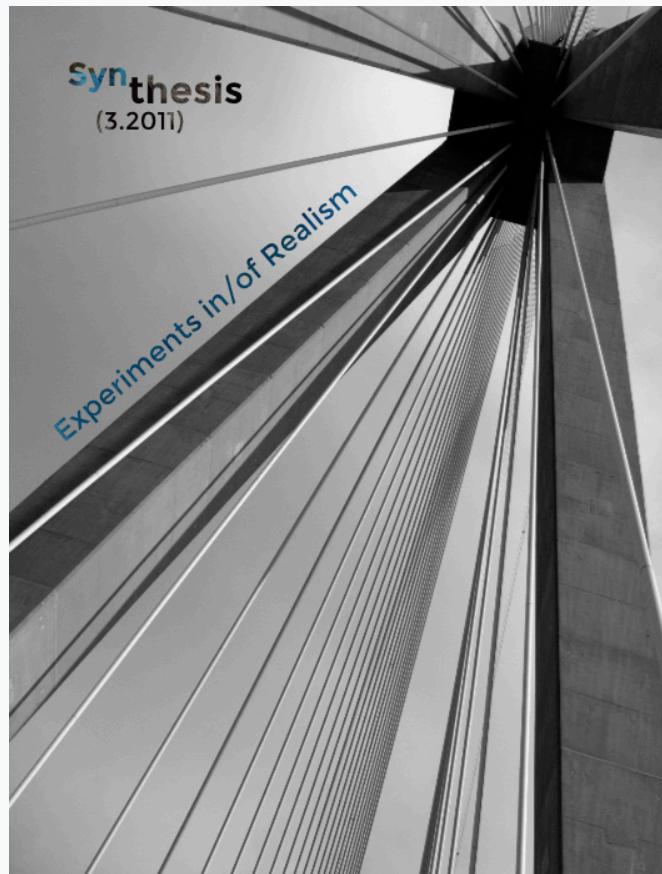


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“Why do you write what isn’t true?”: Dostoevsky and the Fantastic Paradox

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“Why do you write what isn’t true?”: Dostoevsky and the Fantastic Paradox

Michael Hollington

Abstract

In this paper, my starting point will be Philip Roth’s famous essay “Writing American Fiction,” in which he complains about the difficulty of writing novels in a country “where the actuality is constantly outdoing our talents.” I shall contend that this perception is not a new one, nor does it apply to American reality alone, and trace it back through a series of writers commenting on the difficulty of writing novels in the face of contemporary reality to its origins in Byron’s *Don Juan*: “For truth is always strange; stranger than fiction.” I shall argue that the aesthetics of “romantic realism,” as Donald Fanger labels it—the writing of Dickens, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Gogol, etc.—directly addresses this paradox, and that this partly accounts for the differences between it and “classic realism.” My contention is that we mistake the nature of such writing if we judge it by the criteria of “classic realism”—and find it wanting, as is often the case.

Reality

I begin in Northern Ireland on January 8, 2010, with an article by Esther Addley entitled “Iris Robinson and Kirk McCambley: a strange tale of Belfast’s ‘odd couple’” that appeared in *The Guardian*, about what was hot news at the time: an affair between the wife of Northern Ireland’s then first minister Peter Robinson—also a prominent Democratic Unionist politician in her own right—and a 19-year-old butcher’s son whom she had promised his dying father to mother. It appears that she became for a time so infatuated with her toy boy that she may have used her political influence to obtain money from property developers to set him up in business as a café proprietor as well as to ensure his being awarded, without any relevant experience, the necessary lease. The relationship fell apart, she asked for the money back, and later, in apparent remorse for what she had done, attempted suicide. This, and the fact that Mrs Robinson was and is at the same time a hardline right-wing Protestant and Leviticus-quoter, denouncing homosexuality but somehow omitting the Bible’s condemnation of adultery in the same passage of invective against sin, prompts the writer, with entire appropriateness, to describe the episode as a “stranger-than-fiction” tale.

It is clear from this article that the commonplace “truth is stranger than fiction” is firmly embedded in the English language and provides a useful rhetorical ploy for journalists seeking to emphasise the special oddities of the *faits divers* they report. But the idea has been around for nearly two centuries now, and, I would argue, has gained acceptance because it has seemed to successive generations to be appropriate to the common experience of modernity as a never-ending sequence of shocks and upheavals. It has its origins in Byron’s *Don Juan*, in a passage in Canto XIV stanza 101 which reflects ironically on the strange way in which a love affair may grow out of a game of billiards:

‘Tis strange but true; for Truth is always strange,
Stranger than fiction; if it could be told,
How much would novels gain by the exchange.

The irony here resides partly, I think, in the exaggerated mock weight of the word “Truth,” apparently denoting something authoritative and absolute, but set here in the context of a pretty trivial event. Still, the passage seems to offer an implicit critical challenge to novelists to come to grips in their work with the problem of trying to ‘tell the truth,’ which will become in the realist tradition more or less synonymous with the problem of adequately representing contemporary reality. The writers I shall explore here—Dostoevsky pre-eminent amongst them—belong to a version of realism in which the basic presupposition is that to tell the truth you have in some way, in Emily Dickinson’s phrase, “to tell it slant.” What I shall try to uncover here in this mode of writing is the importance (following Byron) of paradox, and in particular of what I shall call ‘the fantastic paradox,’ the product of a conviction that in order properly to represent contemporary reality you have to have a strong sense of how fantastical it is. Furthermore, this sense of paradox leads on to a concept of ‘truth’ as many-layered, as an amalgam of the specificities of empirical ‘fact’ and the sleight-of-hand artifices of ‘fiction.’ So that we find in some realist writers—again early Dostoevsky is my central exhibit—a

surprisingly high degree of self-consciousness, self-referentiality, and literary allusiveness. Such perspectives, I shall suggest, ought to complicate our views of what the realist aesthetic really is in practice rather more often than is usually the case.

