals for their self-fulfillment solidify, acquire laws of their own, and turn out to be “no more concerned with our individuality than are physical forces and their laws.” Thus, “the profound dualism of subject and object survives their synthesis [in culture]” (39). For Bakhtin and Voloshinov, Simmel is mistaken in positing a tragic rift between the needs of the psyche and objective cultural forms: “he does not know the sign as a form of reality common to both psyche and ideology.” In fact, according to them, every act of speech mediates between these two dimensions of existence. In every utterance the subjective (heroic) and the objective (authorial) come together in “dialectical synthesis” (Voloshinov, *Marxism* 40).²⁴

This brief engagement with Simmel adumbrates the tragic stakes of discourse, the possibility that conflict—between subject (the self, the soul) and its other (the cultural form)—can be played out on the level of the utterance. And while in *Marxism* the utterance is understood in its mediating capacity, neutralizing “the tragedy of culture,” in *Problems* we witness a Simmelian persistence of the rift. Instead of synthesizing (heroic) self and (authorial) other, the sign in Dostoevsky internalizes the conflict between them: “In every voice, [Dostoevsky] could hear two contending voices, in every expression, a crack” (30). The protagonist’s self-conscious word collides with the word of another, a word that does not embody “choral support” (“хоровая поддержка”) but instantiates a subjectivized imposter of the archaic otherness of a true choral language.²⁵ The hero can neither avoid nor accept the other characters or the author as capable of redeeming him to meaning.

One might say, then, that Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky as staging the tragedy of individuation on the level of every utterance. This can explain, in turn, Bakhtin’s blatant

underestimation of the feature of Dostoevsky's art that is most important to Ivanov—the plot (e.g., Bakhtin, *Problems* 28). In refusing to grant overwhelming significance to a feature of Dostoevsky's text as prominent as Raskolnikov's final conversion to the love of Sonya, Bakhtin downplays it, regards it as neither essential nor new. Such an ending might be adequate to less centrifugally structured heroes or in more chorally grounded times; it is dwarfed, however, by Dostoevsky's arch-modern hero, who inhabits a world where the best one can hope for is an imposter consummation bestowed by a monologic consciousness. In other words, the conceptions of double-voicedness and polyphony allow Bakhtin to project the tragic plot onto the atemporal plane of discourse and, in accordance with the principle of catastrophic development, to bring together in conflicted coexistence the nonsimultaneous moments of (modern, rootless) selfhood and (residual, monologic) otherness.

Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky's art in *Problems*, then, relies on a vision of Russian modernity distinct from Ivanov's and Pumpyansky's in its radically "presentist" emphasis. Bakhtin emplots Dostoevsky's work in a catastrophic, historically heterogeneous present, which neither loops back toward a future past (Ivanov) nor falls away from that past (Pumpyansky) but retains it in powerful, though ultimately delegitimated, form.²⁶ This retentive emplotment of Dostoevsky's art ensures that the dynamics of the tragic genre are projected onto the plane of discursive simultaneity. This simultaneity, in turn, transfixes the modern individual in a community of other voices monologically articulating residual final truths, which are relativized by the catastrophic advent of capitalist modernity.

Conclusion: Toward a Metahistory of the Tragic

Three distinct historicophilosophical emplotments of turn-of-the-century Russian modernity intersect in the reception history

of Dostoevsky's novels. Each of these emplotments is elaborated in an attempt to conjugate the experience of modernity—voiced by its paradigmatic form, the novel—with tragedy. Ivanov's designation of Dostoevsky's art as tragic tout court corresponds to an anachronistic emplotment, positioning it as a twist in the world-historical and genre-historical narrative of fall into individuation and redemption in community; as the new Aeschylus, Dostoevsky points the West to its own archaic future. Pumpyansky's characterization of Dostoevsky's novels as symptomatic of the "crisis of tragic consciousness" corresponds to a synchronous mode of historical emplotment, aligning Russian with Western modernity, placing Dostoevsky alongside authors like Balzac and Hugo (Достоевский 517). Finally, Bakhtin's vision of Dostoevsky as the creator of the polyphonic novel corresponds to a conception of Russian modernity as nonsynchronous, a product of "combined development."

