



FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOEVSKY

Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century
IIIT Hyderabad
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Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

- Born in Moscow to a physician who later rises to the lowest aristocratic rank.
- Strict upbringing, learns French and Latin, reading includes the Bible, Russian folklore, the Russian classics, French and British literature.
- Studies engineering despite hating it, becomes a draftsman.
- But St. Petersburg captures his imagination.
- Translates on the side, first novel (*Poor Folk*) has him heralded by Vissarion Belinsky as a great writer.
- Becomes rapidly unpopular as arrogance/insecurity takes over.



Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

- Arrested for participating in gatherings that express discontent with political and social order. Sent into exile (penal servitude and military conscription).
- Writes throughout his exile, marries and remains in torment throughout until his wife dies.
- Returns to St. Petersburg in 1859 to find it totally transformed: new ideas, people don't know him anywhere.
- Starts a literary journal (*Vremya*) with his brother, publishes novels and immediately regains his literary name.
- Discovers worst enemy: Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889), the face of Russian radicalism.
- 1866 – Hires stenographer Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina; they fall in love, marry in 1867. Have four children together.
- Travels abroad and hates all foreigners!



Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

- Arrives at a well-defined ideological position later in life: right-wing Slavophile Christian conservative.
- Represents human beings in the worst of crises; mind is taken by storm; external pace only a span of few days or even hours. Pushes his characters to their limits, and then seeks to explore how they think and act.
- Preoccupied with inner workings of the human mind, urban landscapes and themes.
 - *Notes from Underground* (1864)
 - *Crime and Punishment* (1866)
 - *The Idiot* (1868)
 - *The Devils* (1871-2)
 - *Brothers Karamazov* (1880)



Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

- “The Crocodile” (1865, *Epokha* (Epoch))
- Appointed member of élite Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Requested to present tribute to Pushkin in 1880. Delivers impassioned speech on Russianness of Pushkin and Russian national spirit to riotous applause.
- Thrilled at being hero of the hour.
- Jan 28, 1881 – dies of emphysema; funeral attended by tens of thousands of people.

Portrait by Vasily Perov, 1872

The Literary Prank

The Literary Prank

- Original title: "***The Crocodile, an Extraordinary Affair, or What Came to Pass in the Passage, a True Story about One Gentleman of a Certain Age and a Certain Appearance, Who Was Swallowed Alive and Intact by the Passage Crocodile, and What Came of It.***"
- Should the crocodile be sacrificed to let Ivan Matveich out, or should Ivan Matveich be released to save the crocodile (and the Russian economy)?
- *Epokha* ceased publication after this issue. People thought that Chernyshevsky (who was imprisoned at this time) was the subject of such ridicule.
- Dostoevsky had planned a second part, but this was never written.

St. Petersburg Arcade/Passage (f. 1848)

- A shopping arcade (glass-covered passage with shops on either side) with cafes and restaurants
 - Luxury goods catering to elite clients
 - But offered a “public contact zone” for various social groups because performers and, often, audiences were working-class or middle-class.
- Better known for and always associated with entertainment and exhibitions, a cultural centre of sorts. Played an important role in the social life of St. Petersburg in the 1850s and 1860s.
 - Odd, exotic, and/or sensational things: Egyptian mummy, a German giant, and crocodiles
 - Russian Literary Fund (f. 1859) aided needy writers and hosted public lectures, literary productions, readings by respected and well-known writers. Dostoevsky was a part of the Literary Fund.



Пассаж
The Passage (1850s)
Pavel Semechkin
Watercolour?

St. Petersburg Arcade/Passage (f. 1848)

- Most exhibitors and traders came from Europe. Chernyshevsky's novel ends in the Passage, which confirms it as a centre of contemporary intellectual thought.
 - “greenhouse of foreign commerce and entertainment on the one hand, and a center of Russian literary activity and education on the other” → site of cultural transit.
- Russian journalists easily found juicy stories in the arcade, and the newspapers wrote about it constantly, depicting it as the centre of elegant shopping, popular entertainment, public enlightenment, and literary activity.