But to get a bit closer to these issues, let's go back nearly fifty years from contemporary Northern Ireland to 1961, the year in which Philip Roth wrote a now famous *Commentary* essay entitled "Writing American Fiction." Here Roth has certainly abandoned thinking about truth as authoritative and absolute: in common with most thinkers in the tradition of modern realism, he thinks of 'truth' as residing in the local and particular, and so focuses on contemporary America. He tells us a 'real life' story which, whilst more lurid and sensational than the Northern Ireland example, is essentially of the same kind. In it, the naked bodies of two teenage sisters are found in a ditch; a man who claims to have been their lover confesses to their murder, but is released on bail. His mother is brought together by the media with the mother of the two girls and apologises: "I never thought a son of mine would do a thing like that." Donations to the mother of the victims pour in, so that she is able to buy two parakeets and name them after her lost daughters. The story ends when the suspect is extradited to Florida on charges of raping a 12-year-old girl. Whereupon Roth declares:

The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is constantly outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of the novelist. (230)

The 'truth' of contemporary America, he implies, will evade any writer who does not do full justice to its fantasticalness.

Roth's point is well put and well made, yet it would be a mistake if it were thought to apply only to his own time and place. Myself, were I to choose any one single episode in the life of a modern writer to fit the "truth is stranger than fiction" bill, it would be a central incident in the life of Dostoevsky that took place in December 1849. In April of that year he had been arrested and imprisoned as a member of the Petrashevsky circle supposedly conspiring to depose the Tsar and overthrow the Russian government. Following the subsequent investigations, and despite a report to the Tsar to the effect that, whilst the group certainly organised discussion of desirable changes to the existing structure of authority, there was little evidence of any coherent or concrete plan to effect such changes, Dostoevsky and fourteen others were condemned to death by firing squad on November 16, 1849. On December 22, without having been hitherto informed of this decision, the 15 were led out to Semonovsky Square in St. Petersburg to a scaffold on which three posts had been erected. Each man saw that he was to be tied to one of these and shot. The first three were led out, blindfolded, and tied to the stake in front of a firing squad at the ready during a one-minute drum roll. At the end of this minute the drums started to beat in a different rhythm the tattoo of retreat, and it became clear that the men would not be executed. A galloping horseman arrived with the Tsar's reprieve and the substitution of various lesser sentences of penal servitude in Siberia (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 49-66).

These facts in themselves would be enough to sustain a claim that what happened on that day was like some work of fiction, which surpassed by some distance anything a writer might invent. Contemporary novelists were indeed interested in the representation of the last hours of a condemned man's life, often as part of a campaign against public capital punishment. Hugo's *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* is the most famous example of such writing, but students of English literature will also remember Dickens's vivid portrayal of the last hours of Fagin's life in *Oliver Twist*, often compared with the Hugo, or later, the depiction of Sydney Carton's final moments in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dostoevsky himself in fact had Hugo in mind at this moment of trauma: immediately upon returning to his cell, he wrote his brother a letter describing what had happened which is remarkable for its elation at the reprieve, even though he would be forbidden to write during his banishment and imprisonment. In it he quotes from Hugo: "I still have my heart and the same flesh and blood, and these too can live, suffer, desire and remember, and that, after all, is also life. *On voit le soleil!*" Frank

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comments that the details of Hugo’s text “had surged back into Dostoevsky’s memory as he stared death in the face” (*The Years of Ordeal* 61).

But the intensity of Hugo’s conception and its obvious significance for Dostoevsky in this moment of time starts to take something of a back seat when one contemplates further the manifold layers of this extraordinary event. The essential thing to note is that it was constructed as a theatrical performance, as part of Tsar Nicholas’s special policy of dealing with subversion and opposition, in which he tried to create an impression of simultaneous severity and magnanimity. He had put in place some rather astonishing laws requiring a mock execution whenever a death sentence was commuted, but usually the condemned man had already been informed that his life would be spared and the ceremony became a mere formality. On this occasion, although he had decided to spare the men’s lives as early as December 11, Nicholas issued special instructions that they were not to be informed of their reprieve until after the staging of the macabre performance. As Frank remarks:

Nicholas carefully orchestrated the scenario on this occasion to produce the maximum impact on the unsuspecting victims of his regal solicitude. And Dostoevsky thus underwent the extraordinary adventure of believing himself to have been only a few moments away from certain death, and then of being miraculously resurrected from the grave. (*The Years of Ordeal* 51)

Once more, literary parallels come readily to mind to underscore the “incredible” nature of these nonetheless very real events, especially since the authors in question overtly present them as parody, laying them bare as absurdities that correspond only to literary tastes and conventions that have no recognisable basis in reality. The conclusion of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, for instance is designed to mock the Metastasian conventions of Handelian *opera seria* (even if Handel himself often played fast and loose with these). Metastasio’s formula was that tragic events had to end happily, and Gay points up the ridiculous artificiality of this procedure in a dialogue between Player and Beggar in Scene 16:

Player: But, honest friend, I hope you don’t intend that Macheath shall be really executed.
Beggar: Most certainly, Sir—To make the Piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical Justice—Macheath is to be hang’d, and for the other Personages of the Drama, the Audience must have suppos’d they were all hang’d or transported.

Player: Why then Friend, this is downright deep Tragedy. The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily.

Beggar: Your Objection, Sir, is very just, and is easily remov’d. For you must not allow that in this kind of Drama, ‘tis no matter how absurdly brought about...So...you Rabble there, run and cry, A Reprieve! Let the Prisoner be brought back to his Wives in Triumph.

