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Understanding Dostoevsky: A Comparison of Russian Hermeneutic Theories

In the introduction to his 1887 *Poetics* Wilhelm Dilthey, one of the founders of modern hermeneutic theory, justified his attempt to “reestablish a healthy relationship between aesthetic thought and art” in part by referring to the “anarchy in art” brought on by an “inundation” from the East of “elemental, formless literature, music, and painting – half barbaric but filled with [the] vital emotional energy of peoples who still fight the battles of spirit in novels and twenty-foot-wide paintings. In this anarchy”, Dilthey noted, “the artist is forsaken by rules; the critic is thrown back upon his personal feeling as the only remaining standard of evaluation” (Dilthey 1985: 31). Dilthey most likely had in mind the Russian novel, specifically the novels of Dostoevsky, whom Dilthey seems to see as a vindication of art and a challenge to its scientific understanding. Dostoevsky’s works insist upon being interpreted but also resist traditional heuristic methods, stimulating new approaches to literature.

The problem of providing conceptual account of the sway Russian artists of the 19th century held over the consciousness of the age was a problem also for the Russians themselves. The development of an undeniably great literature first confronted Russians as a *fait accompli* that posed multi-faceted historical and even philosophical problems concerning how this literature had become possible and what it might mean for Russia, the world and religion. The central position of literary criticism in Russian cultural history stems not merely from the lack of formal philosophy or scholarship, as is sometimes alleged, but also from the fact that most problems and ideas confronted Russians in a new kind of literature, from which they emanated to other spheres of human endeavor, from the political to the philosophical. In other words, Russian cultural

consciousness emerged as the process of understanding and interpreting its literature. The hermeneutical task of explicating “personal feelings” (both of author and receptor) therefore becomes the central focus of culture. On the other hand, since Russian culture is in this way fundamentally hermeneutic, that is, based on a traditions of self-interpretation, the task of formulating an adequate hermeneutic theory has always enjoyed prominence. Artistic trends and schools themselves have often emerged most clearly and forcefully in the new readings they propose of central texts in the literary tradition, so that the act of reading has often been foregrounded in Russian aesthetic theory and practice.

Dostoevsky, the most obvious culprit of the “elemental, formless literature” of the East, posed a particularly broad and deep set of questions for his interpreters, whose number includes practically all thinkers of note active in Russia after 1845, from Belinsky and Mikhailovsky or Solov’ev in the last century to Nabokov and Solzhenitsyn in the twentieth. In my paper I focus on the attempts of two Russian thinkers, Viacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Bakhtin, to come to grips with the phenomenon of Dostoevsky and the revolution he engendered in the Russian cultural consciousness. I propose that Dostoevsky accorded Ivanov the occasion to formulate a coherent hermeneutic theory that not only became the basis of Ivanov’s analyses of Russian culture but also yields several interesting parallels with hermeneutic theories contemporary to us. Secondly, I suggest that an understanding of Ivanov’s achievement points up serious deficiencies in Bakhtin’s better-known interpretive method as applied to Dostoevsky. Bakhtin can be seen anew in light of his contrast to Ivanov.

The relationship between the thought of Viacheslav Ivanov and Bakhtin becomes an issue already in Bakhtin’s introduction to his 1929 book on Dostoevsky. Here Bakhtin portrays Ivanov as one of the most recent and most advanced critics who had, while making valuable points about Dostoevsky, largely missed the point. In Bakhtin’s view, the point is that the power of Dostoevsky’s fiction is not in its ideology but in its use of an entirely new artistic genre, the dialogic novel. Bakhtin praises Ivanov’s identification of Dostoevsky’s principle of “penetration” into his characters’ personalities, which Ivanov tied to the formula “thou art,” which “shifts the dominant to someone else’s personality, and in addition corresponds more closely to Dostoevsky’s *internally dialogic* approach to the represented consciousness of a character” (Bakhtin 1984: 14; Bakhtin 1994: 11). However, Bakhtin faults Ivanov for failing to address how this thematic principle “becomes the principle behind Dostoevsky’s *artistic* visualization of the world, the principle behind his artistic structuring of a

verbal whole (ibid.). This verbal whole creates free human subjects who act with utter independence from the author's own persona. Bakhtin applauds Ivanov's attention to the formal or generic definition of Dostoevsky's novels but laments Ivanov's focus on their ideological message, accusing Ivanov of monologizing the dialogue. Bakhtin claims that Ivanov's concept of the novel-tragedy cannot do justice to the new form created by Dostoevsky since it remains a hybrid of traditional forms to which dialogue was still foreign (Bakhtin 1984: 14; Bakhtin 1994: 12). Damning with faint praise, Bakhtin declares that his illustrious predecessor had "groped" at the truth which he was the first to recognize: that Dostoevsky's novels present entirely new problems and demand an entirely new approach.

