

Makar Devushkin and the Ordeal of Artistic Manhood

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In his critical study of the young Dostoevsky Victor Terras praises the author's first work, the epistolary novel *Poor Folk* only for its style: The content is poor, the motivation for the exchange of letters is feeble, the plot unsophisticated and implausible.¹ However, other readings, mostly western and recent, and, in fact, Terras' own close reading of the novel refute this harsh judgement. My own reading has convinced me that what Mrs. Somerwil-Ayrton mentions in passing in her thematic analysis of the early works is, in fact, central to the author's intention, namely that *Poor Folk* introduces the theme of "communication as a necessary element in the human condition."²

In the following, after a few words on the genre of the novel, I will focus upon the motivation for the exchange of letters, or, more precisely, the different motivations of the hero and the heroine. Their motivations involve not only the problem of establishing a personality, but also the literary – or should I say epistolary – construction of gender. Finally, I will show that for the hero a special quest is involved.

¹ Terras, 1969

² Somerwil-Ayrton, 1988, p.46.

I

The main characters of *Poor Folk* are, at first glance, a middle-aged male protector and a young girl in need of protection. In the traditional, i.e. sentimental novel of letters there would be, once these roles had been established, only a certain amount of plot possibilities and they would all imply romance and/or tragedy. In spite of the end of *Poor Folk*, which in its own Dostoevskian way lives up to these expectations, the matching plot never unfolds. A major reason for this prolegomatic character of the plot is, in my view, that the sexual identities of the protagonists are unstable. Their names seem to confirm an uncharacteristical pattern of sexual roles: Makar Devushkin is the blessedly innocent, inept protector and Varvara Dobro-sëlova the barbarian protégée. Mr. Virginal and Miss Good-village, as Charles Passage has dubbed them.³

Victor Terras has described *Poor Folk* as one of the young Dostoevsky's "experiments in human existence." In this novel, the experiment comes about when Dostoevsky casts the poor clerk of the Natural school in the role of the Sentimental lover.⁴ I will come back to the result of the experiment later. The amorous epistolary genre ensures the perfect romantic-sentimental setting for the experiment. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that this genre is by its nature oblique and elliptical: the correspondents know what have happened between them, wherefore the letters frequently contain only repercussions of events that are never narrated. What "happens" in the letters, therefore, is

³ Makar is the Russian form of the Greek Macarios, meaning "blessed"; Devushkin is derived from *devushka*, meaning "virgin" or "maiden"; Varvara is the Russian form of Barbara: "a barbarian woman"; and Dobrosëlova is a combination of *dobr-*, "good" and *selo*, "village." Passage, 1982, pp. 19, 127.

⁴ Terras, 1969, p. 56.

constituted mostly by reenacted events, e.g. reenacted seduction, persuasion, rejection, confession.⁵

As Wolf Schmid has underlined, *Poor Folk* is not only a novel of letters, but a novel of correspondence, and therefore consists of alternating, dialogically responding texts.⁶ In the frame of the novel, then, the relationship of Devushkin and Varvara develops in a *dialogue of reenacted events*.

I would like to point to two aspects of the dialogue which are important for the understanding of the relationship of Devushkin and Varvara. First, *the answer* is the pivot of the dialogue. This is why both Devushkin and Varvara constantly pose questions – however unimportant – and urge the other to respond. The questions are posed not so much for the sake of partaking in the other's life, knowledge or perspective as for the sake of confirmation, of the answer in itself. This is evident from Devushkin's idea of what I would call a "curtain-semiotics," which he presents to Varvara – his opposite neighbour – in his very first letter.

If you've lowered the curtain, that means: 'Good night, Makar Alekseyevich, it's bedtime!' If you've raised it, that means– 'Good morning, Makar Alekseyevich, did you sleep well?' or 'How are you today, Makar Alekseyevich? As for myself, thanks be to the Creator, I am well and happy!' Do you see, my little darling, what a skilful arrangement this is? You don't even need to write me letters! [И писем не нужно] It's clever, isn't it? And what's more it was my idea. I'm rather good at these things, Varvara Alekseyevna, don't you agree?

(*Poor Folk* p.4)[*Sobranie sochinenij*, vol. I, p.14]⁷

⁵ Altman, 1983.

⁶ Schmid, 1986, p. 82.

⁷ Quotations are taken from the English translation (page number in brackets). Throughout I add references to the Russian original (page number in square brackets).