Player: All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town. (103)

Brecht in *Die Dreigroschenoper* follows suit—the chief of police arrives on a horse to announce that Macheath is not only reprieved but raised to the nobility, given a castle and an annual income of ten thousand pounds, with Peachum reminding us, in case we thought otherwise, that the king’s messengers don’t come very often, and it’s not a good idea to behave in too immoral a fashion, and with Weill’s parodic music pointedly underscoring the absurdity of such an ending.

Anyone who has read at all widely in Dostoevsky’s work will recognise how deeply the author pondered this extraordinary event, and reflected it throughout his career through so many complex lenses and layers of artifice and reality. To take one simple example—the dénouement of Dostoevsky’s comic novel of 1859 *The Village of Stepanchikovo* is clearly a lighter version of Tsar Nikolay’s nightmarish theatre of the absurd in December 1849. In chapter 5 of part two, “Foma Fomich Creates Universal Happiness,” the extraordinary Pecksniffian Tartuffe who is the novel’s main character, decides that his principal game is up—that he can’t successfully arrange a marriage (lucrative to himself and his patroness) between her son, the Pickwickian innocent Colonel Yegor Rostanov, and a

nouveau riche Bovaryesque spinster, hitherto deprived of male attention and now highly susceptible to its sudden dramatic increase, as she becomes the centre of many schemes of romantic enticement and elopement. Like the Tsar, whose absolutist role he has played hitherto in the village, he suddenly starts to behave with entirely uncharacteristic magnanimity, and all kinds of parodic happy endings are brought about. The philosopher Korovkin—awaited by the Colonel like Godot throughout the text as the means of unravelling his predicament—suddenly turns up at last as the equivalent of the king's messenger. Only he is completely drunk, and after lunging at a few ladies and asking for another drink—"just to drown a fly in, just a thimbleful" (182)—is led off to the accompaniment of uproarious laughter. The Colonel is now free to marry his real love, the penniless governess Nastenka, and there is general ecstasy about the sudden beatific metamorphosis of the hypocritical village tyrant into a fount of benevolence:

The triumph of Foma Fomich was complete and unassailable. Truly nothing would have come to pass without his intervention, and the accomplished fact stifled all doubts and objections. The gratitude of the blissfully happy couple knew no bounds. Uncle and Nastenka simply refused to listen to me when I tentatively hinted at the chain of events which had led Foma to agree to their marriage. Sashenka kept shouting: "Good, kind Foma Fomich—I'll embroider a cushion for him in wool! And she put me to shame for my skepticism." (184)

Only the narrator continues to stand outside the closing circle of happiness. We meet his counterparts in other early Dostoevskian texts, where, likewise, they present 'the truth' through layers of complex fictional indirection, reflecting in part the complex and precarious situation of Dostoevsky the writer himself. At the time of *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, Nikolay was dead, replaced by the more liberal, reformist-minded Aleksandr, but the censors were still active, and Dostoevsky—only recently released from prison in Siberia, and permitted to write again—still had to watch his step. He had to write about reality aslant.

Paradoxicality

"It is possible to be supremely happy in Siberia" (21). These words stand on the first page of David McDuff's fine translation of Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, a thinly disguised fictional account of his years of imprisonment from 1850 onwards, and they alert us at the outset to the pervasive presence therein of paradoxicality. The book's quasi-oxymoronic title already hints that it will describe something quite unique, and offer a new challenge to our sense of reality by describing "our own world, unlike anything else; here was the house of the living dead, a life like none other upon earth, and people who were special, set apart" (27). I shall claim that the book's thoroughly realist techniques are essential to achieve its effects of strangeness—that is to say, by relying upon close, detailed, first-hand empirical observation in a manner that employs a fairly minimal slant from the conventional modes of journalistic reportage, the book seeks to challenge conventional, stereotyped perception and confront us with disturbing paradoxes about the nature of prison life in Siberia. It is a place of terror inhabited by monsters and demons—in the prison bath-house the narrator Goryanchikov reflects "that if, at some later date we should all find ourselves together in hell, it would be very similar to this place" (156-57)—but, as Dostoevsky declares in a letter of February 1854, "there are deep, strong people among them, and what a joy it is to discover the gold beneath the cold, hard surface" (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 77). In exploring such contradictions, Dostoevsky seems in this book to be interrogating rigid distinctions between what is commonly held to be "real" and what imaginary, as embodied in literary conventions like those, for instance, of Gothic writing.

As a child, Dostoevsky was thoroughly familiar with the Gothic novel in general and Mrs Radcliffe in particular. It lay, he confesses in his travel book *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, at the origins of his fascination with going abroad: "I used to spend the long winter evenings before going to bed listening (for I could not yet read), agape with ecstasy and terror, as my parents read aloud to me from

the novels of Ann Radcliffe. Then I would rave deliriously about them in my sleep" (4; Frank, *The Seeds of Revolt* 55). Already there is contradiction of a familiar kind—"ecstasy and terror"—inherent in the Gothic aesthetic, as defined early on by Ippolito Pindemonte as "quell'orror che attristando piace" ['that horror at which we shudder and take pleasure'], but Frank is right to underline the particular turn this initial complexity takes when it confronts "real life" horror in the prison: "The stories Dostoevsky heard around him rivaled the most desperate deeds of the Gothic novels and Romantic literature that had filled his youthful imagination; yet such stories were part and parcel of the prosaic, squalid existences of perfectly commonplace Russians" (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 146). In this, as in much besides, Dostoevsky is following a path mapped out by Dickens, who in his early *Sketches by Boz* had remarked of Newgate prison and the Quaker prison visitor Elizabeth Fry that "we have a great respect for Mrs Fry, but she certainly ought to have written more romances than Mrs Radcliffe" ("Criminal Courts" in *Sketches* 197).