Over the last fifteen years there has been a steady stream of articles on the question of Ivanov's influence on Bakhtin.¹ For the most part their authors conclude that, for whatever reason, Bakhtin understated his indebtedness to Ivanov, and that Ivanov's principle of "Thou art" and the related concept of "penetration" might well have served as the basis of Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic novel. It is understood that Bakhtin may have masked his debt to Ivanov out of political necessity and a couple of authors go so far as to defend Ivanov against Bakhtin's critique. But common to most works on Bakhtin and Ivanov is their acceptance of Bakhtin's basic frame of reference: the question is not whether Dostoevsky really wrote dialogic novels, nor whether Ivanov may have offered a better alternative, but rather to what degree Ivanov anticipated Bakhtin's unquestionably superior theory. There are understandable reasons for this. It is so difficult to argue with the concept of the dialogue that one is reluctant to take issue with Bakhtin lest one be seen to be defending the indefensible: monological totalitarianism or intolerance. Second, Bakhtin himself has accrued such a personal halo, while Ivanov's image keeps bifurcating and is easily demonized, that many seem reluctant to reverse the emphasis. This, however, is what I attempt to do in my paper.

¹ On Ivanov and Bakhtin see Jackson's comparative analyses (1993: 251-68, 272-5, 291f.; see comment in Emerson 1995: 246f., 301f.). Many works on Ivanov and Bakhtin tend to see Ivanov in Bakhtin's terms as "groping" more or less capably towards the Bakhtinian truth: Seduro 1957: 57-63; Kotrelev 1988; Jovanovic 1993. Others are more appreciative of Ivanov's non-Bakhtinian ideas but fail to explain precisely what sets Ivanov off from Bakhtin (Terras 1993; Grabar 1993). A different approach is taken by Anna Lisa Crone, who undertakes to demonstrate the internal dialogicity of Ivanov's thought by identifying the different types of discourse he uses; however Crone also takes Bakhtin's concept of dialogue as an unquestioned point of departure (Crone 1988).

My thesis is that Ivanov's mature thought, in particular his writings on Dostoevsky, yield an interpretive framework that points up serious deficiencies in Bakhtin's method, specifically the lack of any coherent explanation of how the dialogic principle is communicated to the reader or receptor of the aesthetic object. Bakhtin elucidated dialogue as the key to the plots of Dostoevsky's novels, and also as a philosophical or ethical postulate; but he never addressed (at least in his extant texts) how the formal principle of dialogue contributes to a dialogic ethic, apart from providing fictional representation. By contrast, Ivanov focused on the means by which the artist communicated the energy of his underlying vision. Further, I posit that this interpretive framework is part of Ivanov's general turn toward a kind of hermeneutic philosophy, that is, toward the view that life itself consists of acts of communication and interpretation. In this light Ivanov's ideas prove relevant to contemporary discussions of literary theory. Nowhere is this as apparent as in Ivanov's writings on Dostoevsky, when these works are read in and of their own right, and not just as a foil to Bakhtin. For the arch-romantic Ivanov this meant first and foremost the incorporation of history into his aesthetic philosophy, insofar as history is the horizon within which acts of understanding take place, and the record of previous acts of understanding. Undoubtedly, not all of Ivanov's writings fit a hermeneutic framework, but certain of his writings on aesthetics and literary history yield a clear tendency toward a view of life as a continuum of communication and interpretation.

To demonstrate this tendency, one can divide Ivanov's aesthetic thought into three stages: 1) Dionysianism and tragedy; 2) Apollonianism and theurgy; 3) personalism and historicism. During his Dionysian period Ivanov viewed art as the holy ecstasy of a mystic-cum-artist. When communicated to the receptor, art was capable of effecting personal transformation by removing the veil of illusion which (in the spirit of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) covered and distorted the world. Both the origin and the reception of artworks were therefore creative *acts*. Ivanov primarily viewed art as performance and he therefore concentrated largely on lyric poetry and theater.

