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# Just a Devil

## Michael Wood

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DOSTOÏEVSKI

by Julia Kristeva.

Buchet/Chastel, 256 pp., €14, March, 978 2 283 03040 0

AT THE RISK OF THINKING: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF JULIA KRISTEVA

by Alice Jardine.

Bloomsbury, 400 pp., £19.99, January, 978 1 5013 4133 5

**J**ULIA KRISTEVA'S book on Dostoevsky appears in a series from Buchet/Chastel called 'Les Auteurs de ma vie'. Earlier titles included works by Stefan Zweig on Tolstoy, Thomas Mann on Schopenhauer, Paul Valéry on Descartes, and contributions from living writers such as Marie-Hélène Lafon (on Flaubert) and Michel Schneider (on Pascal). The series was started in 2016, and the most recent book in the set, before Kristeva's, was a 1939 essay by Trotsky on Marx, so sequential time is having a little holiday. We don't have to take the tag line 'the authors of my life' as suggesting anything more than a certain affinity or intimacy, but it's hard to resist some of the further implications – an element of loyalty or debt, a long history, a touch of autobiography.

Kristeva confronts these implications directly in two ways: through a personal anecdote and a bold editorial gesture. Many years ago, she tells us, her father stared at his Bulgarian editions of *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and 'severely' told his daughter not to read them. The writer was 'destructive, demonic and clinging', he said. 'Too much is too much, you won't like him at all, let it go.' He thought she should stay with her 'innate taste' for the 'clarity and freedom' of French authors. She did that, and wrote a doctoral thesis on the *Nouveau Roman* before she left Bulgaria for France. But she also read the scary Russian. 'Naturally, as usual, I disobeyed the paternal instructions and plunged into Dosto. Dazzled, overwhelmed, engulfed.'

Her book on Dostoevsky is also a book of Dostoevsky, an anthology. After a long introduction – about a third of the book – Kristeva presents her selection by saying that 'in its vocal range and swirl of sense, the spate of language in Dostoevsky does not lend itself to extracts and defies anthologies.' She means first of all that translators of Dostoevsky

into French have tried too hard to make him sound reasonable, and that the translations she is mainly using, those of André Markowicz, don't do this. They 'restore to the French language', she says, 'its genius for letting things be said, without being afraid of the sacred'. She also means that Dostoevsky's defiance can be defied if the anthologist goes about it in the right way. 'The themes chosen here are just crossroads that call upon you to continue your journey through the narrative currents that intersect there.' If you do this, she says, returning to her religious metaphor, 'you will adhere to the violence of the incarnate Word that you are, that wounds you, bores you or carries you away.' In this language we may hear something of the young girl's father, disobeyed in the letter but followed in the spirit. Who could resist the destructive and the demonic? Though I'm not sure about the clinging.

Kristeva likes apparent contradictions, though hers aren't as unruly as those we find in Dostoevsky – strange people who are typical, villainies that are innocent and so on. 'Nowhere is one more foreign than in France,' she writes in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1998), adding a page or so later: 'And yet, nowhere is it better to be foreign than in France.' I hope she felt the second part of this assertion was still true in 2018 when she was accused of having been, in the 1970s, a spy for the Bulgarian secret service (Neal Ascherson discussed the story in the *LRB* of 19 July 2018 ([/the-paper/v40/n14/neal-ascherson/don-t-imagine-you-re-smarter](#))). I believe Kristeva when she says she wasn't a spy, and her biographer Alice Jardine offers a good if not entirely conclusive argument for this belief: 'If she had been forced to do such a thing, if she had had no choice but to comply to protect her family and friends, let alone herself, she would have written about it the minute the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.' If she was a spy, we would in any case have to keep two particular considerations in mind. One is the safety of her family, as Jardine says. The other is that, as we learned from the Bulgarian secret service itself, she never passed on information of any tactical or political value. This turns the accusation into a sort of compliment to her cultural standing: she was worth claiming as a spy even if her spying was useless.

