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## DOSTOEVSKI AND CERVANTES

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**T**he first question facing the critic who undertakes to bring together two such towering writers as Dostoevski and Cervantes is one of rationale. Why do so at all? As everyone knows there is no accounting for genius. Moreover, if one attempts more modestly to trace some of the trails that lead at least into the foothills of these unassailable peaks, one discovers, as regards Dostoevski, that others are much more strikingly blazed than the Cervantine one. It is Balzac, Dickens and Gogol who are foregrounded in Donald Fanger's definitive *Dostoyevsky and Romantic Realism*; Cervantes figures only in passing. Similarly sparse, though telling, are the references to Cervantes in the text of Konstantin Mochulsky's *Dostoyevsky: His Life and Works*. The Appendix covering "Dostoyevsky's Plans and Rough Drafts" does show, nevertheless, that he had *Don Quixote* very much in mind for his unwritten "Tale of Captain Kartuzov." Ludmila Turkevich, in *Cervantes in Russia*, gives a reasonable rundown of the Russian author's principal reflections, critical and topical, on Cervantes and Don Quixote but her comments are often disappointingly imprecise<sup>1</sup>. She leaves quite open the question of what drew Dostoevski to the *Quixote* in the first place and what effect his reading of the novel had on the shaping of his own art. I of course do not pretend to answer such questions definitively.

The justification for posing the question at all lies in several unequivocal avowals by Dostoevski of his reverence for Cervantes. As late as 1876, that is, between the publication in 1869 of *The Idiot*, the work on which I shall concentrate, and the composition of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which appeared shortly before Dostoevski died in January 1881, we find him, in one of the installments of his *Diary of a Writer*, asking: "Who was it — Heine, was it not?"

— who recounted how, as a boy, he burst into tears when, reading *Don Quixote*, he reached the place where the hero was conquered by the despicable barber-surgeon (*sic*) *Samson Carrasco*. In the whole world there is no deeper, no mightier literary work. This is, so far, the last and greatest expression of human thought; this is the bitterest irony which man has been capable of conceiving” (*Diary I*, 260). Years before he had discoursed at length on the *Quixote* in an early installment of the *Diary*, calling it “the grandest and saddest book conceived by the genius of man” and recommending that it be taken along to the Last Judgment as a brief for humankind (II, 837). ‘Greatest,’ ‘grandest,’ ‘deepest,’ ‘saddest’: the words strike us, for the hyperbole, as deeply felt. Can we probe beyond the evident divergences between the two writers to the roots of the affinity with Cervantes so strongly felt by Dostoevski?

The dissimilarities are there for all to see. To mention only a few: *Don Quixote* is a dialogic novel; its lifestream, for all Cervantes’ attempts at diversion, is the endlessly resumed conversational interaction between Don Quixote and Sancho, which might be described as one of theme and geometrically incremental variations. Dostoevski’s novels, to use Bakhtin’s term, are polyphonic: multivoiced and full of wide-ranging and often clashing resonances. There are no absolutely dominant voices. Cervantes’ genius, when it finally blossomed in his sixth decade, proved to be comic. Dostoevski’s major works are properly termed novel-tragedies. The poetry of *Don Quixote* is that of the open road. Dostoevski’s novels, with the partial exception of *The Brothers Karamazov*, discover the poetry of the modern city, as those of Dickens and Balzac had been doing. Dostoevski thought out his novelistic structures, though not necessarily at the outset, through draft after draft. He conceived his characters, though he did not handle them, as embodiments of ideas and social forces. Cervantes seems to have happened upon the design and the dynamics of the *Quixote* almost by accident. Even though we lack in his case the voluminous literary evidence Dostoevski has left in his notebooks and correspondence and are forced to pounce upon every casual remark as on some rare nugget, it is hard to imagine Cervantes pondering and rejecting, sketching and crossing out, as we so often find Dostoevski.