It is noteworthy that while in the traditional amorous epistolary novel the letters would be rendered superfluous by the presence of the beloved, Devushkin, who is very reluctant to meet Varvara in spite of her invitations, would exchange them only for another communication of signs.

The other important aspect of the dialogue is that it is often, and certainly so in *Poor Folk*, "false," the true dialogue being the one between equal subjects, between *Ich und Du* in Martin Buber's sense.⁸ The false dialogue – the *Ich-Es* relation – occurs when the subject regards the other as an object. In other words, and with respect to Devushkin and Varvara: false dialogue begins when you see and interpret the other only as part of your own story, not considering his/her equally valid version.

The stories of Devushkin and Varvara are never completely congruous. His frequent stories of the generous protector and the poor dependent girl are met by her independent discourse and her contemptful "look at yourself! – you should buy yourself some new clothes"(48) [48]. At another time her despair of being poor and ill and alone in the world is belittled by his almost babbling light-heartedness: 'do as I do, you are not ill if you decide not to be, eat the sweets I am sending you and be happy!' (56–59) [54–57]. The incongruence can also be explained by a struggle for dominance in the world of the correspondence: each of them wishes his/her story – with its reenacted events – to be confirmed by the other. This wish, in turn, is engendered by their different motives for writing.

II

Varvara is a realist. She has a practical attitude to life and literature, her letters are often rather businesslike and

⁸ Buber, 1995.

throughout considerably shorter than Devushkin's. She has written a journal of her childhood and youth, but repeatedly claims not to know why she wrote it. At other times she is quite aware that her letter-writing is a place of refuge from the worries of real life, a diversion. It is clear, however, that her letters are also a way of telling and thereby composing her past. A version of her life. The main "events" of her letters are therefore not concerned with Devushkin and their relationship. What she reenacts are childhood impressions, her father's death, what "they" did (implying manipulation), what Bykov did (implying seduction), and her mother's death. In her letters to Devushkin she presents herself as the helpless victim of circumstance, asking repeatedly: "what will become of me?" She receives his gifts and the protection offered by his name – with becoming reluctance! – but she denies him affirmation of his indispensability.

Varvara's real life, however, is outside the letters and it is here that she is confronted with real choice when Bykov, her seducer, hunts her up and presents her with a purely pragmatic marriage proposition. When she accepts, she also accepts Bykov's degradation of literature and of the "romantic nonsense" (his words) of her relation with Devushkin. It is worth mentioning that the anti-intellectual, pragmatic Bykov is the antithesis not only of Devushkin but also of Varvara's beloved, now dead, Pokrovsky (who was Bykov's illegitimate son!). She therefore leaves behind not only Devushkin and his letters, and her sacred memory of Pokrovsky, but also her own literary creativity, the chance of a new version of her life. What Varvara gains, however, is the freedom granted by marriage – freedom from uncertainty, unprotectedness, and poverty – and a return to the often-dreamt-of countryside of her childhood. The despair in her very last Postscriptum – "Remember your poor Varenka!" – reveals that she herself suspects that she

will not find the Eden of her dreams: in this last version of her life she equals herself to Karamzin's tragic heroine.

Varvara's self-willed enslavement makes the hot-tempered Bykov both her father, husband, lover and master – the roles she has been denying Devushkin.

Devushkin's motives for writing are very different from Varvara's. He is a romantic, a sentimentalist, who lives in his letters rather than outside them. To him, therefore, the correspondence with Varvara is a matter of life and death. It is obvious that where Varvara is the *agens* of the relationship, Devushkin is the *agens* of the correspondence.⁹ Most critics agree that Devushkin's love for Varvara is genuine. Victor Terras sees the result of Dostoevsky's Devushkin experiment as proving the fact that, in spite of Devushkin's lack of success in the role of lover, the nature and greatness of his love is not different from any refined hero's.¹⁰ His tragedy be then that his love is unrequited, as Varvara is more concerned about herself and her material and moral situation. One critic even contends that Devushkin is victimized by Varvara.¹¹

I do not fully agree with these readings. It is obvious that Devushkin – just like Varvara – loves with a purpose, and that his own person is the major object of his concern.¹² Their epistolary dialogue, which is more often false than not, reveals egotism on both parts, an egotism which is also evident in their already mentioned struggle for dominance. In this respect they are alike, related by their self-absorption,

⁹ Somerwil-Ayrton, 1988, pp. 60, 96.