Kristeva moved to Paris in 1965, when she was 24. In an often told story, she had only five dollars in her purse, but she did (of course) have two volumes of Hegel in her suitcase – in another version of the tale, she also had books by Blanchot and Céline. She studied with Roland Barthes, introduced the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to the French, and became closely associated with the magazine *Tel Quel*. She met Philippe Sollers within months of her arrival and they were married in 1967. After two books on semiotics (1969-70), she published the influential *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974. In 1979 she became a practising psychoanalyst. Among her later works, the following may seem (do seem to me) especially remarkable: the trilogy on 'female genius', represented by Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Colette (1999-2002), and the wonderful novel about Teresa of Avila, *Thérèse mon amour* (2008).

Jardine says her book is not a hagiography, and it isn't. But she does see Kristeva as offering a model of 'how to live a thinking life' in the second half of the 20th century and after. An important part of Jardine's case is that Kristeva understands and repeatedly makes clear that 'we cannot change the world without changing the way it is imagined and spoken,' and that if her works 'do not all focus on women and maternity ... the question of the vulnerable, cognitively unusual subject is always there.' From the beginning, Kristeva

felt that structuralism was the intellectual breakthrough that so many people thought it was, but also that it tended to forget 'two things vital to both literature and life: the speaking subject and history'. Her recurring attention to Proust is propelled by the same feeling: 'Kristeva's book on Proust is her first long rumination on time. She values Proust for his fight against the speed of the 20th century. Proust's writing (like psychoanalysis) is a way of restoring time to language.' It's engaging too to hear Kristeva, quoted in these pages, returning to aquatic metaphors:

Even though I think of myself as very Cartesian, rational etc, I don't follow a programme . . . I do things a bit as they come to me, as if I were swimming. I let myself be carried by the waves. I swim, but there is also the movement of the waves. I never thought I would leave Bulgaria – never! But it's true that in a way all of my studies have been escapes, a way of taking distance from my parents while staying close, distancing myself but at the same time transcending where they were.

After recounting her memory of her girlhood encounter with Dostoevsky, Kristeva recalls reading him in French and coming across, in *The Diary of a Writer*, the account of his inventing, along with his engineering classmates, a word which he later used in *The Double*, and which then entered common usage. The word was *stushevatsia*, meaning 'to vanish . . . not all of a sudden but delicately'. Chasing the shifting implications of the word in *The Double*, Kristeva became captivated, she says, by what she now calls the 'irrefragable bliss of writing'. In 1963 the second edition of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* appeared in Russian, and Kristeva and her friend Tzvetan Stoyanov were able to 'plunge again, Bakhtin's book in hand, into the novels of Dostoevsky himself . . . I felt the vocal power of tragic laughter, of farce in the strength of evil, and that contagious, intoxicating flow of dialogues composed as stories.' Jardine reports that Kristeva returned to Dostoevsky in the 1980s. 'She remembers that she reread *The Devils* intently around that time.' Dostoevsky also figures prominently in Kristeva's book about 'depression and melancholy', *Black Sun* (1987), which includes a long quotation from *The Idiot* as a prelude to a chapter on Holbein's painting of the dead Christ, and a whole chapter devoted to Dostoevsky's ideas of suffering and pardon. 'Pardon,' Kristeva memorably says, 'renews the unconscious.'

Kristeva's non-anthology is composed mainly of passages from the novels her father was staring at when he told her to stay away from them: eight selections from *The Idiot*, six from *The Brothers Karamazov*, six from *Demons*. But there are also lines from letters, short stories, *The Diary of a Writer* and other novels. Given Kristeva's warning, we can hardly ask what this adds up to, but we can describe something of the effect. Certainly it involves what Kristeva calls 'the arrival and the eclipse of meaning', but it felt to me less like a plunge into the world of this double event than a fast, scary set of interviews with some of its inhabitants – or a carefully edited film shown at a little more than ordinary cinematic speed.

