

Title: Polyphony as Narrative Violence in Dostoevsky's "The Meek One"

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In *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin declares that polyphony is what makes Dostoevsky the "realist in the highest sense": the new position of the author in regard to his hero permits Dostoevsky to depict his characters' true coming into being. Polyphony gives its practitioners a new kind of seeing from within, since polyphonic characters are given freedom to pronounce their word without uncontrollable external pressure from the author. Bakhtin begins his discussion of Dostoevsky's "small scale Copernican revolution" concerning the relationship between the author and the hero with an almost complete citation of the preface from a short story "The Meek One." In the story's preface Dostoevsky writes about the truth that the novella's protagonist reaches through the process of narration. Bakhtin calls this truth, "the truth of one's own self-consciousness." In my paper I will contest the nature of the pawnbroker's truth by examining the ethical implications of intersubjective relationships in Dostoevsky's novella. I will argue that while the narrator does come to a clear understanding of the events that preceded his wife's suicide, the ethical value of this truth depends on whether it is shared by the consciousnesses of other protagonists, and by extension by the consciousnesses of the story's readers. By analyzing the story, I will show that the notorious "unfinalizability" of Dostoevsky's prose is in fact a sign of the ethically compromised consciousness of the hero, which seeks to usurp the authorial position from the consciousnesses of other protagonists. By allowing the heroes' word to be "uncontested" Dostoevsky creates an open circle, which the reader needs to complete by pronouncing a moral judgment on those participating in narrative coercion. As Dostoevsky shows in "The Meek One," physical violence is always preceded by the narrative one.