Despite these and other observable contrasts, there was never a clearer instance of how *les extrêmes se touchent* — or, as the pretentious Westernizing Ippolit puts it in *The Idiot*, *les extrémités*. The two writers transcend methodological differences and come together on a plane where monody and polyphony, country and town, improvising one’s way and plotting it in advance, comic and tragic, cease to be central considerations. If Cervantes, as he himself puts it, was taught “*paciencia en las adversidades*” by the unlucky chance of his five-year captivity in Algiers, Dostoevski returned from his ten years of imprisonment and exile in Siberia transformed in outlook on God and man. His response to the *Quixote* is that of one whose

spirit has been tempered, not broken, by adversity, who has lost his illusions but not his ideals. He embraces the *Quixote* and its eponymous protagonist with all the compassionate fervor of the Russian and German Romantics — Pushkin and Gogol, Schiller and Heine. One should add that Turgenev's essay on Don Quixote and Hamlet had appeared just after Dostoevski's return to St. Petersburg (1860). Turgenev's vision of the two as human exemplars, the man of action and the man of reflection, the comic and the tragic hero, surely helped orient Dostoevski toward Cervantes. Still, it would be anachronistic, to say the least, to see in Dostoevski a **quijotista** as against a **cervantista**; he invariably transcends such facile distinctions. As a fellow professional, Dostoevski sees Cervantes as a trail-blazing man of letters like himself and marvels at the answers Cervantes found to the challenges both faced.<sup>2</sup>

Let us now look bifocally, so to speak, at Don Quixote, the self-styled knight-errant who, having “lost his judgment,” as Cervantes says (though not his uncommonly high IQ), has given himself over to the active service of mankind; and at Prince Myshkin — “Mousekin” — that equally idealistic but strikingly passive hero of *The Idiot*. When struggling with the composition of this work in January 1868, Dostoevski writes to a niece: “The main thought of the novel is to depict a **positively beautiful individual**.”<sup>3</sup> Dostoevski goes on to ponder the difficulty of his task: no one except Christ has ever embodied this ideal on earth and Christ's incarnation is a pure miracle. And he adds: “Of the beautiful characters in Christian literature the most finished is Don Quixote, but he is beautiful simply because at the same time he is also comic... Compassion appears toward the beautiful that is also mocked and does not know its own value... This arousing of compassion is the secret of humor.”<sup>4</sup>

I will return to the implications of this concept of the comic. For now it suffices to note that, like Don Quixote, Myshkin is repeatedly a laughing-stock for the worldly people, the cynics and evildoers of St. Petersburg into whose company he stumbles and among whom he remains throughout the novel. Like Don Quixote he fails to see through their mockery but unlike Don Quixote he does not fly off the handle but merely turns the other cheek and joins in the laughter uncomprehendingly. There is no question that as the raillery goes on he wins the reader's compassion, as he also wins over those characters in the novel sufficiently disinterested to be receptive — beyond amusement, exasperation, and anger — to the strange fascination he exerts. In the *Quixote* this capacity for reciprocation is centered in Don Quixote's constant interlocutor, Sancho Panza, and leads to the phenomenon that twentieth-century critics have called the quixotization of Sancho. But, less evidently, it affects other interlocutors of Don Quixote as well, from the camp-followers La Molinera and La Tolosa at the beginning (I, 2) to those who weep at his bedside at the end (II, 74). In the second *Quixote* Basilio

of Camacho's wedding feast, whom Don Quixote has championed, and Basilio's friends, students and *bachilleres* all, react to him more perceptively than most. They take him along to their village where, in all seriousness, "they extolled his bravery as much as his sharpness of mind, holding him to be a Cid in arms and a Cicero in eloquence" (II, 22). But of course the subtlest judgment is the one given a little before by Don Diego de Miranda — in the author's words "a discerning (*discreto*) gentleman of La Mancha".<sup>5</sup> After watching Don Quixote in action and listening to his eloquent words, Don Diego concludes that Don Quixote is "sane in a mad way and mad with a tendency toward sanity" (II, 17). In a word, Don Quixote remains a puzzle right down to the end; the paradoxes, inconsistencies, and contradictions of his nature are never resolved, or rather can only be transcended ethically: he will die as Alonso Quijano el Bueno.