In Siberia he heard such terrible 'romances,' often narrated in quite paradoxical fashion, with more than a dash of humour: "Only in prison have I heard stories of the most terrible, the most unnatural actions, the most monstrous slayings, told with the most irrepressible, the most childishly merry laughter" (*The House of the Dead* 36). The prisoner Baklushin for instance tells how he kills a German and delivers a joke insult at the moment he shoots him: "try this then, bratwurst! And I shot a bullet into him, and he rolled off the chair" (163). He encountered ogres like Orlov—"a man who carved up old men and children in cold blood" (81)—and above all Gazin:

a fearsome individual. He had a terrible and distressing effect on everyone. It always seemed to me that there could be nothing more violent and monstrous than this man. In Tobolsk I once saw the bandit Kamenev, who was notorious for his crimes; later I saw the deserter and terrible murderer Sokolov when he was being tried. But neither the one nor the other repelled me to the extent Gazin did. I sometimes thought I was seeing a huge, outsize spider, the size of a man. He was a Tartar, horribly strong, stronger than anyone else in the prison; he was taller than average, of Herculean build, with an ugly, disproportionately large head; he walked with a stoop, and his face wore a distrustful expression...There was also a story that he had been fond of murdering little children purely for pleasure: he would take away the child to some convenient spot; first he would frighten and torture it, then, delighting in the terror and quaking of his poor little victim, he would quietly and voluptuously slit its throat. This was all quite possibly a fantasy, a consequence of the general aura of unpleasantness with which, for most of the convicts, Gazin was surrounded; but all these fictions somehow suited him, and were in keeping with his appearance. (72-73)

The 'real' Gazin, we see, is a kind of blur of hard fact—names, places, phsyiognomical detail—and rumours and fictions whose veracity it is impossible to check, but which seem to ring true in the context of his actual physical presence in the prison. Without attempting to do some kind of justice to this terrible conception, the realist writer cannot hope to represent the extraordinary actuality of the man.

Yet despite the fear and awe that Gazin inspires amongst his fellow inmates, the book maintains, to our further discomfiture, that the most dangerous men in prison are not of his kind. The most terrible criminals, in fact, often break down at the last moment. Meditating again in this book, perhaps, on his own experience on the scaffold (where the ringleader Petrashevsky appeared to be the most eager to cooperate with the authorities), Dostoevsky explores the contradictory emotions of someone condemned to die:

He affects a kind of *desperation*, and a "desperate" man like this often longs for punishment, longs to be *dealt with*, because in the end his affected *desperation* has become too much for him to bear. It is interesting to observe that for the most part this state of mind, this affectation is sustained right up to the scaffold, and is then switched off as if this were some formal interval designated in advance with certain rules and regulations. Now the man suddenly resigns

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himself, withdraws into the background, becomes a limp rag. On the scaffold he whines and snivels...a slobbering, abject creature. (140-41)

It is in fact the lesser villains who are more dangerous: "one man who had never killed anyone could be more terrifying than another who had been sentenced for six murders" (139-40). This is in fact because such individuals are often looking to commit new crimes in the prison in order to put off the punishment they fear the most: flogging. One of them, Dutov, "the day before he was to run the gauntlet...took a knife and went for the duty officer who had entered his barrack...his calculations were centred only on postponing, even for a few days, a few hours, the terrible moment when the soldiers would begin to flog him" (79).

Thus the specific is always strange and upsets stereotyped expectations. In *The House of the Dead* the novelist is inviting us to enter into a new world in which we shed such expectations and confront the real in all its fantasticalness. We must learn, to begin with, that the work régime in the nineteenth-century Siberian prison is not nearly as terrifying as the conventional imagination assumes: "the peasant in freedom works incomparably harder and longer, sometimes even at night, especially in the summer" (43). Indeed, as Dostoevsky reports elsewhere, "there are men who commit crimes on purpose to be sent to penal servitude, in order to escape from a far more penal life of labour outside" (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 140). Work is in fact the saving grace of the prison, a way of staying sane. Yet no sooner have we assimilated this initial paradox than we must confront another. Prisoners may work long and hard and apply their minds in all manner of ingenious ways to making money, but this is not in order to improve their status or quality of life. One individual, Sirotkin, is occasionally flush with funds, but we are told that "When he got some money, he spent it not on necessities, such as giving his jacket to be mended or buying new boots, but on *kalatches* and treacle cakes which he ate as if he were a child of seven" (70). The Siberian convict, according to the account of him given in *The House of the Dead*, may be observed "labouring for months like a harnessed ox," but the satisfaction he gets from the money he thus accumulates is simply "to be able to spend it all on drink on a day that he has previously earmarked for this purpose" (68). Status in this upside down world is quite different from status elsewhere, and so drunkenness here is a sign of grace: "in the prison a drunk man was treated with deference. Prison drinking had its own brand of aristocraticism" (64).

One could proliferate such instances at will. But beneath the constant shocks and surprises, a deeper and yet more unsettling paradox gradually takes shape. Prison life may be strictly incredible by any quasi-objective measure to be had from the outer world, yet the prisoner and the reader gets used to it, and gradually regards it as something natural and reassuring, which he may later find himself reluctant to exchange again for the outer world. The narrator Goryanchikov, exploring in his record of prison life the processes whereby he becomes desensitised and familiarised with its horrors, serves as an essential mediator between us as readers and the fantastic world on display. In the prison, time is subject to special laws that have affinities with those operating in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*)—"The first month and indeed the whole of the early phase of my life in prison come vividly into my mind's eye now. The years that followed are much fainter in my memory" (*The House of the Dead* 42)—and the structure of the two books is not dissimilar, for they both give highly detailed attention to the first few days of the experience, of prison and sanatorium respectively, but later skim over much longer stretches of time. This gulf of time appears at first terrifying to the narrator, as he reflects on "How many thousands of days like this one still lie ahead of me...all of them like this one, all of them the same" (125). But this anxiety passes, for as "time went by...little by little I began to settle down. With every day that passed, the ordinary scenes and events of my new life had a less and less disturbing effect on me" (126).

