

Raffaella Vassena

Reawakening National Identity

Dostoevskii's *Diary of a Writer* and
its Impact on Russian Society

Peter Lang

Diary of a Writer

Prologue

On 8 June 1880, during the Moscow Pushkin Festival, Dostoevskii read his speech on the poet. Summing up his ideas about Russia's mission in the world, this speech represented the final phase of a thought Dostoevskii had taken up many years before. Ever since the early 1860s, Dostoevskii had seen Pushkin as an exemplar of the uniquely Russian gift of universal reconciliation, and in 1880 he felt that the fateful moment to achieve his goal had finally come:

There is one exalted aspect in my literary activity, my goal and hope (and not in achieving fame and money, but in achieving the synthesis of my artistic and poetic idea, that is, the desire to speak my mind in something, as fully as possible, before I die).¹

In 1880, the artistic rule that had always characterized Dostoevskii's work – of not 'saying the last word' – gave way to a new moral imperative. The eminence that Dostoevskii had attained by that time gave him the right to be absolutely firm in expressing his most radical beliefs: the letters of that period presuppose a forthcoming battle against enemies and thus reveal Dostoevskii's intention to speak his mind.² In the letters written to his wife between May and June 1880,

- 1 Letter of 8 March 1869 to Sofia A. Ivanova (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Complete letters*, trans. by David Lowe and Ronald Meyer, 5 vols. [Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1991], 3: 143–44).
- 2 See the letter to Konstantin P. Pobedonostsev of 19 May 1880: 'I have prepared my speech about Pushkin, and precisely in the most extreme spirit of my (that is, our, I make bold to thus express my self) convictions, and therefore I expect, perhaps, a certain amount of abuse. But I don't want to be put out of countenance and I'm not afraid, and one should serve one's cause, and I will speak without fear' (Dostoevsky, *Complete letters*, 5: 199–200); see the letter to his wife of 31 May: 'I wonder how meeting Annenkov will go. Will he really offer his hand? I wouldn't want any confrontations' (*ibid.*, 223), and 5 June: 'Ostrovskii, the local Jupiter, came up to me. Turgenev ran up courteously. The

Dostoevskii stresses the need for his speech to stir his listeners, and defines it as ‘his main debut’ – the chance to win the same eminence as Tolstoi and Turgenev.³

The reality exceeded Dostoevskii’s expectations: his Pushkin speech marked the peak of his career and gave him the status of ‘prophet’.⁴ Nevertheless, Anna Grigor’evna Dostoevskiaia reports that critics soon awoke from Dostoevskii’s ‘hypnotic spell’, and started accusing the writer of having manipulated his audience’s emotions, forcing it to share his ideology.⁵ In *Golos* (The Voice), Aleksandr Gradovskii stated that whoever had read or listened to Dostoevskii even once knew how difficult it was not to be overwhelmed initially, although

other liberal parties, among them Pleshcheev and even the lame Iazykov, regard me with restraint and as though haughtily: as though to say ‘You are reactionary, while we are liberals’. And in general, complete discord is starting up here already. I’m afraid that because of the tendencies people may come to blows any one of these days’ (*ibid.*, 231). Dostoevskii’s Pushkin speech has been studied extensively. For two studies of the rhetorical strategies used by Dostoevskii in his speech and for their effect on readers see Marcus C. Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 122–46; Alan P. Pollard, ‘Dostoevskii’s Pushkin Speech and the Politics of the Right Under the Dictatorship of the Heart’, in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1983): 222–56; Pamela Davidson, ‘The Validation of the Writer’s Prophetic Status in the Russian Literary Tradition: From Pushkin and Iazykov Through Gogol’ to Dostoevsky’, in *Russian Review*, 62, no. 4 (2003): 524–36.

- 3 See the letters to Anna Dostoevskiaia of 27–28 May 1880 and 7 June 1880 (Dostoevsky, *Complete letters*, 5: 214, 235).
- 4 See D.N. Liubimov’s memoirs in K. Tiun’kin (ed.), *F.M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 2: 406–19. See also Anna G. Dostoevskiaia, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1971), 364–69.
- 5 Dostoevskiaia uses the word ‘hypnosis’ in Dostoevskiaia, *Vospominaniia*, 366. Semen A. Vengerov uses the same word in S.A. Vengerov (‘Stat’ nastoiashchim russkim – znachit stat’ bratom vsekh liudei’, in S.A. Vengerov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4 vols. [Saint Petersburg, 1913], 4: 29). The same word appears in I. Shcheglov (‘Tri mgnoveniia. Iz vospominanii o F.M. Dostoevskom’, in *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 29 January 1911. Quoted from Igor L. Volgin, *Poslednii god Dostoevskogo* [Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel’, 1986], 101).

