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Title: De-Monologizing Early Symbolist Discourse on Dostoevsky

Abstract:

Referring to early critics of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin wrote in his seminal study, “Out of the concrete and integral consciousnesses of the characters (and of the author himself) they surgically removed ideological theses, which they either arranged in a dynamic dialectical series or juxtaposed to one another as absolute and irreducible antinomies.” For Bakhtin, these critics – identified as “Rozanov, Volynsky, Merezhkovsky, Shestov, and many others” – helped forge the still influential notion that Dostoevsky’s novels are filled with “idea-characters.” However, surveying the work of the above critics and others, such as Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdiaev, reveals a third strategy of characterization relying on neither Bakhtin’s polyphonic consciousnesses nor the character-cum-“ideological thesis” of “philosophically monologizing” Symbolist criticism. This paper explores the Symbolists’ consistent approach to reading Dostoevsky through character archetypes drawn from ancient and romantic literary paradigms, in the process illustrating how Symbolist methods of characterization merged coherently with another *bête noire* of Bakhtin’s, the “novel-tragedy.” Critics such as V. Ivanov, S. Bulgakov, and Merezhkovsky turned to authorial and fictional archetypes to show Dostoevsky’s contiguous connection to past literary models. In this way, Symbolist critics sought to bring Dostoevsky into Western literary paradigms, while Bakhtin later framed him as pioneering a new novelistic form and mode of characterization. This paper thereby seeks to nuance Bakhtin’s polemic with Symbolist critics, moving beyond the frequent invocation of them as straw men, and suggesting alternative, productive ways of engaging with early Dostoevsky criticism.