'We Russians have two countries,' Dostoevsky wrote in an essay on the death of George Sand: 'Our Russia and Europe, even when we call ourselves Slavophiles.' Nabokov thought a sentimental and reactionary vision of Russia won out too often in Dostoevsky's work, or perhaps he meant to suggest only that too many readers celebrated the old Russian at the expense of the modern European. Dostoevsky certainly liked to make jokes on the subject. 'I am not a French poet', a character in *The Idiot* says, 'and I refuse such consolations.'

Another figure in the same novel explains that ‘not believing in the devil is a French idea, a frivolous idea.’ In fact, it’s not clear that the two countries can ever get out of each other’s way, and this is part of what the polyphony Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky is about. No one needs to win in a good novel – or can win, perhaps. There is a trial, so to speak, but there is no judge, and the jurors don’t stop talking.

The devil is encountered at several different crossroads in Kristeva’s book. ‘I think,’ Ivan Karamazov says, ‘that if the devil doesn’t exist, and if therefore he was created by humans, they created him in their own image and likeness.’ His brother Alyosha spots the reversed quotation from *Genesis*, and says: ‘God too, in that case.’ Ivan laughs and replies: ‘It’s amazing how you manage to turn words around. Never mind . . . He’s a nice fellow, your God, if He created humans in his image and likeness.’ This is the man who later in the novel (earlier in Kristeva’s book) reports his long conversation with the devil, insisting on the literal presence of his visitor, though he does try to demote him in rank:

No, no, no, it was not a dream! He was there, sitting there, on that other sofa . . . He’s not Satan, he’s lying. He’s just a devil, a mean devil, a nonentity . . . But he – is me, Alyosha, myself. Everything about me that’s vile, disgusting and despicable . . . Mind you, he told me a few truths about myself. I myself would never have said them. You know, Alyosha, I would much prefer that it was really him and not me.

Ivan has already had some kind of nervous breakdown. This ought to explain a great deal, but Dostoevsky doesn’t so much refuse psychology and reason as fold them into a more complicated picture. Ivan’s speech is certainly a little frantic, but it’s also lucid. It shows that being Russian and European can be a problem and bring a strange illumination. The fact that there is no hell doesn’t mean you can get out of it.

‘You are a lie,’ Ivan says to the devil in an earlier chapter. ‘You are my illness, you are a ghost . . . You are my hallucination.’ The devil agrees, and offers his awareness of this fact as proof of his own particular kind of reality. ‘I am merely your nightmare and nothing more’, he says. ‘Even so . . . I say original things, such as have never entered your head before.’ Ivan knows this is true because he didn’t invent the Latin joke the devil has just made: ‘Satan sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto.’ The devil then begins to sound like Yeats justifying his conversations with visitors from the spirit world, and makes another joke, this time about Tolstoy:

I’ll be honest and explain to you. Listen: in dreams and especially in nightmares, well, let’s say as a result of indigestion or whatever, a man sometimes sees such artistic dreams, such complex and real actuality, such events, or a whole world of events, woven into such a plot, with such unexpected details, beginning from your highest manifestations down to the last shirt button, as I swear even Leo Tolstoy couldn’t invent.

The indigestion is also a very good diabolical touch.

THE GREAT QUESTION in accounts of this kind of magical intervention, whether in ghost stories, *Macbeth*, worst case scenarios in Nabokov, or the deals with the devil in the Faust stories of Marlowe and Thomas Mann, is perhaps not the one we most often take it to be: are the fantastic phenomena real or not? The answer, with a few variations, is: yes in the story, and no in the supposedly ordinary world. That's why the stories are fantastic. The more interesting, more focused question is whom do these creatures come for, how are they tuned to a particular mind, what is their mission? This narrative situation is impeccably displayed in Marlowe. Faustus is slightly surprised to learn that Mephistopheles has been sent to him rather than summoned by his own dark and complicated arts. 'Did not my conjuring speeches raise thee? Speak.' Not really, Mephistopheles says, all you had to do was blaspheme seriously:

Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring,  
Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity,  
And pray devoutly to the prince of hell.

