

28B: December 28, 10:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Slot: 28B-1 Dec. 28, 10:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.
Panel: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: The Self, the Word and Power
Chair: Liza Knapp, Columbia University

Title: “Мёртвые пчелы”? — Prince Myshkin’s Anti-Logos Stance in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*
Author: Ani Kokobobo, Columbia University

Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin seems to be positively aching to speak at the start of *The Idiot*, but, at the start of Part II, after a few months in society, he reveals a shift in his verbal behavior. He appears not as the loquacious “philosopher” of the Epanchin parlor, but rather as the laconic “sphinx.” As the narrator confirms, Myshkin – in a tone much reminiscent of Fyodor Tiutchev’s “Silentium!” – confides in Prince Shch. that “he had to restrain himself and keep silent because he had no right to humiliate a thought by stating it.” Myshkin proves incapable of utter verbal restraint and occasionally gives in to his impulses to verbalize, thus zigzagging from silence to loquaciousness. It seems to me that this character’s reaction to language, his reticence and frequent reliance on gesture and facial readings, tells of a non-logocentric, Tiutchevian mode of being that challenges the word’s primacy and diverges from the Bakhtinian dialogic model of the vibrant and “embodied” word. To use Osip Mandelstam’s metaphors, both in the loudest of conversations and during his own verbal outpourings, Myshkin seems to construe words as washed out dead bees, he ignores their buzz, instead weaving them into a gestural, perfunctory necklace.

This paper begins by treating Bakhtin’s “brief” analysis of *The Idiot* in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* and discuss the ways in which the novel’s Swiss prehistory, often referred to by Myshkin as his “inarticulate” past, sets this character apart from standard extracts of “slum naturalism.” This hints at the limitations of Bakhtin’s dialogic and significantly logocentric model. This paper considers Myshkin’s almost deviant verbal behavior in the carnivalesque scandal scene where, in direct opposition to characters like Ganya Epanchin who display an acute (almost pathological) attention to words, he neither internalizes nor engages the verbal medium, but rather metalingually distorts and objectifies words, often taking what seem to be key prophetic insights, and making them interrogative, or, worse still, using the word as a mere building block in syllogisms. The character’s own speech (both inner and outer) is marked by a vagueness and almost gesture-like quality. Instead of engaging the other and shaping inter-subjectivity, Myshkin’s speech searches for a different dimension of interaction, often struggling to attain sincerity and objectivity.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
De Man, Paul. "Dialogue and Dialogism." In Emerson C., Morson G. S. *Rethinking Bakhtin*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989.
Emerson C., Morson G. S. *Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990.
Rice, James. *Dostoyevsky and the Healing Art*. Ardis, Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1985.
Seifrid, Thomas. *The Word Made Self*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Title: «Я ВОТ ОН. А Я ВОТ ОН»: Megalomania and Homecoming in *War and Peace*
Author: Emma Lieber, Columbia University

Readers of *War and Peace* have long taken Napoleon to be, if not quite the villain of the novel, than at least the laughingstock, a megalomaniacal baby engaged in a narcissistic project. Tolstoy’s savage portrait of Napoleon rests in part upon a theory of history in which individual agency is limited and heroic deeds are always partly illusory. In war, as in history as a whole, any single event is made up of so many individual wills, causes, and occurrences that the outcome could never have been planned or predicted. We are all small, insignificant units, and the attainment of maturity means the relinquishing of self-love and omnipotent fantasies.

Yet though Napoleon seems fully worthy of the author’s contempt, it has not gone unnoticed that the most admirable characters in the *War and Peace* (notably Pierre and Andrei) possess worldly ambitions that resemble and even are figured by Napoleon’s. Indeed, critics have pointed out that such drives account for the epic qualities of the novel. This paper suggests a reading of *War and Peace* that is based on this paradox, and on the suggestion

that a grandiose sense of self, though repudiated in the figure of Napoleon, is at the same time associated with the heights of moral and spiritual accomplishment. Throughout the novel, characters experience, specifically in memories of childhood, domestic life, family harmony, and maternal care, intimations of immortality. That is, in recollections of the time of life when we were all, properly, little Napoleons immersed in adoration and infantile satisfaction, they catch glimpses of the celestial home from which we all originated and to which we all will return. In this sense, perhaps it is the status of *War and Peace* as a *novel*—the literary genre that puts the smallest of us in the spotlight, makes heroes of us all, and takes us as seriously as we deserve to take ourselves—that the most noble and uplifting qualities of heroism can be most deeply felt.

Jackson, Robert. "Napoleon in Russian Literature." *Yale French Studies* 1960: 107-118.

Tolstoi, Lev Nikolaevich. *Voina i mir*. Moscow: Eksmo, 2003.

Title: Reading Dostoevsky in the Shadow of the Holocaust

Author: Gina Kovarsky, Virginia Commonwealth University

As Robert L. Jackson writes, "Dostoevsky is still 'becoming,' and we keep discovering, or rediscovering, in him dimensions that both embrace and go beyond his relevance to the nearly apocalyptic events of the twentieth century" (2). From within the frame of Dostoevsky's 19th century consciousness, *The Idiot* explores the horror of death overwhelming the meaning of life. The Holocaust went even beyond the worst of what Dostoevsky could have imagined. And yet, despite that inevitable gap, Dostoevsky's concerns resonate with those taken up in the literature that responds to the Holocaust.

Can a representation of such extreme inhumanity and suffering ever be commensurate? Indeed, as Langer notes, "some still believe that it is impossible to write about the Holocaust and that silence is the only fitting response" (3). Readers of *The Idiot* will remember Ippolit's confrontation with a related question: "Can one conceive as an image [*obraz*] that which has no image?" That question and the passage on the Holbein Christ offer a way into considering the idea, voiced by Lyotard and others, that the Holocaust is "the endpoint of the historical process as well as of rational reason" (Kaes 207).

Yet it is also in the Holocaust's shadow that we may be better able to discern the relevance, not only of Dostoevsky's acknowledgment of language's limits, but also of his insight into a restorative principle kept alive through communication. Reading him through the prism of witness accounts can broaden our vision of the ethical significance of narration for Dostoevsky. The paper will also show that in focusing on Dostoevsky's concern with "gesture" and "measure," we may become better readers of Levi and Spiegelman, both of whom reveal a similar preoccupation with narrative decorum.

References

Jackson, Robert Louis. *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions*. Stanford UP, 1993.

Kaes, Anton. "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema." in Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*. Trans. Stuart Woolf. New York: Collier, 1993.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Volume I: *My Father Bleeds History* and Volume II: *And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.