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# PROBLEM OF GENRE IN DOSTOIEVSKY'S *THE DIARY OF A WRITER*

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A genre (from French "kind" or "sort", from Latin: genus) is a loose set of criteria for a category of composition; the term is often used to categorize literature and speech, but is also used for any other form of art or utterance. Genres are vague categories with no fixed boundaries, they are formed by sets of conventions, and many works cross into multiple genres by way of borrowing and recombining these conventions. Genres are often divided into subgenres. Literature, for example, is divided into three basic kinds of literature, which are the classic genres of Ancient Greece: poetry, drama, and prose. Poetry may then be subdivided into epic, lyric, and dramatic. Subdivisions of drama includes foremost comedy and tragedy, while e.g. comedy itself has subgenres, including farce, comedy of manners, burlesque, satire, and so on. However, any of these terms would be called "genre", and its possible more general terms implied. The term novel is now applied to an extended narrative or extended works of fiction written in prose. It is distinguished from the long narratives in verse of Chaucer, Spenser and Milton which, beginning with the 18th Century, the novel has increasingly supplanted e.g. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Franz Kafka's *The Trial* etc. Richardson's *Clarissa* is an epistolatory novel where the narrative is conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters. The actual term novel had a variety of meanings and implications at different stages. From roughly 16th to 18th Century, the term tended to derive its meaning from the Italian novella and the Spanish novella and the term denoted short stories or tales of the kind one finds in Boccaccio's *Decameron* etc.

In the early 19th Century, Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen dominated the English fiction, along with some minor novelists like James Hogg and his *The Private Memoirs* and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. During this period, Dostoievsky too produced some of his masterpieces e.g. *Poor People* (1846), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1866), *The Possessed* (1871-72) and *The Brothers of Karamazov* (1880). Both in Russia and France a number of trilogies were published which were ambitious and complex chronicles of the times. From the nineties down to the present day while the quality of output suffers slight diminution there is a marked decline in the quantity; and that there is an increasing tendency on part of our ablest men to choose other modes of expression. Journalism and drama have proved serious rivals to the intellectual supremacy of the novelist. Gary Saul Morson in his article "Tolstoy's absolute Language" says that Bakhtin suggests that the identifying characteristic of the novel as a genre is its representation of "the concrete life of the [dialogic] word," which is to say, the exchange of utterances in their social and historical context. The novel, he argues, represents the drama of speech reacting to speech, of words struggling to answer, paraphrase, or even deliberately ignore each other- and of words anticipating how they themselves will be answered, paraphrased or ignored. Bakhtin's reasoning on novel differs from all other genres because while the other genres are governed by rules and canons, the novel is anticanonic. The novel's essence he maintains, is to be anomalous, to violate and, indeed, systematically to invert all rules. For Bakhtin, the novel is not a genre but the antigenre; it follows that no sooner do novels begin to develop rules than other novels parody those rules, just as they parody all other literary and social conventions. The novel knows that it participates in the very historical flux it dramatizes, in that its own conventions are historically given and therefore subject to change. Thus, the history of the novel includes the history of parodies of the novel. Bakhtin's second definition of the novel suggests the possibility that a novel can successfully violate its first description. For if, the essence of the novel is to parody its own rules, then it may also deliberately violate the rule prohibiting unconditional and nondialogic language. In this light Dostoievsky's *The Diary of a Writer* becomes an alluring piece of literature for those who are interested in genre studies.

The word diary comes from the Latin diarium ('daily allowance', from dies, 'day', more often in the plural form diaria). The word journal comes from the same root (diumus, 'of the

day'). Until around the turn of the 20th century, with the world-wide rise of literacy, diary writing was generally a practice of the middle and upper classes. Many diaries of notable figures have been published and form an important element of autobiographical literature e.g., those of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. Their influence was considerable, upon both the development of style and the broadening of subject matter. They have colloquial case and familiarity to the manner, actuality to the matter; and helped to prepare the way for the rich blossoming of fiction that took place during the later years of the era. The word 'journal' may be sometimes used for 'diary' and in this context, the terms are in effect almost interchangeable. Over many years two forms related to the diary have attracted considerable attention: autobiography and epistolary fiction. These are by no means rigid categories, however one reason for this is the length of some of the diaries examined; Samuel Pepys' diary, clearly the most famous in diary in English literature, spans ten years and over a million words. Because of his diary's length, Pepys shows he is more than just a chronicler: he is also a traveler, apologist, and confessor. Like Mallon's book reminds us of the World War II, Dostoievsky's *Diary* reflects the turbulent days of Russia. While most eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts clearly mark their documentary form (letters, diaries, memoirs, etc.), twentieth century diary texts pose a different problem.

