

Title: Spotting Dostoevsky in a “Dark Alley amongst Broken Fences and Chagall’s Cows”: Beat
Author John Clellon Holmes Rewriting *The Possessed*

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Jack Kerouac, clearly obsessed with Dostoevsky and claiming that he could even recognize him “in a dark alley amongst broken fences and Chagall’s cows” (Kerouac, 386), urged his younger colleague and friend, John Clellon Holmes, to tell the story of the Beat generation and describe the “big swirling vortexes” (Kerouac, 200) of their shared experiences with an eye turned toward one of Dostoevskii’s greatest works, *The Possessed*. Holmes then enacted this suggestion with his first published novel, *Go*, admitting briefly his debt to Dostoevsky in the foreword to his book (Holmes, xxii).

An examination of *Go* reveals a score of subtle, yet significant parallels permeating the work both on a strictly content-oriented level as well as in more abstract considerations of form and narrative technique. By concentrating specifically on *The Possessed*, one of Dostoevsky’s more turbulent plunges into the multi-voiced “polyphonic” style of prose so loudly trumpeted by Bakhtin, Holmes thrusts himself into an inheritance of this very same mode of novelistic discourse. Not only does Holmes stretch the face of Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin like a mask across the face of one of his contemporaries, but the voices of his characters all merge into a cacophony of contradictory ideas not unlike the mosaic of communal madness that we encounter in *The Possessed*.

This paper charts the more revealing points of convergence and divergence between the two works as *Go* constitutes a bold recontextualization of Dostoevsky’s literature or, as the critic Harold Bloom would say, a “creative misreading” of Dostoevsky in the context of the hedonistic excesses of an underground, bohemian community in post-World War II America.

Bibliography

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