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Vran'yo: Dostoevsky On Lying

"Once a person finds a listener and starts talking," wrote Fedor Dostoevsky, "it is already impossible not to lie." His 1873 article "Nechto o vran'ye" — "Something about Lying" — forms the basis used by Deborah Martinsen to explore Dostoevsky's contradictory views on lying, which stemmed from his twin roles of author and journalist. Martinsen, a post-doctoral fellow at the Harriman Institute, talked about these tensions in a presentation February 27, 1990. She believes that Dostoevsky the author celebrated the creative and socially interactive elements of lying, whereas Dostoevsky the journalist condemned widespread lying and emphasized the need for truth in society.

Something About Lying

Dostoevsky addressed the phenomenon of *vran'yo*, which he saw as particularly Russian (there is no direct translation) though bordering on the universal. He differentiates between two kinds of *vran'yo* — a combination of hyperbole and false representation on the one hand, and improvisation and uninformed prattle on the other. It is different from *lozh'*, malevolent and manipulative lying. *Vran'yo* is a norm of social interaction incorporating three principles: mutual hospitality — "You allow others to lie and they you"; entertainment — to pass the time pleasantly; and aesthetic effect — to enhance the pleasure of the teller and the listener. Dostoevsky the journalist demonstrates that *vran'yo* is largely derivative and banal, based on lack of information, concern for appearances, and the narcissistic desire for approval.

But behind this wish to please lurks a shame which Dostoevsky ascribes to Russians' fundamental lack of self-respect. Lebyadkin, in *The Possessed*, is distressed by his whole existence and the arbitrariness of life. Believing the fact that he was born in Russia is responsible for his every misfortune he says, "In my opinion, Russia is a freak of nature, nothing more." Russians lie for the sake of appearances, to recreate reality, or because the truth is prosaic and

uninteresting. Kolya Ivolgin in *The Idiot* scolds a woman, "No matter how much I tried to convince you that the prince was almost well, you didn't want to believe me because to imagine him at death's door was far more interesting."

Going Beyond the Bounds

In his 1873 article, Dostoevsky mournfully ponders the implications of a society-wide devaluation of the truth. He complains of the unrestrained liars he sees around him. "You lose all hope for something independent and saving for the nation." In public, he says, the Russian intelligentsia cultivates a European image, but in their homes they throw up their hands: "To hell with opinions! Who cares about whippings?"

In his fiction, Dostoevsky is fascinated by those who go beyond the bounds, who become enraptured with their own fantasies. To break the code of hospitality, to catch someone in his lies, becomes a social offense. In *The Idiot*, General Ivolgin tells a story about being Napoleon's pageboy during the 1812 campaign. Napoleon leaves Russia, signing Ivolgin's sister's album with the inscription, "Never lie. Your true friend, Napoleon." Lebedev, not to be topped, tells Ivolgin that he has a wooden leg because he lost his real leg in 1812. He buried the leg in Vaganovsky cemetery in Moscow under the epitaph "Rest, dear dust, until the joyous morning," and returns yearly to hold a memorial for it. Ivolgin points out that Lebedev was too young to fight in 1812 and that wooden legs were not invented until much later. A peeved Lebedev shoots back, "If you were a pageboy to Napoleon in 1812 then allow me to bury a leg in Vaganovsky."

In his article, Dostoevsky claims that reciprocal lying is the norm of social interaction among all Russians at all social gatherings. In his fiction, he represents people drawing upon lies to assert their individuality, to build themselves up and to establish their independence from the family, community or authority. "If you tell your own lies you are a human



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being," says Razumikhin in *Crime and Punishment*. "If you tell someone else's truth you are only half."

The Golden Age in One's Pocket

To Dostoevsky the journalist, truth clearly does matter. For what can be the salvation for a society ruled by lies? Dostoevsky offers an idealistic response, looking to women for hope. "Women lie less. Some don't lie at all." Women, he thinks, are more serious than men; they will engage in a cause for its own sake rather than for the sake of appearance. Yet in Dostoevsky's novels, some women not only lie but are overtly obsessed with appearances.

Dostoevsky also uses his fiction to expose human behavior and to deal with the relationship of truth and self-fulfillment. The monk Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, tells Fedor, "The important thing is not to be ashamed of yourself, for all this [lying] comes from that.... The important thing is not to lie to yourself. The person who lies to himself and listens to his own lies gets to the point where he cannot distinguish the truth either in himself or around him and

consequently he loses respect for himself and for others. Respecting no one, he ceases to love, and having no love, in order to occupy and amuse himself, he gives himself up to passions and coarse pleasures and becomes a beast in his vices. And all this comes from endless lying to others and himself."

Martinsen states that "the author wants readers to recoil before the portrayal of the boundless liar. Surely we won't take him as an ideal to imitate." As both journalist and author he condemns self-delusion. "The hardest thing in life is to live and not lie, and not to believe one's own lies." By lying, one loses the ability to know oneself and therefore the ability "to find the Golden Age in one's pocket." This is to say that Heaven on earth is attainable if everybody would only desist from the game of appearances and speak the truth.

Where Dostoevsky the journalist conveys his moral message in an overt, idealistic manner, Dostoevsky the author relies on the power of his realism. The journalist condemns all lying, but the author celebrates its source in the fantasy impulse which is an integral part of Western literature.

Reported by Jeff Zelkowitz

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