That style, "the Good," might well go into Russian as 'prekrasni'. We come around again to the "positively beautiful individual" whom Dostoevski saw in Don Quixote and embodied in Prince Myshkin. Unlike Cervantes, who only gradually realized and brought out the ethical potentialities of his protagonist, Dostoevski began by conceiving Myshkin as positively Christ-like. Quite late in Cervantes' novel, the author can still tell the reader that "Don Quixote's doings are to be greeted either with amazement or with laughter" (II, 44), a formula that Cervantes had long since exceeded in practice. Like his Romantic confrères Dostoevski saw through the inadequacy of such either-or formulations. Myshkin, in addition to being laughed at continually, will be branded stupid, idiotic, a pure child, naïve, but just as surely he will from the start cast a spell on those about him, even as they continue to mock, delude, or dismiss him. The most notable instances of his spellbinding are of course Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaia Yepanchin, who fall in love with him. It is simplistic to see these two as a splitting-apart of Aldonza-Dulcinea, as has been done in the criticism. Closer to the mark would be to see Nastasya Filippovna as a "damsel in distress." Like Don Quixote with the camp-followers, who laugh at being called "damsels" (I, 2), Myshkin is blind to her "fallen" status. Even before he meets her at her *soirée*, he is in love with her portrait. Again like Don Quixote, who overcomes the raucous disparagements of Sancho in Sierra Morena by telling him: "... It is enough for me to think and believe that that good Aldonza Lorenzo is beautiful and virtuous... to assume that she is the most exalted princess in the world... and to sum up... I paint her in my imagination the way I want her to be, both in beauty and in high estate" (I, 25), Myshkin sees what amounts to a Dulcinea of his own in Nastasya Filippovna. He does the same thing with Aglaia. This despite their frequently hellish treatment of him as they struggle (unawares) against their feelings. Since Myshkin's love, like Don Quixote's, is sexless, it is perfectly possible for him at the same time to reciprocate the love of both. The entanglements to which this

leads have of course no equivalent in the *Quixote*. It never occurred to Cervantes to have anyone fall in love with Don Quixote — if I may presume to read his mind.

The *Quixote*, both materially as a book and in the characters' reference to Myshkin as a Don Quixote or a knight-errant, keeps turning up throughout *The Idiot*. The first time is when Aglaia notices the name of the book in which she has earlier thrust Myshkin's "incoherent" letter (the adjective is the narrator's): "... It was only a week later that she happened to discover what the book was. It was *Don Quixote de La Mancha*. Aglaia burst out laughing — what at, no one knew" (207). At this stage her inadvertent association of Myshkin with Don Quixote evidently amuses her greatly. The book and the character are simply a joke in her eyes. All the same, Myshkin's letter has made her blush. Laughter in Dostoevski as in Cervantes is by no means always a purely laughing matter.

The *Quixote* continues to act as a touchstone for the state of her feelings. After the Prince's return to St. Petersburg from six months in Moscow, he follows the Yepanchins to nearby Pavlovsk, where they are summering. When they come to see him, it emerges in the conversation that during the Prince's absence in Moscow, the Yepanchin sisters have coined a private name for him: "the poor knight" (264). "A month ago," Kolya Ivogin teasingly reminds Aglaia, "you were looking through *Don Quixote* and you used those very words about there being nothing better than the 'poor knight'..." It turns out that the allusion is at the same time to the subject of a Pushkin ballad, which Aglaia will go on to recite feelingly, one composed by Pushkin presumably with Don Quixote in mind. "... That poem," Aglaia continues now, "describes a man capable of having an ideal... Because he believed in it... he devoted his whole life to it. This does not always happen in this age... The poor knight no longer cared who his lady was... It was enough for him that he had chosen her and that he believed in her pure beauty..." Aglaia becomes quite explicit: "The 'poor knight' is also a Don Quixote, only serious and not comic. At first I didn't understand him and laughed, but now I love the 'poor knight' and, what's more, respect his deeds of valor..." (265-266). Aglaia's enthusiasm marks a palpable intensification of her feeling for Myshkin but, as always with Dostoevski, the imponderables of human nature are not overlooked. The narrator observes when Aglaia finishes: "... It was difficult to say whether she was in earnest or laughing." Indeed, she had remarked that "even if [the knight's lady] became a thief afterward, he would still have to believe in her and break a lance for her pure beauty." The humor has an unmistakable flavor of Cervantic comic irony. The Sierra Morena passage quoted above or one of its many analogues shows through as subtext here.

