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Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: On the Verge of Nihilism by Paolo
Stellino (review)

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Heidegger's relationship with Conservative Revolution members is also provided by Francesco Cattaneo in "Sul concetto di rivoluzione nella filosofia di Martin Heidegger. Alcune note storico-ontologiche." Although clearly stating that Heidegger cannot be considered a thinker of the movement, Cattaneo proposes an original reading of his abandonment of political engagement as a transformation that brings his philosophy closer to Nietzsche's sense of "thoughts that come with doves' feet" (*Z II* "The stillest Hour").

The last contribution, by Manlio Iofrida, "La ricezione di Nietzsche in Francia fra le due guerre: Thierry Maulnier fra Maurras e Foucault," provides a glimpse of the French reception of Nietzsche at the time of the Conservative Revolution movement. Giving an account of the interpretations of Charles Maurras and Thierry Maulnier, Iofrida traces a line that leads from them, passing through the early Nietzsche *renaissance*, to Michel Foucault's reading.

Overall, *Nietzsche nella Rivoluzione conservatrice* is a clear and rich volume. It will be an important resource especially for scholars interested in this ambiguous and tragic period of the last century, a period that the volume analyzes with great lucidity and sense for nuances.

Paolo Stellino, *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: On the Verge of Nihilism*.

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In his late work Nietzsche professed profound admiration for Dostoevsky, calling him "the only psychologist [...] from whom I had something to learn" (*TI* "Skirmishes" 45). He also said, characteristically complicating matters, "I am grateful to him in a remarkable way, however much he goes against my deepest instincts" (*KGB* III/5, letter 1151). There is, however, another well-established way of connecting the two authors, due to the Symbolist writer and critic Dmitri Merezhkovsky, which regards Dostoevsky as preemptively refuting Nietzsche's teachings through his portrayal of the nihilistic protagonists of his great novels.

Paolo Stellino takes up both these ways of connecting the two authors (the latter of which, as he shows, has been remarkably influential in literary circles). They must evidently be approached in different ways: questions of influence have a place in the first approach but not the second. Accordingly, Stellino divides his book into two parts, the first of which is mainly concerned with philological considerations about precisely what Nietzsche read when. The second, considerably shorter, part engages Merezhkovsky's thesis through a comparative study of the utterances of Dostoevsky's nihilistic protagonists and those of Nietzsche.

In part I, Stellino sifts the evidence for and against Nietzsche's having read specific texts. There is, it turns out, no decisive evidence that Nietzsche read any of Dostoevsky's four great novels, except *The Demons*. What we do know is that Nietzsche's reading of Dostoevsky began, at the latest, in the winter of 1886–87, when he claimed to have first stumbled upon Dostoevsky in a bookshop in Nice. From then on he read a series of French volumes published by Plon (listed here with their respective publication dates): *L'esprit souterrain* (1886), *Souvenirs de la maison des morts* (1886), *Humiliés et offensés* (1884), and *Les possédés* (1886). He also briefly had in his hands a little Reclam volume titled *Erzählungen von F. M. Dostojewskij* (1886), but disliked the translation, the work of "the awful Jew Goldschmidt (with his synagogue-like rhythm)" (93). (This egregious bit of casual anti-Semitism attracts no comment from Stellino.) Stellino's intimate familiarity with the French editions has its payoffs. *L'esprit souterrain*, it turns out, is not a straightforward translation of *Notes from Underground*, but a composite that amalgamates a translation of Dostoevsky's story *The Landlady* with *Notes from Underground*, the latter appearing in a highly mutilated version that involves transposing one of the characters from *The Landlady* and turning him into the protagonist of the *Notes*. When Nietzsche describes the *Notes* as "a sort of self-ridicule of γνῶθι σαυτόν [know thyself]," this characterization, as Stellino suggests, seems to derive directly from an editorial interpolation (not marked as such) in the French volume.

Part I might well be read as a study in what Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence. Stellino repeatedly resists the overhasty conclusions that previous authors have drawn about Nietzsche's reading of Dostoevsky from the flimsiest evidence and by means of the most contorted and speculative arguments. Much of this previous argumentation seems to involve

a naïve picture of influence that takes it to be a kind of pushing motion that the influencer exercises on the influenced. Such a notion is particularly inapt in the case of Nietzsche, who is almost always a creative appropriator of what he finds in others. As Michael Baxandall taught long ago, to understand the workings of influence we must often know as much about the recipient as the giver (see his *Patterns of Intention* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985], 58–62).

Stellino's account bears out that, if we look closely, we find that often Nietzsche is already operating with some notion or image before finding it in Dostoevsky, and going on to elaborate it further in light of this discovery. Nietzsche had got the term *ressentiment* from Eugen Dühring; but he then comes to see in Dostoevsky one of the great psychologists of *ressentiment* and his own conception becomes palpably richer. The subterranean man, again, figures in Nietzsche's work before he comes across *Notes from Underground*, and it is hence of very limited point to speculate (and Stellino only briefly pauses to do so) whether Nietzsche had got hold of this text while composing the 1886 Preface to *D*, in whose opening sentence he presents himself as a "subterranean man' at work." But again, the subsequent development of the figure of the subterranean surely owes something to Dostoevsky (as the subtler treatment we get in *GM I* brings out). Similarly, the "pale criminal" is already there in *Z IV*, before Nietzsche's first encounter with Dostoevsky. Stellino reproves Thomas Mann for supposing that Nietzsche was influenced by Dostoevsky in *Z* (76). But the question of direct causal influence is not the interesting one, and was not Mann's main point; that of the connection between the two (and Nietzsche's ability to *recognize* the pale criminal in Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*) is. Often Nietzsche's sources are multiple, with the conception he works out for himself constituting a synthesis of this manifold. While others might try to determine whether Nietzsche's conception of the "idiot" comes from Dostoevsky *or* from Charles Féré, Stellino sensibly says "it is perfectly plausible that Nietzsche's understanding of Jesus was *both* influenced by Féré and Dostoevsky" (113). What is far more interesting is whether Dostoevsky and Nietzsche offer analogous *explanations* of the type of the "idiot" (instanced by Prince Myshkin and Jesus the Redeemer, respectively): that of an epileptic whose emotional development has been arrested in puberty. Stellino broaches this question but does not develop it.