one might be assailed by doubts eventually.⁶ Saltykov-Shchedrin accused Dostoevskii of exploiting the image of Pushkin to his own purposes.⁷ In *Novosti* (News), Vladimir Mikhnevich argued that Dostoevskii's success depended on his ability to torture his readers' nerves, and he compared his speech to Gogol's *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druž'iami* (Selected Passages from the Correspondence with Friends).⁸ The overwhelming effect of Dostoevskii's speech was manifest in Gleb Uspenskii's article 'The Pushkin Festival' in *Otechestvennye zapiski* (The Notes of the Fatherland): in the first part, written right after Dostoevskii's speech, Uspenskii celebrated Dostoevskii's intention to express his opinion on Pushkin 'simply and clearly, without a trace of withdrawing or useless ornaments', whereas in the second part, written after the speech's publication in *Moskovskie vedomosti* (The Moscow Gazette), he attacked Dostoevskii's utopia and subtle tactics.⁹ In *Delo* (The Cause) an anonymous critic accused Dostoevskii of abusing expressions such as 'unifying soul', 'brotherly unity', '*narod*'s (people) sacred truth'. The reviewer faulted the writer's self-confidence and ability to switch from a 'fanatic's pathos' to a 'sacristan's meekness', thereby confusing and stunning the listener.¹⁰

- 6 A. Gradvskii, 'Mechty i deistvitel'nost' (Po povodu rechi F.M. Dostoevskogo)', in *Golos*, 25 June 1880.
- 7 On 27 June 1880, after reading the first part of Uspenskii's article, Saltykov-Shchedrin wrote to N.K. Mikhailovskii: 'Uspenskii did not realize that both Dostoevskii and Turgenev swindle the public and hijack the Pushkin Festival' (M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 20 vols. [Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965], 19:2: 159).
- 8 Kolomenskii kandid, 'Avtor *Perepiski s druž'iami*, voskresshii v g. Dostoevskogo', in *Novosti*, 19 August 1880.
- 9 G.I. Uspenskii, 'Prazdnik Pushkina', in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1880, no. 6; G.I. Uspenskii, 'Sekret', in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1880, no. 7, 109–21.
- 10 G-n, 'Romanist, popavshii ne v svoi sani. (*Dnevnik pisatel'ia* g. Dostoevskogo. Edinstvennyi vypusk na 1880 g. Avgust)', in *Delo*, 1880, no. 9, 160. I will keep the Russian word *narod* throughout my work, because the English word 'people', I think, fails to catch the specific national and cultural meaning of the original.

Many of the statements Dostoevskii had made in the 1876–1877 edition of the *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* (Diary of a Writer) had already led some critics to charge him with paradox, arguing that he vacillated between merciful novelist and violent journalist.¹¹ Dostoevskii's speech offered new arguments about his split personality. Several critics depicted Dostoevskii as a beast that delighted in tormenting its victims/readers: in 1882 Nikolai Mikhalevskii compared him to a wolf, whereas in 1913 Maksim Gor'kii called him an 'evil genius'.¹² It would be rash to explain critics' attacks on Dostoevskii's rhetoric as their inability to understand it: critics had the tools needed to analyze the rhetorical structure of Dostoevskii's journalism, yet they did not have the tools needed to comprehend his message. In fact the Pushkin speech addressed *another* kind of reader, whose support Dostoevskii had already found while publishing his *Diary of a Writer*. As we shall see, the *Diary* reader also underwent a double process: in the first stage he was hypnotized and overwhelmed by Dostoevskii's words, while in the second stage he felt reawakened. This reader, however, did not conceive of this reawakening in the same way as critics. Most readers reawakened *through* the *Diary of a Writer* and not *from* it. Thus the key to understanding the success of Dostoevskii's Pushkin speech and its role in his literary activity is to be found in the relationship Dostoevskii had managed to set up with his readers: only by clarifying the nature of this relationship will it be possible to discover what, on 8 June 1880, granted Dostoevskii the right to hijack the Pushkin Festival and utter his 'last word'.

- 11 The journalist A.M. Skabichevskii, in his article 'O g. Dostoevskom voobshche i o romane *Podrostok*', in *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 9 January 1876, articulated this view of Dostoevskii's divided self most vigorously.
- 12 N.K. Mikhailovskii, 'Zhestokii talant', in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1882, nn. 9–10; Maksim Gor'kii, 'O *karamazovshchine*', in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1949–1955), 24: 147.