¹⁰ Terras, 1969, p. 56.

¹¹ Somerwil-Ayrton, 1988, p. 98.

¹² If this is the way "refined heroes" love, Terras and others are, of course, right.

showing only self-pity where the other begs for sympathy and understanding.¹³

Varvara is necessary to the man in Devushkin. By her he tries to achieve masculinity, in spite of his name (!) and his previous failures and lack of drive in this direction. In his 46 years he only had one love affair, when he was very young: excited by a group of other young men's infatuation with an actress, he went along, fell in love with her without having seen more than a glimpse, and ruined himself in order to buy her flowers and drive past her windows in smart cabs, until one day he got bored (64–65) [60–61]. Although officially Devushkin wants to be a father to Varvara, the fact that he finds it necessary to repeatedly assure her of this, his fear that they be "found out" by the neighbours, the fact that he actually accepts being called a Lovelace, and his caressing her with an overwhelming amount of diminutives – all this reveals that his love is not purely paternal. Through his relation to Varvara Devushkin attempts to establish himself as bread-winner, protector, benefactor, and mentor. He tries to be resolute, active, reassured, and to provide answers even if he has to invent the questions himself. At the top of his self-invented masculinity he reenacts events from his sparse direct contact with Varvara: 1) I saw you my little frail bird, 2) you kissed me (once!), 3) eat the sweets I gave you (and remember me each time you put them in your mouth (!)). The repetition of these events could be interpreted as signs of his desire to patronize, seduce and satisfy her. He is trying to play the roles of father, lover, and husband at one time. When Devushkin is not up to one of these roles, he very quickly falls into the complementary feminine roles, i.e. the roles he has been trying to fit Varvara into. He diminishes, apologizes for his behaviour, remains passive,

¹³ Perhaps this is the common denominator suggested by Dostoyevsky's choice of patronymics for his hero and heroine: they are the son and the daughter of Aleksej (Alekseevich/Alekseevna).

and asks questions instead of providing answers. Varvara, accordingly, takes over the active part.

There is a clear, general development in the alteration of sexual roles. From the first letter Devushkin launches himself as man and protector and struggles to force Varvara into the roles of daughter and mistress. He strains himself financially and mentally in his effort to succeed (3–68) [13–63]. After three months things begin to go wrong. This is just after he has read Gogol's "The Overcoat," in which he finds himself and his poverty indecently exhibited. For two months Varvara now plays the role of protector, although she manages to persuade him to try to borrow money for her sake (Bykov is catching up with her). Devushkin is disintegrating into non-existence (69–106) [63–91]. The climax of his humiliation is a new turning point (106–110) [91–94]. He makes a copying mistake – the ultimate catastrophe in the universe of the copying clerk – and is summoned by His Excellency, who sees him in his poor state – the ultimate catastrophe in Devushkin's universe. He is now "finished as a human being." His Excellency, however, having rebuked Devushkin for his mistake, gives him a hundred rouble note. Although literally dying of gratitude, Devushkin is now ready to relaunch himself. But a serious problem faces him: Bykov has entered the scene, and Varvara is leaving. While Devushkin has gone from confidence through despair to new desperate hope, Varvara, who was at first grateful, has become casual and even cynical towards him. In her last letter she refers to him and his letters as already past tense (126–127) [106].

III

Where Varvara's project aims at material and personal security, Devushkin's concern is personality and prestige, notions which are inextricably connected or even identic in

his mind, and which imply material security. These strivings are concentrated in his effort to find *his own style*. In an early letter he begs Varvara to help him on the way.

So what is wrong with the fact that I earn my living by copying? Is copying a sin? 'He just copies documents,' they say. 'That rat of a government clerk makes his living by copying!' Yet what is dishonourable about it? My handwriting is clear, well-formed and pleasant to look at, and His Excellency is satisfied with it; I copy his most important documents for him. Of course, I have no lite-rary style, I mean, I know I have none, curse it; that is why I have not succeeded in rising in the service, and why even now, my darling, I write to you in this plain manner, with no frills, just as the thoughts come into my heart... All this I know; and indeed, if everyone were to start being an author, who would do the copying? That is the question I ask you, and I beg you to answer it, little mother.

(47) [47-48]

Two weeks later, in spite of Varvara's lack of support, but inspired by his new acquaintance, the amateurish writer Ratazyayev, Devushkin already fondles the thought of becoming a writer.