Plot, motif, and discourse are the features of Dostoevsky's poetics most important to Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin respectively. A protonarratological focus on plot allows Ivanov to draw transhistorical parallels between Aeschylus and Dostoevsky, to read a modern Russian story as retelling the paradigmatic narrative of Attic tragedy and, beyond it, the universal story of individuation and integration. A reading of Dostoevsky as precipitating a corruption of the tragic motif allows (and is in turn enabled through) Pumpyansky's historical narrative of crisis and dissolution. Concentrating on motifs that Dostoevsky's novels share with tragedy—the spilling of blood, the trial, parricide—Pumpyansky detects a dislocation in each (Достоевский 525). Finally, Bakhtin's emphasis on Dostoevsky's skill at "[organizing and shaping] diversity in the cross-section of a given moment" bulwarks his conception of modernity as detemporalized history, his recasting of historical change as arrested dialogue; of the choral end as the polyphonic present; and of the self's

tragic struggle with communal otherness as the double-voiced utterance (*Problems* 30).

From the perspective of a certain widespread vision of modernity, the project of thinking the modern novel and tragedy together is paradoxical.²⁷ It is thus noteworthy that such a project seemed appealing and urgent to major Russian intellectuals in the 1910s and 1920s and that, at least in two of the cases we considered, it came to rely on the articulation of an implicitly exceptionalist narrative about Russian modernity and its proper forms. Diverging from Pumpyansky's synchronous emplotment, Ivanov and Bakhtin rely on the presumption of Russia's backwardness. For Ivanov, its backwardness is restorative, plotted on a circular course, while for Bakhtin it is presentist and residual, displaying the characteristics of historical unevenness and correlatively a special, though highly mediated, affinity for the tragic genre.

The argument about Bakhtin in particular has been that his conception of the polyphonic novel may be best understood as an attempt to rethink the category of the tragic for the conditions of an uneven modernity. In this account, Bakhtin reads the Dostoevskian novel as tragedy in the times of combined development, as restaging the crisis of individuation within a detemporalized, purely discursive horizon that reenacts on the level of form the asynchrony of its historiographical frame. The unfinalizability (незавершимость) of conflict, of the hero's rebellion against his others, thus emerges as isomorphic with the historiographical paradox of modernity, which, in its simultaneous backwardness and contemporaneity, no longer yields to, but still solicits, definitive, meaningful emplotment.

NOTES

I am grateful to Caryl Emerson, Hiba Hafiz, Ken Hirschkop, and Nasser Zakariya for their generous and helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. Keldysh provides an overview of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reception of Dostoevsky's work.

2. Russian critics were not the only ones to perceive the world-historical significance of Dostoevsky's art and to seek its proper generic designation. Toward the end of his *Theory of the Novel*, for example, Georg Lukács wonders whether Dostoevsky harbingers a new world of regained epic wholeness (152–53). Tihanov gives a brief overview of the “veritable Dostoevsky mania” in Europe in the 1910s (*Master* 167–68).

3. In these deliberations on genre, something more than genre is frequently at stake. For the theorists I discuss, *novel*, *tragedy*, *lyric*, and *epic* designate periodizing and discursive categories as much as they do literary forms. Thus, discussion of genre in the thought of Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin requires sensitivity to subtle shifts in categorial register. Bird analyzes some of these shifts (141–49).

4. For a sense of the intellectual atmosphere reigning in the Nevel philosophical circle, see Clark and Holquist; Brandist, Shepherd, and Tihanov.

5. This and all other unattributed translations are mine.

6. On possible slippage in Ivanov's theory between tragedy and the mystery play, see Fridman 273–79; Bird 91–94.

7. Ivanov's friend and fellow enthusiast of the third renaissance Faddei Zelinsky, a classical philologist, offers a simpler but similarly circular topology (63).

8. None of this is intended to overstate the prominence of the link in Ivanov's thought between tragedy and the novel. The novel does not seem to have preoccupied Ivanov nearly as much as theater and the lyric and does not constitute an important historico-aesthetic category for his thought as a whole. My extrapolations, then, are only meant to present Ivanov's philosophy of history through the prism of the concept of novel-tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche also posits the novel as an heir to tragedy and prophesies tragedy's triumphant return (91). For Nietzsche's influence on turn-of-the-century Russian literature and thought, see Clowes. Tamarchenko more directly juxtaposes Ivanov's and Nietzsche's views on the relation of tragedy to the novel.