In his second, Apollonian period (from about 1908), Ivanov switched his focus from the creative act to its result, the artwork as such, which he viewed as partially transfigured reality (the symbol). If the Dionysian artist required above all theomachic daring, the Apollonian artist created in obedience to the higher imperative of theurgy (in the spirit of Vladimir Solov'ev), i.e. the restoration of divine reality. If Ivanov's first set of

aesthetic constructs privileged performance over the static artwork, then this second set produced an extremely static picture of reality. In neither of his first two periods was there any possibility for art to be seen as communication among people and over time; it was something either profoundly personal and instantaneous, or else objective and eternal.

These problems were addressed by Ivanov in his essays of 1911-1914, which on aggregate provide a personalist and hermeneutic aesthetic. Essentially Ivanov merges the two foci of his previous writings in order to explain how artworks effect personal transformation, both of artist and receptor, by revealing something about transcendent reality, meaning that the artist ascends to some transcendent revelation in daring, but descends back to reality in humility. The artist must formulate his revelation in terms which have significance to other people, a significance endowed the tradition of cultural expression. When communicated, the artist's revelation does not effect some magical transfiguration of worldly reality, but engages in this tradition of meanings stimulates the transformation of this tradition. Borrowing its frame of reference from tradition, art moves people to apply what they have learned in historical labor. The artwork thus becomes a link in the chain of history, which both binds people together and liberates them from alienation and illusion. The new focus of Ivanov's thought in his historicist period was revealed to be *man*: "the symbol is living life to an endlessly lesser degree than Man, who is alive and being in truth, which he remains even when face-to-face with the First of Beings Himself, which is why it is said that he is little different than the angels" (Ivanov 2001: 86f.; 1971-1984, II: 646f.). If the first two stages of Ivanov's aesthetic thought are represented by Dionysus and Apollo, then the third is personified by Orpheus, who combined tragic daring and beautiful form in a single, human face, and whose mystical revelations gave rise to a historical tradition and community. Central to this personalist hermeneutic is Ivanov's belief in the human being as a free entity capable of an individual understanding within the context of tradition, and of independent action within the context of the historical community.

If during his early periods Ivanov viewed history itself as some sediment of transcendent revelation, then increasingly throughout the 1910s he shifted attention from the transcendent realm onto the human tradition of meanings which both interprets past events and directs future historical action by individuals. History ceases to be merely a reflection of higher reality and becomes a constitutive element in the formation of this reality. Ivanov's most detailed historical study of this period is his 1909 essay

“On the Russian Idea”, which also provides an interesting exposition of Ivanov’s hermeneutic method. Ivanov posits a “common substrate” beneath all historical reality, but stresses that this substrate is accessible only through fissures opened by manifest historical conflicts. The substrate reveals underlying unity and intimates future synthesis of the contradictory elements, but the task of achieving this synthesis is one for humans to perform within history. The most important example is Ivanov’s analysis of the divide between the intelligentsia and the people. The appearance of this social divide was the origin and engine of modern Russian history and, as such, holds the promise of revealing the inner teleology of Russian history. Ivanov seeks to identify the common “substrate” in both elements, which “inevitably means searching for a synthesis, as the third and supreme form which cancels the contradiction of the two lower forms: ‘the people’ and ‘the intelligentsia’” (Ivanov 2001: 131; 1971-1984, III: 325).

There is a palpable Hegelian rhythm to Ivanov’s historical musings. Where Ivanov diverged most markedly from Hegelian thought was in his belief that the dialectical process is the gradual embodiment of objective, eternal ideas which are fully accessible via any of their partial revelations. Tracing symbolic fissures that open up in history grants access to the “being of their idea”. Since this latter is a transcendent essence, reading history is ultimately a religious investigation:

Insofar as we are moving beyond the definition of the substrate to the development of a synthesis, we must speak of postulates and not accomplishments, of our hopes and not of historical achievements. *Only that which is, becomes*; when we reveal potential being in empirical presence, we also reveal the being of the idea that is to be fulfilled in incarnation. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the results of a psychological observation would find their alternative expression in terms of religious thought (Ivanov 2001: 131f.; 1971-1984, III: 325).

Although such a theologization of history may seem to defeat the purpose of comprehending historical events, it must be noted that Ivanov begins with manifest facts (even if in artistic expression) and proceeds through them to an underlying, transcendent reality. If this is a religious hermeneutic, it is also existential in its method and in its orientation toward a comprehension of history as a living process embodied in concrete people and propelled by individual decisions. Religion itself must also be approached as a series of historical expressions, grounded in a foundational event and directed to discrete actions by individuals.