The recurrent motif of the 'poor knight' becomes a virtually paradigmatic instance of the direct emotional response and the subsequent

conditioning it undergoes. Just as happens in the *Quixote* with so many returning motifs of the interlocution of Don Quixote and Sancho, the range is constantly expanding as new overtones and undertones accrue. Later (442) Aglaia attempts to articulate her motives for reciting the Pushkin ballad: "I wished," she tells Myshkin, "to — to express my admiration for you; at the same time I also wished to express my disgust with you for your behavior and to show you that I knew everything." (In her reading Aglaia had substituted for the letters on the knight's shield allusive to the Virgin the initials of Nastasya Filippovna. Yet she still cannot see that the mysterious substitution has been prompted by jealousy.)

Looking now more closely at what I have called the plane on which Dostoevski and Cervantes meet, let me try more broadly to suggest how they surmount their divergences. *The Idiot* remains the proving ground because it is indisputably the work in which the impact of Cervantes and his protagonist is most strongly felt.

At the heart of the affinity Dostoevski feels for Cervantes lies the former's mature conception of human character as the repository of an infinitely tangled web of traits: beliefs and fantasies, urges, impulses and proclivities, refusals and lapses, willfulness and spinelessness, introversion and extroversion. In the divided self-awareness of Dostoevski's *Man from Underground* this disorderly agglomeration of traits had been prefigured. It is irreducible to temperamental pigeonholing or facile consistency. Yet somehow Dostoevski's characters always cohere in the end.

A corollary of this conception of character as a bundle of self-contradictions is what Dostoevski himself calls realism. He means by this the inescapable intrusion of the world of fact upon any conceptual or imaginary world, a phenomenon with which readers of the *Quixote* are more than familiar. It is perfectly exemplified by a passage from the *Diary of a Writer* entitled "A Lie is Saved by a Lie." This begins: "Once upon a time Don Quixote... was suddenly struck by a perplexity which made him ponder for a long while": how was it that the knights he had read about in his "most truthful books" of chivalry were able single-handedly to "annihilate an army of one hundred thousand men"? Dostoevski's Don Quixote continues: "... I believe that these armies were not composed of men exactly like us... Their bodies... were rather akin to the bodies, for instance, of mollusks, worms and spiders. Thus, the solid and sharp sword of a knight, swung by his mighty hand, striking these bodies, instantly passed through them without resistance, as if through the air... It is intelligible then, that the matter was greatly accelerated and the knight was actually able to annihilate in several hours whole armies..." (II, 835-836).

Dostoevski has beautifully pinned down the method in Don Quixote's madness. Don Quixote is reasoning with what Dostoevski himself calls (II, 898) the "surest mathematical consideration," as logically — and as

misguidedly — as, say, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* or Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. And, Dostoevski goes on: “What proved capable of... almost shattering his whole faith was not the absurdity of his initial aberration; not the nonsensicality of those magic miracles which are recorded in ‘the most truthful books’, but, on the contrary, an outward, secondary, altogether isolated circumstance. The fantastic man suddenly begins to **crave after realism!**” (II, 837)

I have been speaking of Dostoevski’s Don Quixote advisedly: I have searched in vain through the whole *Quixote* for the passage Dostoevski quotes: it isn’t there. Could he have found it in some free-ranging Russian or French translation? Possible. It has been pointed out to me, however, that Dostoevski was not at all averse to taking just this kind of liberty with the creations of other writers.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the truth — and the question remains to be cleared up —, the further one reads in the full passage from which I have quoted, the more convinced one becomes that this is a Don Quixote made over in Dostoevski’s image. It is not the romancers of the sixteenth century but Descartes who is being shown up here. Fired in some part by Cervantes’ achievement, this extraordinary Russian is blazing the way toward the modern psychological novel.