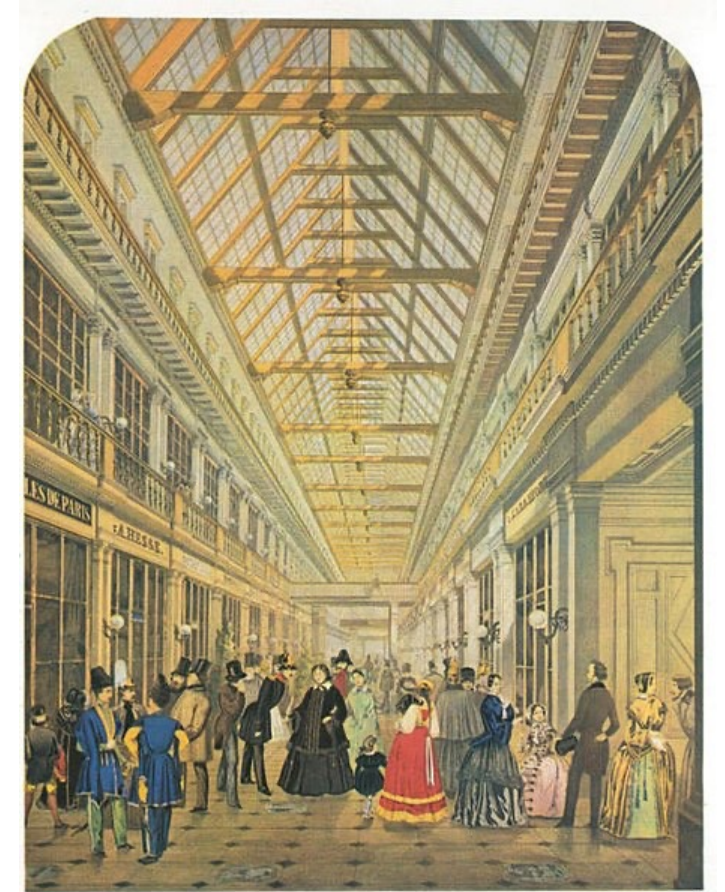
“More than simply a physical space in the capital of Russia, the Passage became a symbolic locus of polemics surrounding its cultural capital. Ultimately, the Passage was about representation: what made it such an important landmark in Russian cultural history was neither trade, nor exhibitions, nor literary evenings, but the incessant writing about these events in the press that delivered the Passage and associated discourse to the general public” (244).



Пассаж
The Passage (1850s)
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St. Petersburg Arcade/Passage (f. 1848)

- In fact, it is through newspaper writing that people knew about the Passage. But many newspapers were also critical.
- There was a German couple who brought in European phenomena to amuse and entertain (trained dogs, canaries) and lots of other enterprising German entertainers.
- Two crocodiles put on display in 1865.



Пассаж
The Passage (1850s)
Pavel Semechkin
Watercolour?

Crystal Palace (1851)

- Katia Dianina connects Dostoevsky's dislike of the Passage and its representation in "The Crocodile" to the Crystal Palace.
 - a passage is also a place of transit, as was the Crystal Palace
 - also made of glass and iron, Crystal Palace culmination of a building style → glass architecture that is particularly apt for "utopian imaginings" (240)
- Dostoevsky thought that European civilization had become a prison that could only impede Russian cultural development. Ivan Matveich's habitat is also designated a prison and he is referred to as a prisoner. (this has also led some to compare to Chernyshevsky's imprisonment).

Epigraph and Other Details

- Claim of truth - “A True Story” – “found manuscript”
- “Hey Lambert! Where is Lambert? Have you seen Lambert?” – French catchphrase.