We are thus afforded a glimpse of the kind of paradox that Dickens observes in *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, that the prisoners released from their cells by the rioters clamour in both instances

for a return to their prisons. Concomitantly, released after four years from penal servitude to serve out the rest of his sentence as a soldier in Siberia, Dostoevsky soon found that there was little difference—"In the overcoat of a soldier I am just as much a prisoner as before," he wrote (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 165). The town of Semipalatinsk where he served was likewise simply another prison: "Gloomy, cold, stone houses, no life, no interests—there is not even a decent library. A genuine prison! I intend to get out of here as possible" (Frank, *The Years of Ordeal* 292). Inside the prison and outside, 'the real' cannot be simple and straightforward and will not obey conventional classification. The 'fantastic paradox' itself—a moment of specific conscious underlining of the strangeness of these realities as a fundamental challenge to the categories of the fictional and the real—emerges at many points in the narrative. An interesting place to begin to explore it is in the way the narrator presents the common practice of name-swapping in Siberia, deliberately underscoring how fantastical it must seem, the narrator again using his own initial incredulity to enable the reader to effect an astonished *entrée* into this world. The rhetorical stratagem of 'truth is stranger than fiction' is clearly on display: "However strange this fact may seem it is a fact none the less, and in my time this exchanging of names was very common among convicts *en route* for Siberia, was hallowed by tradition and bound by certain formalities. At first I could not really believe what was going on, although in the end I had to submit to the evidence of my own two eyes" (*The House of the Dead* 99). And as so often—as in the case of the tsar's reprieve in December 1849—a kind of black *Galgenhumor* is invoked in the depiction, as one prisoner who has committed crimes so terrible that he is to be placed in some as yet undetermined form of penal servitude sharp-wittedly manages to persuade another, much pettier hoodlum to sell him his name: "I'm Mikhailkov, and I'm going to prison, except it's not really prison, it's some kind of 'special category.' Well yes, it is a prison, but it's sort of special, you see, so it's a better class of prison" (100). Here again, the comic literary clichés, in drama and elsewhere, of gull and dupe, and the consequent confusion of identity, are taken up, enhanced and superseded in their realist version, in the surpassingly strange and dreamlike world of the prison.

Yet the aim remains that of realist writing in general—to 'hold a mirror' to the real world, not only to the world of the prison, but, refracted through such immediate focus of representation, a cracked image of the wider society at large. Some of the most brilliant paradoxical writing of *The House of the Dead* concerns what happens to capitalism in prison society. In the outside world, Dostoevsky is withering in his denunciation of the hypocrisy of virtuous cheating by the respectable middle classes, as in Paris in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, where English tourists get thoroughly fleeced even as they engage in what they regard as successful haggling over ten francs. There, the merchant "will take his revenge all right, and for a scarf worth 1,500 will rook milady 12,000, and do it in a way which will leave her completely satisfied":

But in spite of this, the bourgeois is passionately fond of unutterable high-mindedness. On the stage he must have nothing but people completely disinterested in money. Gustave must shine by the light of high-mindedness alone and the bourgeois sheds tears of tender emotion. Without unutterable high-mindedness he will not even sleep quietly. And as to taking 12,000 francs instead of 1,500, this was his duty: he took it because he was virtuous. To steal is wicked and mean—that's what the galleys are for; the bourgeois is ready to forgive a great deal, but he will not forgive stealing even if you and your children should be dying of starvation. But should you steal for virtue's sake, then, oh then, everything is forgiven unto you. It means you want to *faire fortune* and amass many possessions, i.e. perform a natural and human duty. In other words the legal code clearly defines stealing for low motives, i.e. for the sake of a piece of bread, and stealing in the name of highest virtue. The latter is completely assured, encouraged and is organised on an extraordinarily sound footing. (*Winter Notes* 64-65)

The transition from this world to that of the prison is deftly managed in *The House of the Dead* as the convict Skuratov relates how he got started in his alternative career of crime: "my brothers still have their own shop in Moscow to this day, doing a roaring trade down a little alley, wealthy merchants they are...It was then you know that I got my first two hundred...‘Not roubles?’, one inquisitive convict chimed in, positively aquiver at the mention of so much money. ‘No, dear laddie, not roubles—

whacks" (*The House of the Dead* 116). By means of this correction we enter into a turpsy-turvy form of capitalism in which the commodities traded are things like names and backs and lashes. Grog smugglers, for instance, try to bribe their way back into the prison to distribute their merchandise, but anyone whose bribe is refused "must pay with his last capital asset, his back. He is reported to the Major, his capital asset is flogged and flogged hard" (67). The illegal drinking parties they organise, known as "maydans" (the prison name ironically parodies colonialism), are equally perilous risk ventures: "For practically a whole night of such work they would take five silver kopecks, and if they were found out they lost everything and paid with their backs" (98).

Yet there is also in *The House of the Dead*, to borrow a phrase of Kafka's, "a leap out of murderer's row" in the shape of Christmas theatricals (212). In one of the most spellbinding episodes of the book, we are asked to

Imagine the prison, with its fetters and servitude, its long, dismal years stretching ahead, its life as monotonous as the dripping of rainwater on an autumn day—and then suddenly all these oppressed and tyrannized, confined men being allowed for a brief space of time to unwind, to enjoy themselves, to forget their bad dream, to put on a show and to do it as to say proudly to the astonished townsfolk: "Look, this is the stuff we're made of!" (195)

The prisoners put on three short plays, and it is characteristic of the book that they should still further complicate our sense of the complexity of the relations between the real and the imaginary. One in particular, *Kedril the Glutton*, is a mystifyingly garbled amalgam of Mozart's Don Giovanni and the Faust legend, in which both the Don and Leporello, or Kedril, are carried off by demons to hell, though the main focus here is appropriately on the servant rather than the master. The narrator not only watches the play; he watches with equal vigilance the reactions of the audience as they attempt to decipher the weirdly comic transformations of Gothic writing on display: "a side door opened in the wings, and there appeared something shrouded in white, with a candle lantern instead of a head; a second phantom also had a lantern for a head and carried a scythe. What were the lanterns, what was the scythe, why were the devils dressed in white?" (192).