Feuilleton, a common genre observed in Diary, cultivated since the 19th century, and the word acquired the general meaning of satirical piece in the Russian language that allows for much freedom as far as its content, composition, and style are concerned; the text is hybrid which means that it makes use of different genre structures, both journalistic and literary ones. Thematic domain of a column tends to be always up-to-date, focusing specifically on culture matters and social and moral issues. An accented and active role of a columnist as the subject of the narration is also very important characteristic of this genre. The tone a column is written in is usually reflexive, humorous, ironic, and above all very subjective in drawing conclusions, assessments, and comments on a particular subject. The style of this kind of publication, contrary to the style of most journalistic publications, is very close to literary. Its characteristic feature is lightness and wit that is shown by play on words, parody, paradox, and humorous hyperboles. The vocabulary that is usually used is not neutral, and strongly emotionally loaded words and phrases prevail. The early days of a

column go back to the date of January 28, 1800, when the supplement called "Feuilleton" appeared for the first time in the "Journal des Debats" magazine. The word "feuilleton" meant "a leaf", "a scrap of paper". Soon the supplement became the regular column devoted to entertainment and cultural issues. It is important to note that the English term "column" means both a part of a paper and the kind of press genre. At the turn of 19th and 20th century, the traditional connection between the name "feuilleton" and the specific place in the magazine became weaker. From that point, the term "feuilleton" has been associated only with textual properties of the publication. In French newspapers, it consisted chiefly of non-political news and gossip, literature and art criticism, a chronicle of the latest fashions, and epigrams, charades, and other literary trifles. German newspapers still use the term for their literary and arts sections. Besides France, Russia in particular cultivated the feuilleton genre since the 19th century, and the word acquired the general meaning of satirical piece in the Russian language.

*The Diary of a Writer* strikes the reader as one of the strangest works in world literature for it does not follow a linear principle of writing or does not fall into a particular genre of short stories, novel, essay, diary or feuilleton, yet can be categorised and read under any one individually. The *Diary* stresses that Russian history is and must be different from that of any other country. In addition, it is a very detailed description of many of the issues with which Dostoievsky dealt with and the circumstances surrounding them. *The Diary of a Writer* comprises of two volumes, which deal with Russian political issues. Much of it deals with the liberation of the peasants in 1861, as well as Russia's role in the 'future destinies of Slavdom'. Boris Brasol, in the preface to *The Diary of a Writer*, describes it as a "noble human document" in which Dostoievsky plays the role of the "friend of humanity". He becomes the voice of the Russian people who are dissatisfied by the unrest in Russia. The sketches in the diary are accounts of the events in Russia accompanied by Dostoievsky's political questions. Dostoievsky published the *Writer's Diary* as a monthly journal full of short stories, sketches, and articles on current events. Unlike Rousseau's and Tolstoy's pretentious *Confessions*, Goethe's *Dichtung and Wahrheit* which are more or less public avowals or entertaining memoirs or autobiographical discourses, *The Diary of a Writer*, contains little autobiographical material. Brasol again in the preface to the *Diary* states that it evades every

established pattern of novel, satire, drama, reminiscences, essay, fable etc. and yet of course it is a personal journal. Leonid I. Strakhovsky in an article published in Book Reviews, quotes the following lines as said by Dostoievsky himself, "I am writing a Diary, i.e. I am recording my impressions apropos of everything that strikes me most in recent events." (251)