9. For a reading of *Crime and Punishment* informed by the debates around the novel-tragedy thesis, see Rood 35–55.

10. Here and elsewhere my use of the masculine pronoun in references to the hero reflects the three critics' tendency to conceive of the tragic and novelistic protagonist as male.

11. Wachtel discusses the symbolist category of “life-creation” (жизнетворчество), esp. as it manifests itself in Ivanov's lifework (143–56). N. I. Nikolaev cites a curious incident: excited by the early days of the October Revolution, the poet and novelist Andrey Bely exclaimed to Ivanov, “Vyacheslav! Do you recognize them? Do you recognize them? The Soviets—they are your orchestras. The very, very same!” (291).

12. Also pertinent is Benjamin's distinction between the storyteller and the novelist (98–101).

13. Ivanov chooses Prometheus as a subject for a tragedy of his own and in it gives voice to a chorus of men and a chorus of women, both literally created by the hero (Стихотворения 31–85).

14. Predating and perhaps preparing Pumpyansky's discussion of the "Hamletian Renaissance," Hegel describes Hamlet as a hero who "tarrys with his revenge, even though the very spirit of his father reveals to him the crime by which he was murdered, and institutes still other proofs—for the reason that this revelatory spirit could also be the devil" (447).

15. In the introduction to his 1919 lecture "The Meaning of Pushkin's Poetry" ("Смысл поэзии Пушкина"), referring to the terms delineated by Bakhtin, Pumpyansky says, "The monumental symbolic [i.e., classical] world is connected with pure tragedy—and, the other way around, classical tragedy is impossible except in that world" (792n).

16. Bakhtin discusses "the crisis of authorship" in "Author and Hero" (202–03).

17. I will not address Bakhtin's alternative account of Dostoevsky's roots in antiquity, developed in the expanded, 1963 edition of the book, retitled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, since I am mainly concerned with an intellectual-historical conjuncture to which the latter text belongs only in a highly mediated way. The English version of passages from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* are drawn from the translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The corresponding original version of the text is in *Собрание сочинений в семи томах*.

18. Given Pumpyansky's insistence on the exemplarity of Racine's tragedy, this passage in Bakhtin can be read as addressed to Pumpyansky in a friendly polemic (792).

19. Bakhtin worked on the Dostoevsky book during most of the 1920s and might have completed a version by 1922. Though it is difficult to say how much the final, 1929 version of the book owes to the prototext, there is reason to believe that Bakhtin significantly changed its approach (Bočarov 443–44). Bakhtin's other early philosophical manuscript, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1918–22?), is arguably more relevant to the problematic of the Dostoevskian hero. Insofar as we are concerned with questions of genre and historiographical emplotment, however, this text is less important than the slightly later "Author and Hero."

20. Igeta discusses the use of *polyphony* and *monologue* in Ivanov and Bakhtin as well as other terminological parallels in their thinking about Dostoevsky (12).

21. Kotrelev also juxtaposes Ivanov's and Bakhtin's views on Dostoevsky, emphasizing their similarities.

22. Bloch provides an early elaboration of the principle of noncontemporaneity (37–184). For a more recent discussion, see Koselleck 166.

23. In this respect, as in some others, it is possible to detect here a convergence with the views of Lukács, whose

Theory of the Novel the Nevel philosophers were reading and even translating. Lukács writes, "Henceforth, any resurrection of the Greek world is a more or less conscious hypostasy of aesthetics into metaphysics . . . ; an attempt to forget that art is only one sphere among many, and . . . the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art and its becoming" (38).

24. Tihanov discusses Bakhtin and Voloshinov's conception of "ideological creativity" in the light of Simmel's view of culture ("Voloshinov" 607–12).

25. Voloshinov discusses "choral support" in "Слово в жизни" (71).

26. Kern usefully discusses the motif of temporal retention in the broader discourse of modernism (36–64).

27. The *locus classicus* of this disjunction between tragedy and modernity is found in Hegel. Agnes Heller summarizes Hegel's position: "The main contrast between all pre-modern worlds and the modern one is that . . . the conflicts of the modern world will not take a tragic shape; this world will not go down because of insoluble contradictions" (43).

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