Interpreting Ivanov’s historical writings as a hermeneutic philosophy allows one to ascertain a close relationship between history and aesthetics

in his thought. Historical, social, political, or psychological events occur when some divide opens a symbolic aperture onto the eternal realm that effects the passage of divine ideas into the world, much as a symbolic work of art was seen to do in his theurgical theory of aesthetics.² This theory has potential shortcomings inasmuch as, in Ivanov's aesthetics, it implies the passivity of all worldly being before a static, impersonal higher entity. As a literary hermeneutic, this approach is liable to interpret all texts as manifestations of the same eternal ideas, obliterating the historical *process* and the human *personality* as such, turning everything into an allegory for some ideology.³ This would appear to be the thrust of Bakhtin's criticism of Ivanov's writings on Dostoevsky.

In his application of this hermeneutic to Dostoevsky's works, as in his aesthetics, Ivanov overcomes the problem of allegory by discovering within the artistic symbol a revelation concerning humanity as a free and moral entity, which precludes the merely passive acceptance of divine truth. The artist's revelation is granted without coercion. If man's archetype is Christ, then man cannot be a mere "type" of a higher idea, but must be able to direct his own life in freedom and responsibility, like Christ. In "On the Limits of Art" Ivanov formulated this in the following way:

[T]he symbol is true life to an endlessly lesser degree than Man, who is truly alive and being [...]. The symbol, by contrast, is mediating and mediated life, not a form that contains, but a form through which reality flows. By turns, reality flares up and is extinguished in it. It is the medium of epiphanies which stream through it. And the liberation of matter that is achieved by art is only a symbolic liberation (Ivanov 2001: 86f.; 1971-1984, II: 646f.).

The eternal realm needs human life and human history in order to become manifest. By the time of his third stage of development in the 1910s, Ivanov's religious hermeneutic therefore gains a potential foothold in historical-existential situations; as a method of reading, it becomes sensitive to the creative experience of both author and reader. The central revelation answers historical needs and is applied to historical tasks.

² As is so often the case, the transcendent realm could be understood as some utterly detached sphere or as the Earth-World Soul. In "The Russian Idea" Ivanov refers both to the idea that historical events "cast their shadows before them as they approach the earth" (attributed to Mommsen) and the image of "the subconscious sphere of the collective soul, where the roots of events are hidden" (Ivanov 2001: 129, 134; 1971-1984, III: 322, 328).

³ Wellek accuses Ivanov of "arbitrary allegorizing" Dostoevsky (1986: 233). See Terras 1993 for an opposing view.

The evolution of Ivanov's general standpoint is reflected in his changing view of Dostoevsky. Ivanov's early comments on Dostoevsky all remained within a typological scheme, with characters representing aspects of Ivanov's own ideology. As such they illustrate the terrible conflation of aesthetics and reality in Ivanov's early thought: literary personages represent ideological stances and are taken as real indications of the advent of an aesthetic utopia. For example, Zosima's preaching is taken as an actual prophecy of a new organic age, and no account is given of its role in a work of fiction. Ivanov's conception of Dostoevsky remained quite stable within these parameters until his 1911 essay "Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy", which will form the basis of our analysis, since his subsequent essays are largely developments of thoughts presented here.⁴ Ivanov now integrates Dostoevsky's roles as thinker and artist, linking the social or historical relevance of Dostoevsky's types to their genesis and expression in Dostoevsky's artistic method. In fact, the dual nature of the literary works (as novel-tragedies or "epic-tragedies" [1971-1984, IV: 437]) is rooted precisely in the interaction of objective revelation and individual artistic experience. Following his symbolic hermeneutic, Ivanov concentrates on the *event* of creation as an aperture onto transcendent realms, which causes the creation of a new, epic reality whose contradictions that point back to the foundational event for their resolution. The tragic nature of this founding event also opens up the receptor to this reality and stimulates his activity in the ethical realm. This hermeneutic method allows Ivanov to formulate an influential understanding of Dostoevsky's art and to develop his own understanding of the history and destiny of the Russia Dostoevsky depicted.

The result of Dostoevsky's tragic creative process is the inculcation of *catharsis* in his readers.

