

Title: "Знаю, что и вы обо мне там думаете": the ethics of realism in Dostoevsky's *Bednye liudi*

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Abstract:

The title of this paper points to a problem that runs deep in Dostoevsky's literary debut, the 1845 epistolary novel *Bednye liudi*: the problem of other minds. «Уж знаю, что и вы обо мне там думаете», writes the lowly clerk Makar Alekseevich Devushkin to (and of) his beloved neighbor Varvara Alekseevna Dobroselovna in the novel's first letter, turning her into the object not only of his affection and gaze, but of his narrative as well. Taking as its point of departure recent scholarship on narrative ethics, this paper will investigate the slew of questions about the ethics of realism and narrative that this letter engenders: as a character-narrator, can Makar Devushkin in fact know that she is thinking of him? The way Makar Devushkin reads is tantamount to the way he knows, but his literary tastes are questionable at best, and he reads naively, tone-deaf to the distinction between narrator and author, reader and character. The privileged knowledge produced by the omniscient third-person narrative voice of realist texts greatly discomforts him, and yet, he also attempts to read (and to know) Varvara Alekseevna in a way that mirrors the fictional narratives that cause him such distress. This paper will posit that *Bednye liudi* is at its heart an ethically fraught novel, shot-through with an anxiety that coheres around the all-too-easy rendering of the mind of the other by a character-narrator who lacks omniscience, but who still strives for something like it anyway. Written into the novel is a deep concern with the ethics of realism, mapped out as a problem of narrative voice, strung along the tension between first- and third-person narration, between limitation and omniscience.