The text, of course, will not provide an answer: "No one had any explanation to offer; but then no one gave the matter the slightest thought. This was probably as it should have been" (199). *Pace* Barthes, perhaps, in his distinction between realist and Modernist narration, Dostoevsky's version of realism is here *scriptible* rather than *lisible*: "we fleshed out the scene in our imagination rather than seeing it with our eyes" (200). The Dostoevskian reader is called on to do likewise—to read the *mises en abîmes* on stage, the weird dance involving a Brahmin and a man he has raised from the dead in the "last pantomime, fantastic in character" (203), for instance, a kind of comic shadowing forth of some form of resurrection. Only the reality of the effect is insisted upon—and here once more the "fantastic paradox" is invoked:

Everyone seemed somehow unusually satisfied, even happy, and fell asleep not in their usual way, but almost at peace with themselves—and for what reason, one might wonder? This was no fiction of my imagination. It really was so...I looked at their wretched faces, their wretched beds, all this utter misery and poverty. I scrutinised it, and it was as if I were trying to convince myself that all this was real, and not the continuation of some monstrous dream. But it was real... (203-04)

Intertextuality

Dostoevsky is by no means the only nineteenth-century writer to show such consciousness, and to work variations upon the Byronic "fantastic paradox" that "truth is stranger than fiction." The narrator of E. T. A. Hoffmann's story *Der Sandmann*, for instance—a favourite reference for Freud—

interrupts his epistolary story to address and tease his reader with the thought “dass nichts wunderlicher und toller sei als des wirkliche Leben, und dass dieses der Dichter nur, wie in eines matt geschliffenen Spiegels dunklem Widerschein auffassen könne” (27); [‘that nothing is more wonderful, nothing more fantastic than real life, and that all that a writer can do is to present it as a dark reflection from a dim cut mirror.’] Balzac, himself adapting Hoffmann for use in the representation of Paris, agrees in *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes* about the extent to which the writer’s imagination—especially perhaps one working in the tradition of French classicism—has been dwarfed by the realities of modern urban life:

La nature sociale, à Paris surtout, comporte de tels hasards, des enchevêtrements, de conjectures si capricieuses, que l’imagination des inventeurs est à tout moment dépassé. La hardiesse du vrai s’élève à des combinaisons interdites à l’art, tant elles sont invraisemblables et peu décentes, à moins que l’écrivain ne les adoucisse, ne les emende, ne les châtre. (*Splendeurs* 487) [Above all in Paris, social life entails such quirkiness, such complexity, such caprice that the most inventive imagination is outdone at every turn. Reality itself is so outrageous that it constructs combinations that are forbidden to art because of their improbability and indelicacy, unless the writer softens, amends and curtails them.]

Elsewhere, with reference particularly to Gothic fiction, it is a case of naming particular Gothic writers and declaring that reality goes beyond the flights of their fancy. In *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, attempting to give an adequate rhetorical idea of the supernatural frigidity of aristocratic *grandes dames*, Balzac declares that “ni Maturin ni Hoffmann, les deux plus sinistres imaginations de ce temps, ne m’ont causé l’épouvante que me causèrent les mouvements automatiques de ces corps busques” (66). [‘Neither Maturin nor Hoffmann, the two most sinister imaginations of our time, have caused me as many shudders as the automated movements of their contorted bodies.’] The early Dickens, as we have already seen in the case of Mrs Radcliffe and Mrs Fry, was particularly fond of such tropes: on one occasion he has a shorthand writer tell an audience about sensational murder trials he has attended, and includes the story of a drunk baker who boils his son in a copper—“the whole horrible ideality of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, condensed into the pithy effect of a ten-line paragraph, could not possibly have so affected the narrator’s auditory” (“Robert Bolton” in *Sketches* 685)—and on another he writes of a macabre-looking fellow scholar in the British Museum Reading Room that “the man of whom Sir Walter Scott speaks in his Demonology, did not suffer half the persecution from his imaginary gentleman usher in quondam black velvet, that we sustained from our friend in quondam black cloth” (“Shabby-Genteel People” in *Sketches* 263).

I shall conclude here by taking a brief look in this final section at one further surprise about Dostoevskian realism—the extent to which it combines uncompromising truth to the ugly, sordid detail of the lower depths of human life with a high degree of literary self-consciousness, manifest in a number of ways, including frequent teasing arabesques of allusion to other writers. The novel I shall concentrate on here is *The Insulted and the Injured*, where the particular lower depths explored are no longer those of Siberia but of Petersburg. It is a novel that contains many references to other writers, in particular Hoffmann and Gogol, but above all to Dickens, whom Dostoevsky read in the later stages of his time in Siberia¹ and alludes to frequently in his fiction. It can in fact be described as a kind of rewriting of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, done by the first person narrator Vanya Petrovich, who is writing the novel we read as the text goes along. He is an established author—like Dostoevsky himself in the same period, the early 1860s—seeking to repeat earlier successes in which his work has been compared to that of Gogol. His reputation has recently suffered a dip—as had that of Dostoevsky himself, following the criticisms made by Belinsky of his departure from the simpler version of realism on display in his first novel *Poor Folk* in favour of the more complex Hoffmannesque ‘fantastic realism’ of other early texts; and he now wishes to restore himself to public favour.