Dostoevsky's cruel (for it is tragic to the final point) Muse powerfully raises terror and tortuous compassion from the depths of our souls, but it always conducts us to cleansing, thereby granting a seal of the authenticity of its artistic effect [...]. We are familiar with [catharsis] if we have ever returned home after some solemn and collective (*соборный*) shock with the clear awareness [...] that it was not in vain that torrents of tears just flowed from our eyes and that our wounded heart contracted in spasms, [...] that some indelible event has taken place within us, that henceforth we have become in some way different, that life has become in some way different for all eternity, and that some imperceptible, but gladdening affirmation of meaning and value, if not of the world and God

⁴ Parts of "Dostoevsky's Novel-Tragedies" were included in *Freedom and the Tragic Life*. On the history of Ivanov's essays on Dostoevsky see Jackson 1989: vii-viii n.1; Jackson 1993: 330 n.1.

then of man and his aspirations (*нопыѳ*), has lit up as a star in our [...] soul. The relief and fortification that Dostoevsky grants our souls is just so creatively strong and transformingly cathartic [...] (1971-1984, IV: 411f.).

Catharsis grips and affects Dostoevsky's readers, leading them to self-knowledge and orienting their inner being towards God. Catharsis is therefore not only an aesthetic affect, but the engine of positive historical action (cf. Szilárd 1988). If one refers back to Aristotle's discussion of tragedy, one notes that, in addition to viewing catharsis as its aim (*Poetics* 1449 b), Ivanov also follows Aristotle in privileging plot over character:

We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the Plot; and that the Characters come second [...] We maintain that Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents (*Poetics* 1450 ab).

It may be noted that Ivanov's focus on the structure of the action and on its revelatory power contrasts with Bakhtin's focus on Dostoevsky's characters. By ignoring what Aristotle called Plot, Bakhtin was unable to explain how the characters exert influence on the receptor.

In Ivanov's conception, it was Dostoevsky's unique combination of lyrical-tragic vision and realist technique that allowed him, like Pushkin, to have an effect on the world he described in his works:

[N]ever for a minute does the poet abandon the techniques of a matter-of-fact report and investigation. In this way he achieves the illusion of extraordinary realistic faithfulness to life, of absolute authenticity. With this illusion he covers up the purely poetic, grandiose contingency (*условность*) of the world he creates, which is not the same as the real world in our everyday perception, but which so completely corresponds to it [...] that reality itself has, as it were, rushed to respond to this Columbus of the human heart by discovering the phenomena he foresaw and, as it were, foreordained, but which had hitherto been concealed beyond the horizon (1971-1984, IV: 415).

Catharsis communicates the symbolic truth of Dostoevsky's art as the reader's own, and impels the reader to realize it in his or her own life.

One can abstract out of these observations a particular hermeneutic method, based on the ability of a text to communicate not only the expression of the author, but also the author's very experience in creating the work. Reading the work thereby becomes not only an act of understanding, but an event in the reader's life. The moral imperative of the work is returned upon the reader himself. Specifically, Ivanov ties this to his principle of "Thou art": accepting the text, the reader affirms the being of the author and his or her characters, thereby opening himself up to being in general and accepting an existential charge into his soul.

The source of this existential change lies in the author's own experiences of transcendent vivification. All of Dostoevsky's revelations were "only attempts to communicate to the world [...] what was once revealed to him in a catastrophic inner experience" (1971-1984, IV: 423). Specifically Ivanov mentions the "death" Dostoevsky experienced during his mock execution, and his rebirth in the labor camp, which "were a kind of swaddling that confined the newborn man and guarded the outer depersonalization that he needed in order to be reborn in full" (*op.cit.*, IV: 422).⁵ Dostoevsky remained a twofold man, inwardly spiritual yet outwardly prone to fall:

Allowing the outer man to continue living within him as it pleased, <Dostoevsky> devoted himself to the multiplication of his doubles under the multifaceted masks of his *I*, which now was no longer tied to any particular face, but was all-faceted (*всевеликое*), all-human (*op.cit.*, IV: 423).

If Dostoevsky did not become a saint, Ivanov writes, this was because his calling was to be a "prophetic artist" (*ibid.*), expressing the unity of the world in the creative word: "from this time on all of Dostoevsky's art was dictated by his inner man, who had been born spiritually and transgressed the limit. In his worldview the transcendent has become immanent to us, while a certain part of the immanent has become transcendent" (*op.cit.*, IV: 422f.). In terms familiar from Ivanov's aesthetic, Dostoevsky achieved both an ascent to transcendent revelation and a descent to transcendental revelation and a descent back down to earth – to communicate the revelation to others. This latter ability is called by Ivanov "penetration" into others' personalities.

