

Title: Mimetic Art and Medicine: The Ill Body as a Challenge to Claims to Truth in Late 19th Century Russian Realism and Medical Knowledge

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Abstract:

This paper will address ways in which competing disciplinary discourses of medicine and literature in their claims to authority over truth shed light on fiction's eternal problematic relationship to truth and reality. Towards the end of the 19th century in Russia, we can witness an emerging tension between medical professionals and fiction writers centered around health and illness. With the advent of literary realism, which commonly deals with tropes of mental and somatic illness as a metonymy for larger social and political perils, medical practitioners began to compete for authority over the discourse about illness and health: they had to confront literary texts' potential to generate and sustain myths and prejudices about illness, the medical profession, and its practitioners, regardless of their factual validity. Some claimed that the legitimacy of medical profession was undermined if literary texts represent society as "ill", "mad", and in need of a cure, while the physically sick protagonist requires no therapeutic treatment. Others expressed their outrage at what they claimed as unfair representation and vulgarization of the figure of the physician ubiquitous in fiction of late 19th century. In this contestation over truth, it is then not surprising that the Russian psychiatrists underlined physical causes of mental illness in order to gain more legitimacy in popular discourse (Angela Britlinger). A tension between cultural representation and scientific positivism becomes apparent: while the Russian writers claimed to be the experts of the soul and "inner" truths, the medical professionals had to become the experts of the body. And yet, paying particular attention to Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, and Veresaev's *Notes of a Doctor*, this paper will discuss the potential that a particular diseased body has to resist claims to truth in both fiction and medical knowledge.