As the story begins, Vanya is out on the streets of Petersburg looking for a new lodging in which to write his new book, when he encounters an old man with an English background whose name is Jeremy Smith—already a hint in the direction of Dickens. Later, he will meet his ill and impoverished

granddaughter Nellie, who becomes a major character in the novel, and it is evident that the opening of the book represents a kind of inversion of that of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where the first person narrator (himself an old man who will later fade out from the narrative) meets Nell out on the streets of London and accompanies her home to the antique shop and there meets her grandfather. Here Vanya follows Smith and his dog Azorka to a tavern, and before they get there the text already flags its intention of doubling the primary level of realist narrative with another generated through intertextuality, for Vanya tells us "that it occurred to me once that the old man and the dog had stepped out of some page of Hoffmann illustrated by Gavarni and were parading this world by way of walking advertisements of the edition" (*The Insulted* 9).

When they reach the tavern, Azorka dies, worn out by old age and perhaps starvation, and the old man is hardly comforted by the German proprietor's grotesque Dickensian attempt at expressing his sympathy: "you can have it stoffed" (*The Insulted* 13). So, outside in the street again, Jeremy Smith also dies, leaving a vacant flat in a Petersburg apartment building, which Vanya decides to rent, because of its size, enabling him to walk up and down as he composes his book, and also attracted because of the fact that Smith's granddaughter is bound to call at some point and perhaps provide him with some plot. So he settles down to writing what will become a new version of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, installed like Quilp in Dickens's novel, in the equivalent of the shop itself, waiting for Nellie to return. He draws our attention to the complex layers of reality and fiction by reflecting that "I felt it had all happened as in a dream" (14).

I shall focus here only on this relationship between Vanya the writer and Nellie the character in the fiction he is writing, but the novel is full of artists and would-be writers—Valkovsky, Alyosha, Masloboev—who engage in constant banter about questions of realism and the worth of Vanya's books as a picture of reality, and constantly allude to other writers and their work. "Vanya, you're only a romancer, a regular romancer!" (161), says Nikita, the old man who adopts Nell after Vanya discovers her, just as he had earlier adopted Vanya himself: he wants to engage the villainous Valkovsky in a duel and scoffs at Vanya's assertion that he wouldn't accept the challenge. Another friend Masloboev, who informs us that he "trained as teacher of Russian literature, and...wrote an article on Gogol (128)," alludes ironically to Eugène Sue as he delivers his account of what he knows about Valkovsky's role in Nellie's childhood (she turns out to be his daughter, the novel here echoing *Nicholas Nickleby*, where the child victim Smike turns out to be Ralph Nickleby's son) as if it were a fiction: "you've been imagining I had some mysteries of Paris I wanted to reveal to you. One can see you're a novelist" (215).

But these merely frame the central paradoxicality of the writing of Vanya's *Old Curiosity Shop* novel and the reading of the manuscript by the dying Nellie. She first of all asks him pointed questions about reality and fiction, in a passage that has its origin in Paul Dombey asking his father to define money in *Dombey and Son*:

"What are you always writing?" Elena asked with a timid smile, coming quietly to the table.
"All sorts of things, Lenotchkha. They give me money for it."
"Petitions?"
"No, not petitions."
And I explained to her as far as I could that I wrote all sorts of stories about different people, and that out of them were made books that are called novels. She listened with great curiosity.
"Is it all true what you write?"
"No, I make it up."
"Why do you write what isn't true?" (*The Insulted* 165-66)

Nell seems to begin by thinking that Vanya must be a kind of copy clerk churning out documents for others, petitions and the like—Russian literature from at least the time of Gogol being full of such characters, who perhaps allegorise (like Bartleby the Scrivener in Melville's story) a deliberately crude

conception of photographic realism. Vanya's reply also implies a kind of code—Nellie's history cannot be told without some kind of imaginative heightening, for

It was a strange story of the mysterious, hardly comprehensible relations of the crazy old man with the little grandchild who already understood him, who already, child as she was, understood many things that some men do not attain to in long years of their smooth and carefully guarded lives. It was a gloomy story, one of those gloomy and distressing dramas which are so often played out unseen, almost mysterious, under the heavy sky of Petersburg, in the dark secret corners of the vast town, in the midst of the giddy ferment of life, of dull egoism, of clashing interests, of gloomy vice and secret crimes, in that lowest hell of senseless and abnormal life" (170).

The novel returns to the elaborate play of correspondences with Dickens (Nellie having meanwhile told Vanya that he must call her by her English name, and not Elena or the diminutive "Lenotchkka") when she confesses to Vanya that she has been reading his novel in his absence. On this occasion, we learn that it centres around the death of a consumptive boy:

"Why, why did he die?" she asked with an expression of the deepest sadness, stealing a glance at me and then dropping her eyes again.

"Who?"

"Why, that young man in consumption...in the book."

"It couldn't be helped. It had to be so, Nellie."

"It didn't have to at all," she answered, hardly above a whisper, but suddenly, abruptly, most angrily, pouting and staring still more obstinately at the floor.

Another minute passed.

"And she...they...the girl and the old man," she whispered, still plucking at my sleeve, more hurriedly than before. "Will they live together? And will they leave off being poor?"

"No, Nellie, she'll go far away, she'll marry a country gentleman and he'll be left alone," I answered with extreme regret, really sorry that I could not tell her something more comforting. (*The Insulted* 201)

Again, the *Old Curiosity Shop* references are doubled, this time with echoes of *Dombey and Son*. In Vanya's book the child victim is a boy, and the Nell-equivalent lives on to experience an apparent happy ending for herself, if not for her grandfather.