Inner rebirth and the ability to penetrate into others' personalities "taught Dostoevsky to distinguish between man's empirical and metaphysical, noetic (*умопостижимый*) character" (*op.cit.*, IV: 423).

The characters of the inner, real drama are people, but not as personalities that are revealed empirically in outward action, or that are understood psychologically in the secret recesses of emotional life, but as spiritual personalities that are contemplated in their most profound, noetic depths, where they touch upon the living forces of other worlds (*op.cit.*, IV: 438).

Basing himself on the spiritual man, Dostoevsky was able to discern the metaphysical basis of human personalities, which in turn illuminates their

⁵ Ghidini astutely recognizes a parallel between Ivanov's discussion of Dostoevsky's transforming experience and his own life with Lidia Dmitrievna, although it might seem more promising to view her death (and not their meeting) as such a transforming event for Ivanov (1990: 178; 1993: 198).

social nature. By affirming the actual being of each of his characters, Dostoevsky not only created authentic types, but made each one the bearer of absolute value, of being, and of God:

His penetration into another *I*, his experiencing of another *I* as an original, boundless, and autonomous world contained within it a postulate of God as a reality more real than all of these absolutely real essences [...]. And the same penetration into another's *I*, as an act of love, [...] contained a postulate of Christ, who achieves the redemptive triumph over the law of separation and the curse of solitude, over the world that lies in sin and in death (*op.cit.*, IV: 420f.).

Each of the human types Dostoevsky depicted can be read as a revelation of God; and each time a reader accepts the type, he accepts something greater.

The aesthetic effect of Dostoevsky's types on the reader, Ivanov claims, is not merely abstract or moral. By bringing all of these individual types into the light of day, or into the gloom of the Petersburg fog, Dostoevsky became "the great initiator and predeterminer of our cultural complexity" (*op.cit.*, IV: 402). "Unfathomed but who fathomed us", Dostoevsky is compared to both the Sphinx and the serpent: "thus he made us gods who know evil and good, leaving us, free to choose either, at the crossroads" (*op.cit.*, IV: 402f.). In the terms of Ivanov's hermeneutic, the reader ascends through the characters' empirical determinations to their metaphysical substratum. Here there are no discursive truths to be assimilated, rather the reader *experiences* Dostoevsky's characters' sufferings, their passion, as *compassion*.

The stages of the hermeneutic can be summed up in the following scheme:

- 1) the author's tragedy of creation;
- 2) his cathartic symbolization of this experience;
- 3) the apprehension of the symbolic creation by the reader;
- 4) cathartic participation in the creative tragedy.

One might add a fifth stage, that of the reader's transformation under the influence of the work. Catharsis remains a potential force within the work whose realization depends on the work's reception (Szilárd 1988: 154).⁶

⁶ Ghidini cites Ivanov's 1947 article "Forma formans e forma formata" to make a similar point. However in the context of this essay it is clear that the "creative act" that is communicated is cosmic energy, and not the artist's own creative experience, tragic or otherwise. In addition, Ol'ga Deschartes' Russian translation, which accompanies the Italian text in Ivanov's *Collected Works* (1971-1984, III: 674-82, the passage in question is on 680f.) obscures Ivanov's thoughts to the point of distorting them.

By formalizing Ivanov's hermeneutic in this manner one can indicate parallels and differences between Ivanov and contemporary hermeneuticians, particularly Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss.⁷ Ivanov's understanding of history is consonant with Gadamer's idea of the fusion of the existential-historical horizons of the artist and reader / viewer in the aesthetic act. The finite context of this fusion of horizons creates "effective history":

The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a "methodological" circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding (Gadamer 1997: 293).

Having established the intimate connection between tradition and interpretation, Gadamer goes on to stress the importance of "application", i.e. of applying the text "to the interpreter's present situation" (*op.cit.*: 308). Another way of putting this is that *sophia* (wisdom) must be reunited with *phronesis* (practical, moral understanding), that word become deed (*op.cit.*: 20).