Both writers are master story-tellers but in both, the unfolding of the action is subordinate to the verbal interaction of the characters. Dialogue, monodic or polyphonic, with its attendant reticences, is the primary means by which character is revealed. The speakers endlessly draw one another out; self-revelation far outstrips revelation. Not only the reader but the author is subject to being “surprised convincingly” by his creatures.<sup>7</sup> Both writers acknowledge the ultimate autonomy of the characters they have set in motion. So much is this the case, that it is only as they proceed and begin to glimpse the full potentialities of the beings they have created that both authors are able to discern the full range of vicissitudes through which the characters will have to pass.

Cervantes’ performance shows perhaps the greater virtuosity because, as we are reminded well along in the second *Quixote* (II, 44), through several cautiously interposed intermediaries: “To keep the mind, the hand, and the pen always confined to writing about a single person and speaking through the mouths of just a few characters [is] a thankless task...” In Dostoevski one is astonished at the prodigious range of the “mouths through which he speaks” (starting with his own). Yet on a broad view one discovers that the scope of human experience to which the monodic and the polyphonic novel expose us is equally vast. (This even leaving aside the digressions, disquisitions, life-stories and more or less self-contained narratives that abound in *Don Quixote* as in *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.) Cervantes’ constantly refreshed sameness and Dostoevski’s prodigal variety lead to the same result. Sooner or later the whole world of Cervantes’ Spain



takes to his open road; sooner or later, all of Russia, or so it seems, gravitates to Dostoevski's St. Petersburg. Yet a marked difference in technique cannot be overlooked, a difference of proportion. To borrow from E. M. Forster again, all of Dostoevski's characters are round; those of the *Quixote* are graduated from flat to round. The abundance of life and of lives in the foreground of Dostoevski's novels can be positively distracting. Cervantes' characters are more economically and more functionally handled. The secondary, or rather, the tertiary ones, are usually delineated in just one or two quick introductory strokes.

To instance only the latter "walk-ons": right at the beginning (I, 2) the innkeeper who is to dub Don Quixote a knight comes on as "[un] hombre que, por ser muy gordo, era muy pacífico" (being very fat, was very peaceful). How appropriate for the retired **picaro** he soon proves to be — "a bit of a way" as the narrator calls him — to have become sedentary and quite the opposite of famished. But his function is soon fulfilled and he is left behind for good. Or take the budding cleric Alonso López, who presents himself as a **licenciado** but soon volunteers that he is only a **bachiller** (I, 19). Pinned under his mule with a broken leg — or so he claims — he proves unfazed in his garrulity, flippancy, and punning, as befits **bachilleres** and not only those sophomores of Cervantes' day. The sketching in his case is done with a finer point, without authorial intervention, but the character very soon rides permanently out of the novel. Correspondingly, secondary figures like Ginés de Pasamonte or Sansón Carrasco acquire greater relief.

The obverse side of the full-bodiedness of all Dostoevski's characters is the failure of the quixotic and Christ-like Myshkin, though usually at center stage, to stand out in full relief. The problem was inherent in the assignment Dostoevski had set himself, as we have seen him recognizing. Don Quixote has created himself by an act of will; Myshkin's character has been set by God. There is nothing equivalent in Myshkin to the long and painful wearing-down of Don Quixote's will nor to the enrichment this process of disenchantment brings to his depiction. From another standpoint, though both are chronically ill, the visionary possibilities of Myshkin's epilepsy are less abundant than those of Don Quixote's monomania.