In part II, Stellino addresses Merezhkovsky's thesis that Dostoevsky had anticipated, and preemptively refuted, Nietzsche's views through the fates

to which he subjects the principal nihilistic characters of his great novels—namely, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Kirillov in *The Demons*, and Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Whether a portrayal of a fictional character as undergoing a spiritual crisis, or even committing suicide, amounts to a “refutation” in any logically respectable sense is, of course, moot.)

In a suggestive analysis of Ivan’s views, Stellino points out a peculiar tension in his reasoning. Ivan rests his rejection of God on the problem of evil: he finds the world to be full of terrible cruelty and the suffering of innocents. But he claims that, once we have, in light of this realization, denied the existence of such a murderous God, everything is permitted, and so the most terrible crimes (including those that had provoked Ivan’s outrage and set the whole argument going in the first place) are sanctioned. This way of arguing is far from any found in Nietzsche. Stellino furthermore persuasively brings out the contrast between Ivan’s endorsement of the conditional “If God does not exist, everything is permitted” (which actually, it transpires, more frequently appears as “If there is no immortality, everything is permitted”) and Nietzsche’s use of the mantra “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.” Nietzsche’s mantra is, first of all, not a conditional, and therefore cannot play an analogous role to Ivan’s conditional claim in a *modus ponens* argument with the conclusion “Everything is permitted.” Nor is it a claim about the world: the use of it that interests him is that to which it was put by the Order of Assassins (from whom he derives it), as an incantation to steel oneself against the harshness of existence. As Stellino rightly insists, Nietzsche never affirms the mantra directly. And, anyway, “Nothing is true” raises further puzzles that are absent in Ivan’s views. Things get even trickier when Nietzsche varies this with “Everything is false.” Stellino briefly enters the quagmire of Nietzsche’s views about truth (179–83), but is curiously inured to the radically self-defeating character of “Everything is false” (at least “Nothing is true” might allow that everything is neither true nor false—perhaps a slightly less unintelligible prospect). Leaving the specific issues about the two mantras aside, though, one might profitably ask whether Nietzsche does, after all, draw conclusions from his diagnosis of the death of God that are similar to Ivan’s conclusion that “everything is permitted.” Stellino persuasively contrasts Nietzsche’s “immoralism” with Ivan’s “indifferentism,” and opens up a discussion about Nietzsche’s stance on the status of values in some of the most philosophically probing pages of the book. This discussion is too brief, however, to deliver the desired

assurance that Nietzsche's stance really has the resources to save us from a moral free-for-all.

Nietzsche's relation to Kirillov is perhaps most significant, since it is documented in notebooks (combining excerpts and commentary) in which Nietzsche directly considers Kirillov's *arguments* (KSA 13:11[331]–[351]). It is also here that the central feature of Merezhkovsky's picture becomes important. This is the idea that both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche operate with a dichotomy between the man-god (*cheloveko-bog*) and the God-man (*Bogochelovek*). Nietzsche and Kirillov are then both supposed to be advocates of the man-god who emerges in the light of the denial of God (with Dostoevsky himself wanting to reaffirm the good news that the God-man has come to dwell with us). Unfortunately, Kirillov's argumentation seems to have a blatant non-sequitur at its heart: "According to [Kirillov's conception], whereas God's freedom is unlimited, human freedom is limited by God. Thus, once the existence of God is denied, human freedom becomes unlimited" (211). That man's freedom is limited by God does not entail that when *this* limitation is removed, *all* limitation is removed and man now assumes God's unlimitedness. While Nietzsche does, as Stellino points out, evoke the infinite ocean and the open sea (GS 124, 343), he does not proclaim that humans now take up the mantle of God.

Stellino's book is a welcome contribution to Anglophone writing on Nietzsche, which often ignores Dostoevsky altogether. Still, his claim that "in Anglophone countries . . . Nietzsche's reception of Dostoevsky still lacks adequate scrutiny" (18) may seem an overstatement. In particular, Stellino himself draws repeatedly on Charles Miller's excellent series of articles from the 1970s covering much of the same ground in a scholarly and insightful way. As a contribution to the Anglophone literature, it is regrettable that the book is marred by often unidiomatic English and erratic punctuation. Some linguistic features will particularly try the patience of some readers, such as the use, throughout, of "prove" to mean "provide evidence for."

This book touches on a considerable range of philosophical themes where Dostoevsky and Nietzsche can be brought into a significant interplay: the critique of the possibility of self-knowledge, the nature of "idiocy," the psychology of *ressentiment*, masochism, and the "weak heart," and larger questions regarding the implications of nihilism for the Christian value

system. One might wish Stellino had been bolder about leaving behind the previous, often bafflingly pointless, debates about philological matters that he rightly criticizes, and in general that there had been less of part I and more of part II. The book covers much, and although it sometimes deals with the philosophical issues very briskly, it performs the important service of setting out the agenda for further discussion of this multifariously rich and complex relationship.