Jauss, a representative of "reader-response criticism", presents a more descriptive account consisting of three stages: *poiesis* (creation), *aesthesis* (reception), and *catharsis*. The latter he defines as "the practical employment of the arts for the social functions of conveying, inaugurating, and justifying norms of action", giving the viewer "aesthetic freedom of judgment by affording him self-enjoyment through the enjoyment of what is other" (1982: 35). Admittedly, the intellectual contexts in which Gadamer and Jauss present their respective exhortations to attending to

⁷ See Szilárd's and Ghidini's groundbreaking discussions of Ivanov's hermeneutics (Szilárd 1993: esp. 177-80; Ghidini 1990, 1993). Szilárd ties Ivanov's hermeneutic to the general European tradition (from Dilthey) and to Bakhtin. Ghidini, who also adduces similarities to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, points up the metaphysical dimensions of Ivanov's hermeneutic: "The history of hermeneutics can be defined as the history of the deepening and extension of the concept of interpretation. A major difference between the authors of the 19th century hermeneutic tradition and that of our century is that, if for the former interpretation was an instrument for use in the cognitive process [...], for the latter it has assumed ontological value and properties, composing a part of man" (1990: 169f., 1993: 193). Ghidini cites Ivanov's statement that "Symbolism understood only as a method is dangerous" (1971-1984, II: 568) and compares Ivanov's ontologically referential symbol to Jaspers' and Heidegger's ideas of truth (1990: 170, 1993: 194). For a different perspective on the parallels between Ivanov and Heidegger see Bird 1999.

the reader / viewer's application of aesthetic experience are quite far from Ivanov's religious cosmos. Without belaboring the point, the parallel at least serves to legitimize Ivanov's method as a hermeneutic.

If one now recalls Bakhtin's criticism of Ivanov, one can see how far off the mark he was. Bakhtin sees Ivanov as beginning with the writer's "worldview" and proceeding directly to the "content" of the artwork, bypassing its "form". As shown by Sadayoshi Igeta, Bakhtin's understanding of Ivanov was strongly influenced by Lev Pumpianskii's 1922 pamphlet *Dostoevsky and Antiquity* («Достоевский и античность»; Igeta 1988; cf. Pumpianskii 2000: 754-8). Pumpianskii's argument is complex and quite convoluted, but a couple of its strands are of direct interest to the topic at hand. First, Pumpianskii is careful to stress that Ivanov's conception of Dostoevsky's novels as "novel-tragedies" was mistaken. He also claims that Ivanov caused "the shift of the center of Russian culture from Pushkin to Dostoevsky", which he calls "the main error of Russian society" (Pumpianskii 2000: 507). This line of argument remains undeveloped, however. Instead Pumpianskii focuses on the way in which Russian culture imbibed "renaissance culture" but then proceeded to turn it on its head in its own literary tradition. Specifically, Russian literature took its lead from Shakespeare, whose Hamlet refuses to remain a literary character in a tragedy and revolts against the author's efforts to contain him in an artwork: "Prince Hamlet himself becomes the artist of his own fate and, breaking through the fictional circle of his role, desires actually (that is, politically) to create for himself an acceptable fate" (*op.cit.*: 511). So, according to Pumpianskii, did Dostoevsky's works sound the death knell for literature as such. Dostoevsky's fictions exhibit an imperative to life, to independent existence beyond the page, breaking down the walls of the work. "The poet's aesthetic dream is ready to turn into the protagonist's dream; the dying and suffering protagonist is ready to turn into a murderer and inflictor of suffering" (*op.cit.*: 508).

Pumpianskii suggests that this resistance to fiction makes Dostoevsky's works incompatible with tragedy, but in fact it is not too distant from the effect which Ivanov had attributed to catharsis: both lead the reader away from fiction to his or her own situations in life. For that matter, it is not too far from Pumpianskii's view of Dostoevsky as the end of "fiction" to Bakhtin's canonization of Dostoevsky as the founder of a new kind of novel that endows its characters with existential independence. Both Pumpianskii and Bakhtin play down their indebtedness to Ivanov, most likely because they themselves were not conscious of its degree. Both, after all, fail to recognize as Ivanov's key idea that the polyphonic

nature of Dostoevsky's novels is rooted in the cathartic communication of an existential charge to the reader, in the inclusion of the reader into the very fabric of the work.