In the world's mixed responses to both protagonists, intrigue plays a large part, continually livening up the action. Inevitably, whereas Cervantes relies on episode to pace the action toward closure, Dostoevski will rely on plot woven around Myshkin's involuntary seductiveness to the two women.

To turn now, finally, to the question of each author's perspective on the world he presents, I find the comic and the tragic modes adequate categories only in a polar sense. Each exerts its pull, neither is an exclusionary magnet. The truly telling point is rather that Cervantes has reached a settlement with the world while Dostoevski remains unreconciled. Nevertheless, after the terrifying vigil of Myshkin and Rogozhin over the

body of the latter's victim, Nastasya Filippovna, it will be Mrs. Yepanchin, an unfailing source of brilliant comedy of character throughout the novel, who is given the last word. At the end of the final chapter, at the sight of Prince Myshkin, who has lapsed into complete idiocy and is back in the Swiss sanatorium from which he had emerged, the visiting Mrs. Yepanchin remarks: "... At least I have had a good Russian cry over this poor fellow. We've had enough of being carried away by our enthusiasms. It's high time we [Russians] grew sensible..."

We are back on earth just as surely as we are in the last chapter of the *Quixote*. There, despite the gravity of Don Quixote's renunciation, the inconsolability of his household, the undoubted pathos of Sancho's attempt to remove the burden of guilt from his master's shoulders, Cervantes implacably arrests any gravitation toward tragedy with the remark: "The household was thoroughly upset, but still the niece went on eating, the housekeeper raised her glass and Sancho Panza made merry, for this business of bequests somewhat effaces or tempers in the heir the memory of the grief that the deceased properly leaves behind." For good measure, he adds a moment later: "He gave up the ghost, I mean, he died."

At the very end of Plato's *Symposium*, when the bowl has made the rounds many times and day is breaking, Aristodemus dimly recalls that Socrates, in a conversation with Agathon, a tragic poet, and Aristophanes, the comic one, "was forcing them to admit that the same man might be capable of writing both comedy and tragedy." As Ernst Cassirer points out, in commenting on this passage and on one in the *Philebus* where the poet is said to portray "the whole comedy and tragedy of human life": "In every great poem — in Shakespeare's plays, in Dante's *Commedia*, in Goethe's *Faust* — we must indeed pass through the whole gamut of human emotions" (149). In adding Cervantes and Dostoevski to this number, I would stress only that we register these emotions not just in a gamut, like colors in a palette, but in the subtlest of mixtures, as on a canvas.

## NOTES

1 Her conclusion that there is "a kinship in point of view and predilection in the two authors, springing possibly from similarity in environment, mentality or temperament" (p. 121) is a case in point. — Two other works should be mentioned: Robin K. Miller in *Dostoyevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator and Reader* offers a scattering of trenchant comments relating to Cervantes (e.g., pp. 9-10, 259-260). Her concern, however, is not with the larger questions I have raised. Wolfgango Giusti in "Sul 'donchisciottismo' di alcuni personaggi del Dostojevskij" observes early Quixote types in Dostoevski while limiting the range of the parallels with Cervantes. The full trail of Cervantes is still to be traced.

2 Dostoevski could have read Cervantes in Russian in any one of a number of more or less faithful versions published from 1769 on, always through the coarser or finer filter of a French version. He could also have read one of the innumerable French translations directly. There is no reference to Cervantes in Dostoevski before the 1860s, though a first non-Gallicized version of Cervantes' novel had become available in 1838.

3 The single Russian adjective Dostoevski uses, 'prekrasnii', fuses the ethical with the esthetic. There is a note of spirituality as well. Since no English adjective encompasses a similar semantic range I settle for the *pis-aller* 'beautiful'.

4 Quoted in Mochulsky, 345-346.

5 Translations from the *Quixote* are my own. Roman numerals refer to the first or second parts (1605, 1615), Arabic to chapters.

6 For enlightenment on this and many other aspects of this essay, I am greatly indebted to my colleagues, Professors Sam and Claire Driver.

7 The reference of course is to E. M. Forster's well known statement: "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way." (78)

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