“Incessant writing about cultural trivia called for a particular style, which Dostoevskii expressly sets out to imitate from the very beginning of *The Crocodile*. The story's epigraph: 'Ohe Lambert! Ou est Lambert? As-tu vu Lambert?' alludes to an epidemic of lunacy that broke out in Paris in August 1864, when *this nonsensical refrain apparently sounded on every street corner. St. Petersburg, too, went gaga over it.* Golos, for example, published two feuilletons devoted to Lambert and announced the upcoming local production of a vaudeville show and a drama, both entitled: 'Eh, Lambert!' In sharp contrast to the carefree tone with which Golos covered the Lambert incident, Dostoevskii's civic minded colleague A.A. Golavachev chided the French bourgeoisie for its nonsensical merrymaking in the September 1884 issue of *Epokha*. *In The Crocodile Dostoevskii critiques this by imitating; having invoked the trifling discourse typical of the newspaper feuilletonists in the epigraph, he proceeds to reproduce it in the narrative's exposition*” (251-2).

The Feuilleton

- The two newspaper samples are **parodic imitations of the feuilleton**, a genre that was born around the same time as the Arcade.
 - combination of journalistic reporting and fictional narrative, cultural topics of general interest, highly personalized, informal voice of narration.
- Two kinds:
 - “journal feuilleton” (focused on literary criticism, polemics)
 - **“newspaper feuilleton”** (lighter variety with no serious topics; meant to entertain the general public, draw middle-class readers; *Golos* used it extensively).

The Feuilleton

- Voluble narrator of this story is the feuilletonist.
- Mode of narration shifts from Part 1 to the rest from **imitation** to **parody**.

“Having written this first chapter in a style appropriate to the incident recorded, I intend to proceed in a language more natural though less elevated, and I beg to forewarn the reader of the fact” (174).

"Yesterday strange rumours were circulating among the spacious ways and sumptuous buildings of our vast metropolis. A certain well-known bon-vivant of the highest society, probably weary of the cuisine at Borel's and at the X. Club, went into the Arcade, into the place where an immense crocodile recently brought to the metropolis is being exhibited, and insisted on its being prepared for his dinner. After bargaining with the proprietor he at once set to work to devour him (that is, not the proprietor, a very meek and punctilious German, but his crocodile), cutting juicy morsels with his penknife from the living animal, and swallowing them with extraordinary rapidity. By degrees the whole crocodile disappeared into the vast recesses of his stomach, so that he was even on the point of attacking an ichneumon, a constant companion of the crocodile, probably imagining that the latter would be as savoury. We are by no means opposed to that new article of diet with which foreign gourmands have long been familiar. We have, indeed, predicted that it would come. English lords and travellers make up regular parties for catching crocodiles in Egypt, and consume the back of the monster cooked like beefsteak, with mustard, onions and potatoes.

The French who followed in the train of Lesseps prefer the paws baked-in hot ashes, which they do, however, in opposition to the English, who laugh at them. Probably both ways would be appreciated among us. For our part, we are delighted at a new branch of industry, of which our great and varied fatherland stands pre-eminently in need. Probably before a year is out crocodiles will be brought in hundreds to replace this first one, lost in the stomach of a Petersburg gourmand. And why should not the crocodile be acclimatised among us in Russia? If the water of the Neva is too cold for these interesting strangers, there are ponds in the capital and rivers and lakes outside it. Why not breed crocodiles at Pargolovo, for instance, or at Pavlovsk, in the Presnensky Ponds and in Samoteka in Moscow? While providing agreeable, wholesome nourishment for our fastidious gourmands, they might at the same time entertain the ladies who walk about these ponds and instruct the children in natural history. The crocodile skin might be used for making jewel-cases, boxes, cigar-cases, pocket-books, and possibly more than one thousand saved up in the greasy notes that are peculiarly beloved of merchants might be laid by in crocodile skin. We hope to return more than once to this interesting topic” (201; St. Petersburg Listok).