You know, sometimes I have an idea... well, what if I were to write something, what would come of it? Say, for example, that quite suddenly, for no particular reason, a book were to appear with the title *The poems of Makar Devushkin*? Well, what would you say then, my little angel? How would that seem to you, what would you think?

(57) [53]

On several occasions Devushkin comments on his own style, evaluating himself and his progress. During his crisis his concern for style is curbed, almost gone, only to burst out, all

of a sudden, in connection with his – indeed well-written – reflections on the existence of the poor man.

To tell you the truth, my dear, I began describing all this to you partly in order to unburden my heart, but more particularly in order to provide you with an example of the good style of my literary compositions. Because I think you will probably agree, little mother, that my style has improved of late.
(102) [88]

Finding his own style, succeeding as an author is for Devushkin a question of succeeding as the author of his own life.¹⁴ As R.L. Jackson puts it, Devushkin, like other of Dostoevsky's later heroes, e.g. Prince Myshkin and Dmitry Karamazov, experiences the *quest for (the ideal, classical) form* as a subjective need: in order to live he must make an artistic work out of himself.¹⁵ The model of Devushkin's striving is, I believe, that of *artistic manhood*.¹⁶ Given his bad taste in literature and his obvious lack of talent as a man, his success is more than doubtful. But Devushkin is not a master of self-knowledge either. He stakes everything on the project, and on Varvara as his triumph card. What he hopes to win is creativity, where he is now only copying, personality, where he is now a nobody and a victim, status and money to escape humiliation and poverty, and masculinity to refute his name.

When Devushkin fails as an author – and the failure is complete when he loses his addressee – he disintegrates.

¹⁴ I borrow this expression from another of Dostoevsky's early works, *White Nights*, in which the narrator explains the phenomenon of the "dreamer" (himself) to Nastenka: "(...) he desires nothing, because he is above desire, because he has everything he needs, because he is surfeited, because he is the author of his own life [художник своей жизни] and creates each hour according to his most recent fancy." (*Uncle's Dream and Other Stories*, p. 89.) [*Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, vol. II, p. 116.]

¹⁵ Jackson, 1966, ch. 1.

¹⁶ Cf. Sussman, 1995, Introduction.

Although from a stylistic point of view his last letter is, even if it ends in confusion, perhaps the best, most poetic and inspired, certainly the less self-conscious and less forced he has ever written, he seems to be stranded on the border between life and literature, having lost sight of both. In his very last lines all the elements of his quest run desparately into each other – Varvara’s presence (now endangered), the importance for his whole existence, the necessity of communication (the letters), the ambition of developing his own style – only to end in a tired renunciation of the whole project.

What is he to you anyway, this Bykov? What’s suddenly made him so attractive to you? Perhaps it’s because he’s forever buying you furbelows [фалбала], perhaps that’s why? But I mean, what are furbelows? What good are they? I mean to say, little mother, they’re just rubbish! It’s a question of a man’s life, and yet here you are, little mother, looking for furbelows – for rags! (...) ... No, you must write to me again, write me another little letter about it all (...) Otherwise, my heavenly angel, this will be my last letter; and, I mean, it’s impossible that this letter should be my last. I mean, how can it be, so suddenly, my last? No, I will write, and you will write... Otherwise the style I’m developing now won’t... Oh, my darling, what is style! I mean, I don’t even know what I’m writing, I’ve absolutely no idea, I know nothing of it, I read none of it over, I (don’t) correct my style, I write only in order to write, only in order to write as much as possible to you... My little dove, my darling, my little mother!
(129) [108]

These last, unambitious words resemble a declaration of genuine, self-forgetting love: Varvara is no longer the means, but the end. They also resemble the beginning of a true dialogue, which, however, is never to be continued. Devushkin’s last letter atypically bears neither date nor signature. Even the “blessed maiden” is gone. It is part of the novel’s cruel

irony that Varvara's last letter also breaks the pattern. In all her letters she insisted on being "Varvara Dobrosëlova" or "V.D." to "Makar Devushkin." Her final letter, however, is signed only "V." I would seem that the moment she leaves him she agrees to be his.

Devushkin and his project is defeated, his quest is dethroned by "furbelows." But do Bykov's furbelows differ essentially from Devushkin's sweets? If not, Devushkin has himself been undermining his project all along.

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