Similarly, all Ivan has to do in order to receive the devil's visit is to feel guilty and baffled enough. This condition is real and the devil is the verbal and visual personification of it. If we wish to cling to psychology, we need to believe in nothing beyond the extremity of Ivan's distress. This would be a little narrow and clinical, though. As the devil himself suggests, we should listen to what he says, even if, or especially because, he keeps dropping into well-known French phrases – 'c'est charmant', 'je pense donc je suis', 'mais c'est bête enfin' and even 'le diable n'existe point.'

This is notably the case at another crossroads in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It doesn't appear among Kristeva's selections, but it announces several of them in a wildly comic and disturbing way. The speaker is the senior Karamazov, the father of Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha, an unscrupulous, disorderly rogue par excellence, a man whom R.P. Blackmur once called 'a cynosure of every thought of parricide' ('you can't keep your eyes off him,' Blackmur added). The old man is hoping that Alyosha, who is about to go and live in a monastery, won't be too taken with religion. He thinks the chances are good, because 'the devil hasn't made off with your wits.' But his real purpose in this scene is a spectacular mock-performance of religious doubt. Hell exists, he assumes, and he is bound to end up there:

Surely it's impossible, I think, that the devils will forget to drag me down to their place with their hooks when I die. And then I think: hooks? Where do they get them? What are they made of? . . . You know, in the monastery the monks probably believe there's a ceiling in hell, for instance. Now me, I'm ready to believe in hell, only there shouldn't be any ceiling; that would be, as it were, more refined, more enlightened, more Lutheran, in other words. Does it really make any difference – with a ceiling or without a ceiling? But that's what the damned question is all about! Because if there is no ceiling, then there are no hooks. And if there are no hooks, the whole thing falls apart, which, again, is unlikely, because then who will drag me down with hooks, because if they don't drag me down, what then, and where is there any justice in the world? *Il faudrait les inventer*, those hooks, just for me, for me alone.

‘There are no hooks there,’ Alyosha says, and his father keeps going: ‘Yes, yes. Only shadows of hooks. I know, I know. That’s how one Frenchman described hell: “J’ai vu l’ombre d’un cocher, qui avec l’ombre d’une brosse frottait l’ombre d’une carrosse.” How do you know, my dear, that there are no hooks?’

The principal question here, though, is neither the reality nor the punctuality of the magic connection but the vulnerability of any such occurrence to ridicule – and this represents another way in which one can be Russian and European at the same time, except that ‘Russian’ in this case means devoted to buffoonery. ‘They have their Hamlets,’ a lawyer says late in the novel, ‘but so far we have only Karamazovs.’ The riddle of who is made in the image of whom – humans in that of God or the Devil, God or the Devil in that of humans – becomes an extravagant joke about figuration, about any attempt to find a physical habitat for a mental or spiritual condition. It is also a distorted echo of the question asked in *The Idiot* and quoted in Kristeva’s book: ‘Is it possible to perceive in an image that which has no image?’

Hooks? Ceilings? Could the old man really escape damnation on technicalities of furnishing and architecture? It’s true that this would be a miscarriage of justice, as a later chapter in the novel is called in some translations, and that at this moment the old man seems to be parodying in advance his son Ivan’s ruminations on the disharmony of the universe. But of course he probably doesn’t believe in heaven or hell or any kind of other world. He just delights in the ingenious rationalist quibbles he has devised, the borrowings from Voltaire and Perrault, and the whole theological stand-up routine. And Dostoevsky, as Kristeva’s reminder about language and the sacred helps us to guess, loves religious mischief precisely because he cares so much about religious faith.

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