"Every one knows that we are progressive and humanitarian and want to be on a level with Europe in this respect. But in spite of all our exertions and the efforts of our paper we are still far from maturity, as may be judged from the shocking incident which took place yesterday in the Arcade and which we predicted long ago. A foreigner arrives in the capital bringing with him a crocodile which he begins exhibiting in the Arcade. We immediately hasten to welcome a new branch of useful industry such as our powerful and varied fatherland stands in great need of. Suddenly yesterday at four o'clock in the afternoon a gentleman of exceptional stoutness enters the foreigner's shop in an intoxicated condition, pays his entrance money, and immediately without any warning leaps into the jaws of the crocodile, who was forced, of course, to swallow him, if only from an instinct of self-preservation, to avoid being crushed. Tumbling into the inside of the crocodile, the stranger at once dropped asleep. Neither the shouts of the foreign proprietor, nor the lamentations of his terrified family, nor threats to send for the police made the slightest impression. Within the crocodile was heard nothing but laughter and a promise to flay him (sic), though the poor mammal, compelled to swallow such a mass, was vainly shedding tears ..." (203; Golos)

First Description of the Crocodile

“Walking into a little room, we observed that besides the crocodile there were in it parrots of the species known as cockatoo, and also a group of monkeys in a special case in a recess. Near the entrance, along the left wall stood a big tin tank that looked like a bath covered with a thin iron grating, filled with water to the depth of two inches. In this shallow pool was kept a huge crocodile, which lay like a log absolutely motionless and apparently deprived of all its faculties by our damp climate, so inhospitable to foreign visitors. This monster at first aroused no special interest in any one of us” (164).



***“Stavrogin was also eaten by an idea” –
F.M. Dostoevsky, Demons.***



- Once Ivan Matveich is inside, all kinds of ideas come out of the crocodile on education, the natural sciences, the principles of economics, foreign capital, exoticism.
- All these topical subjects are connected to the Passage as well through public lectures, discussions, and even the kind of trade that took place there.
 - Matveich sets out to do the same, specializing in natural sciences (in vogue since the publication of *Origin of Species* in 1864 in Russia) to the bafflement of his friend, and while he grounds his observations in principles of modern sciences, his findings are absurd, e.g. the sole purpose of the crocodile is to swallow human beings.



- The crocodile is a composite figure representing many things that Dostoevsky and his journal could not abide.
 - Most importantly: “a stand-in for the idea of Europe that was consuming liberally minded Russian society” (247-8).
 - It is, after all, when he is about to leave for Europe that Ivan Matveich is swallowed. He also understands crocodiles to be European in origin.
 - Ivan Matveich is agreed to be on his European vacation inside the crocodile. And like the Passage itself, the crocodile screens inhospitable climate and is warm and comfortable inside, creating an artificial environment, which represents the alien, narrow, false comfort of western civilization and ideas in Russia.
 - Inside the crocodile, he ventriloquizes/generates European ideas, which all readers would have understood.
 - But even earlier, the German couple introduce the rhetoric of European rational advantage: enthusiastic response and support in the Russian popular press, secure in their feelings of cultural superiority and, sure of success and advancement.

Target of Dostoevsky's Satire

1. contents of the Passage: “the imported culture of spectacle” (239)
2. The form in which it found reflection in newspaper feuilletons.
“trivial discourse of the daily press, taken to an absurd extreme in the text” (239)



- Dostoevsky thought that the Arcade/Passage represented everything that was wrong with Russia. He critiques the
 - Newspaper feuilleton, which reports incessantly about the Arcade/Passage, and is ridiculous and empty, while also referring to important topics (here, Russia and Europe).
 - Enthusiasm for foreign capital investment on the part of bourgeois liberals, who also printed extensively in *Golos (The Voice)* about this matter.
- The two feuilletons reproduced in the text report that it is the clerk that ate up the crocodile, suggesting that
 - it is Russia that benefits from the economic and cultural possibilities of the crocodile, i.e. Europe
 - it is Russia that is too savage to appreciate the “useful” and “humane” possibilities of the crocodile, i.e. Europe, disrupting Russian progress (by eating its superior agent)



- Arcade representing Russian decline and servility, just as the Crystal Palace represented European decline. In a capitalist society driven by shallow material prosperity, enabled by science and technology, what identity can individuals and nations have?
 - The Arcade becomes a spectacle of monstrous curiosities and demonstrates that there is no real meaning to the rational advantages of European progress (Diadina 249), which is a false ideal not worthy of imitation.
 - Ivan Matveich tells us again and again that the belly of the crocodile is dark and empty, and he too is just a voice (*Golos*), driven by the ideology of European progress.

Works Cited

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