My analysis shows how Pumpianskii and Bakhtin missed Ivanov's main point. The denotation "novel-tragedy" is by no means capitulation in the face of something qualitatively new, nor is it the reduction of Dostoevsky's novels to their ideological content. Instead it refers to the narrative form (epic novel) and cathartic method (tragedy). The tragic element of Dostoevsky's novels for Ivanov denotes less their genre than their method of creation and reception, i.e. it refers less to artistic structure than to the hermeneutic method used by Ivanov. Far from being merely an imperfect anticipation of Bakhtin's theory, Ivanov's view of Dostoevsky points to areas of deficiency in the Bakhtin's method. Bakhtin read Dostoevsky's novels less as living participants in a cultural-spiritual continuum than as "artistic models of the world" (Bakhtin 1996: 369ff). Bakhtin further monologizes these artistic structures by imposing his predetermined interpretation on each work that leaves little room for reader participation. The reader is either a passive observer called to make the proper conclusions from the depicted world, or else a participant in the novel's dialogue: in the latter case the reader can hope only to achieve a more precise formulation of his or her own point of view, but not to learn anything in particular from or through Dostoevsky, apart from the desirability of dialogue in general.⁸ According to Ivanov's allegedly "monological" interpretation, Dostoevsky grants knowledge of final realities, but only through a cathartic event that brings the reader into direct participation with what was revealed to Dostoevsky. The novel makes Dostoevsky's dialogic creativity, which penetrates into others' selves, present to the reader as an event in his or her life. The actual application of this, the active interpretation in the reader's life, remains open and free.

The disagreement between Ivanov and Bakhtin can be illustrated by the breakdown of types in *The Demons*. According to Bakhtin, each of Dostoevsky's characters appears in his or her respective novel as the personification of a point of view. The points of view and the people who express them achieve expression and definition only in dialogue with each other. In essence, however, the conflicting ideologies and personalities are given once and for all: they can only realize themselves, but never

⁸ Bakhtin's reduction of all texts to proofs of his pluralistic philosophy is usually ignored and even perpetuated by works about Bakhtin; see, for example, Bialostosky 1989. Here, instead of comparing hermeneutic methods, the author compares their ideological accessories.

change. Ivanov concurs with Bakhtin that an eternal *type* needs interpersonal contact to be expressed; people need to be “read” by others in order to attain being. Ivanov goes further by attempting to read a more basic level of reality through the ideological conflict between types which he sees as stemming from their isolated and pre-determined content. The crisis of limited types leads to an experience of catharsis, which opens the reader up to a reality transcendent to the novel itself. For Bakhtin the dark world of *The Demons* can communicate only a negative lesson concerning the consequences of personal isolation (e.g. Bakhtin 1984: 96, 244ff.). Ivanov sees *The Demons* as communicating to the reader an ethical and even ontological imperative: the characters point to some metaphysical basis that would provide the common ground on which dialogue might become possible. Ivanov’s readiness to explore the metaphysical basis of the novel and to tie it to Dostoevsky’s own stated belief in a “Russian idea” and “new word” highlights Bakhtin’s reluctance to contemplate the larger teleology of Dostoevsky’s works and their effect on the reader. Indeed, in the case of *The Demons*, the almost total collapse of humanity and dialogue leaves one with little else to contemplate.

Robert Louis Jackson has noted that it was a mighty task for Dostoevsky “to reconcile his classical higher aesthetic with the demands of a realism that essentially called for a new aesthetic of disfiguration” (1978: 113). So, in Ivanov’s view, was it Dostoevsky’s task to present, against a background of human types, a new man capable of refiguring the types he discerned in life. The resolution of this dilemma lies in the way Dostoevsky reformed modern social types as the tragic source of a new reality. In the end, for Ivanov, it is irrelevant whether one can name the character that achieved this goal: the task has been posed in Dostoevsky’s works, and Ivanov challenges Dostoevsky’s readers to take it up by reading Dostoevsky and applying this artistic energy in their own lives. In conclusion, Ivanov’s essays on Dostoevsky yield a coherent hermeneutic theory based on the artist’s experience of tragedy and the communication of the resulting catharsis through the concrete work. This highlights two major shortcomings in Bakhtin’s interpretive method. First, that Bakhtin fails to explain how the complex relationship between author and character is communicated to the reader. Second, that this gap between the work and the reader results in Bakhtin’s literary analyses becoming philosophical tracts. As Tzvetan Todorov observed at the conclusion his book on Bakhtin:

Dostoevsky has ceased standing as the object of the study undertaken by Bakhtin to pass to the very side of the subject: he is the one who has taught Bakhtin

his new position, and all the theoretical and practical work that Bakhtin will dedicate himself to from this moment onward, appears henceforth as merely the application and interpretation of Dostoevsky's teaching" (1984: 107).

This fact is Dostoevsky's usual position in Russian culture, as the source of a revelation that subsequent readers are compelled to apply in an ever-changing historical context. The mechanism by which Dostoevsky (and, indeed, other artists as well) is able to do this was described by Viacheslav Ivanov in works which themselves participate in this tradition and which still have much to teach.

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