

Presenter: Sara Ceilidh Orr, Willamette University:

Title: ‘Zachem eto u nas ne odinakovyи pocherk?’: Imitation and alienation in Dostoevsky’s copyist fiction

Abstract:

Beginning with Gogol, nineteenth-century authors turn to the figure of the copy clerk to explore aesthetic problems associated with literary creation and mimesis. The copy clerk works in the same genre as the writer but produces an entirely imitative, “faithful,” document. In Poor Folk (1846), The Double (1846), and “A Weak Heart” (1848), Dostoevsky uses the uncreative work of the copy clerk to expose the paradoxical nature of copying and of writing more generally: No matter how identical the copy is to the original, it is physically distinct and therefore slightly other. Writing thus becomes in Dostoevsky’s fiction an act of simultaneous creation and alienation.

For Dostoevsky’s clerks, this drama of congruities and incongruities plays out along two axes. A vertical axis measures the distance between the copy clerks and higher authorities, those empowered to produce originals, including authors, superiors, and benefactors. The lateral axis connects the copyists with pairings of similar stations, such as friends, doubles, and love interests. Unlike Gogol, Dostoevsky focuses on failures along the lateral axis, including Golyadkin senior’s alienation from Golyadkin junior, Vasya’s loss of his fiancé and his best friend, and Makar Devushkin’s doomed connection with Varvara, emphasizing the distance between the copy clerk and even his most humble desires. This leads to a sense of the copyist’s incongruity not only with his ideal self-image but even with a more functional version of his current self, as if the clerks themselves are flawed copies of a vanished, more perfect self. Through the clerks’ struggles to correct incongruities and connect with their loved ones, Dostoevsky shows that language is not a transparent medium, and that awareness of one’s (self-) alienation is the price of the creative potential of mimesis.