But not in *The Insulted and Injured*. Despite what Vanya says here, Nell will in fact die, and some of the most interesting rewriting of Dickens occurs in its final scenes. Unlike Dickens's Nell, Dostoevsky's Nellie is a thoroughly sexualised young girl, who at the age of fourteen is in love with her protector Vanya. In exploring her sexuality, Dostoevsky conducts one of his deepest early probes into sadomasochistic behaviour. Nell actually seems to embrace prostitution as a means of supporting her grandfather, and offers later to earn money for Vanya so as to supplement his income from writing. He has in fact rescued her from the sinister brothel-keeper Madame Bubnov, but she doesn't want to be saved: "Let her ruin me, let her torment me...I'm not the first. Others better than I are tormented. A beggar woman in the street told me that. I'm poor and I want to be poor. I'll be poor all my life. My mother told me so when she was dying. I'll work" (149). Vanya buys her a new dress, but she deliberately soils it. Later, when she is very ill, she will refuse to take her medicine. The Dostoevskian understanding of masochism and sadism is full of paradox, anticipating certain emphases in the work of Jean Genet: "Le seul moyen d'éviter l'horreur de l'horreur est de s'abandonner à elle"; "Que j'annonce que je suis une vieille pute, personne ne peut surenchérir, je décourage l'insulte. On ne peut même plus me cracher à la figure" (Genet 34, 59). ['The only way of avoiding the horror of horror is to abandon oneself to it'; "If I declare myself an old whore noone can beat that, I discourage insult. After that, noone can even spit in my face.'] The masochistic personality assumes her or his humiliation in order to conquer it—or, perhaps, as Vanya puts it rather differently, "she enjoyed her pain by this *egoism of suffering*, if I may so express it" (279).

So Nellie on her deathbed offers a remarkable contrast to Dickens's Nell. She flirts with her doctor, spattering her medicine over him ("this time she made no pretence about it but simply jerked the spoon up from below with her hand and all the medicine was splashed on the poor doctor's shirt-front and in his face... There was a look of something cruel and malicious in her face" [263-64]), and promising to marry him. He makes a habit of bringing her confectionery, and like Quilp grooming Nell as his next wife in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, "as he handed it to Nellie invariably added: 'To my future amiable spouse'" (269). Similar scenes occur with her adoptive grandfather, and in her last moments she returns in her final request to Vanya to her life as a child prostitute, asking him go to her father Valkovsky to tell him how he found her in the brothel: "tell him all, all; and tell him I liked better to be at Mme Bubnov's than to go to him" (347). As Loralee MacPike has argued, the text sends us back to Dickens, to interrogate afresh a text that begins in the same way with an encounter between a man and an unchaperoned young girl on the streets of London at night.

Thus the 'truth' that *The Insulted and the Injured* tries to tell is clearly a fantastical one, and after Nellie's funeral, Vanya's beloved Natasha seems to close the circle of reference to dreaming that had began at the novel's opening: "Vanya, it was a dream, you know" (348). I hope to have given here some sketch of how this early Dostoevsky novel conducts a complex aesthetic dialogue about reality and fiction, on this occasion deepening its scope by adding to the contemplation of the relation between text and world that we have observed in other writings an elaborate play of *mises en abîmes* between text and text. Just as in the representation of the Christmas theatricals in *The House of the Dead*, such a conception of realism requires the reader's active participation in the construction of a *Gestalt* that is not something given by some pre-established and predetermined notion of 'reality' or 'truth,' as Natasha hints in an earlier comment on some poems she refers to Vanya: "How fine that is. How tormenting those verses are, Vanya. And what a vivid, fantastic picture! It's just a canvas with a mere pattern chalked on it. You can embroider what you like. Two sensations: the earliest, and the latest; that samovar, that chintz curtain" (81).

To conclude a little polemically, I want to reiterate what the purpose of this paper has been: to try to complicate, or recomplicate, our view of what realism might actually be. It will be noticed that I have not employed the term "Romantic Realism" here, which features centrally in Donald Fanger's now classic book *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism* of 1965, which, together with Joseph Frank's incomparable five-volume biography, form the essential catalyst and inspiration for anything I might want to say about Dostoevsky. The reason for this is that I wanted to avoid giving the impression that the propositions put forward here can only apply to a special kind of realism. To be sure, the authors Fanger treats—Gogol, Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoevsky—form a distinctive, recognisable group whose work can be set apart from, even at times perhaps in opposition to, the kind of "classic realism" (in Colin McCabe's phrase) that describes writers like Tolstoy or George Eliot. But what if the boundaries are porous and the aesthetic categories and concepts less than stable or fixed? In Dostoevsky's own time there was a voice, that of Chernyshevsky, which took up so rigid a position on realism in fiction—that it was to serve chiefly as a surrogate for science—that its inadequacy is plain for all to see. In his discussion of him, Frank quotes Chernyshevsky's definition of the purpose of art, to serve as a "Handbook for those who are beginning to study life; [its] purpose is to prepare the student for reading the original sources and later to serve as reference books from time to time," and gives us René Wellek's reaction: "here surely aesthetics has reached its nadir; or rather it has been asked to commit suicide" (*The Years of Ordeal* 246). Nevertheless, there are still perhaps some Chernyshevskys about today—and that, not only amongst "common readers" but also in the world of literary academia, where some seem tempted to judge fictions on the basis of how faithfully they reflect and embody fixed and preconceived 'truth' and 'reality' in a correct way, as understood from the sovereign perspective of our own time—which made me feel that I should like to try to give some very partial picture of another kind of authority embodied in the richness, fluidity, and complexity of "truth" and "reality" as these are handled in Dostoevskian realism.

Michael Hollington, "Why do you write what isn't true?"

Notes

¹ And *only* Dickens, a contemporary witness seems to imply: "He would even refuse to read the books brought by the young people, and became interested only twice, in the translations by Vvedensky, and took them with him into the hospital, in order to read them" (Lary 2).

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