*The Diary of a Writer* is a unique enterprise, a felicitous combination of reminiscences, dramatic sketches, essays, short stories, and opinion pieces that enabled Dostoievsky to enter into an informal dialogue with his readers that reached far beyond the scope of even the most controversial or capacious of his novels. It presents the contents of a journal written, edited and published by Dostoievsky over a period of eight years. It is a fascinating collection of stories, literary discussions, commentaries on current events, especially court cases and international developments. Dostoievsky's novels are compressed in time (many cover only a few days) and this enables the author to get rid of one of the dominant traits of realist prose, the corrosion of human life in the process of the time flux – his characters primarily embody spiritual values, and these are, by definition, timeless. Other obsessive themes include suicide, wounded pride, collapsed family values, spiritual regeneration through suffering (the most important motif), rejection of the West and affirmation of Russian Orthodoxy and Tsarism. Literary scholars such as Bakhtin have characterized his work as 'polyphonic': unlike other novelists, Dostoievsky does not appear to aim for a 'single vision,' and beyond simply describing situations from various angles, Dostoievsky engendered fully dramatic novels of ideas where conflicting views and characters are left to develop unevenly into unbearable crescendo. In the recent biography by Joseph Frank, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, Frank spent much time on A *Writer's Diary* – a regular column which Dostoievsky wrote in the periodical *The Citizen* from 1873 to the year before his death in 1881. Frank notes that the *Diary* is "filled with politics, literary criticism, and pan-Slav diatribes about the virtues of the Russian Empire, and represents a major challenge to the Dostoievsky fan, not least on account of its frequent expressions of anti-Semitism" (784). In searching for the "etiology" of the Dairy's mongrel genre, Gary Morson explores Dostoievsky's tendency to use "boundary genres" such as the feuilleton and the sketch. In essence, the *Diary* is used as a "touchstone" for several problems in literary theory and its

examination occupies only about a third of the book. The remainder of the book examines the broader questions of genre to which the *Diary* might belong, emphasizing the fact that "genre does not belong to texts alone but to the interaction between texts and classifiers," and thus the perception and interpretation of a text depend upon the classificatory system used. Among the most useful material in Morson's book, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoievsky's "Dairy of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia*, is his lengthy discussion of that sub-class of boundary literature that he calls "threshold works and genres". He convincingly argues that the *Diary* as whole and some of its constituent parts, e.g. "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" and "A Little boy at Christ's Christmas tree" are works of threshold literature and that Dostoievsky's deliberate double coding of a work about utopian society places the *Diary* in a tradition of works like More's *Utopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* – a tradition that he calls the "meta-utopia". In "A little boy at Christ's Christmas tree," Dostoievsky conforms himself a novelist and narrates the story of a small boy who after giving up to the extreme cold meets his mother in heaven after death.

Critics have thoroughly examined Dostoievsky the author as well as Dostoievsky the journalist /feuilletonist /essayist /diarist, but few approaches have included analysis of the Dostoievsky who worked on the editorial boards of three successful journals. While the second of these, Epoch (Epokha), included arguably the best work of Dostoievsky ever published as editor, *Notes from the Underground,* it was Dostoievsky's first journal, *Time*, which gave him the opportunity to experiment in a variety of literary forms and to re-establish his reputation as an active social thinker as well as one of Russia's leading authors. Dostoievsky believed all his life that solid journalistic writing could enhance and intermingle with creative fictional works. Gary Rosenshield in one of the Slavic Review states that this is a powerful and original book, ingeniously organized and splendidly written: nobody interested in genre theory or Dostoievsky will want to miss it. It is generative criticism and scholarship at its best and comes to grip with a central task of criticism: it asks what is peculiar to Dostoievsky's art, how and why it differs from that of other novelists. Bakhtin's book deliberately focuses on a few questions: the role of the hero in Dostoievsky's novels, the way ideas are presented in the novels, the question of the genre tradition to which Dostoievsky was indebted or is supposed to belong, and finally the

special use of language and dialogue in the novels. It would be a mistake to call these questions simply formalist. As early as 1924, Bakhtin rejected the approach of the Russian formalists as "material aesthetics". Bakhtin asserts that Dostoievsky created a totally new kind of novel he calls "polyphonic": i.e., it consists of independent voices which are fully equal, become subjects of their own right and do not serve the ideological position of the author. Dostoievsky probably went further than anybody before him in building his novels around scenes in dialogue, on conversations, debates, and arguments between three or more persons.

As already mentioned, Dostoievsky's much noted and commonly tracked genre, feuilletonist writings, allows for much freedom as far as its content, composition and style are concerned; the text is a hybrid, and concerns itself with culture, social, and moral issues; the tone is usually reflexive, humorous, ironic, and above all very subjective in drawing conclusions, assessments, and comments on a particular subject. Rosenshield in his book *Western Law, Russian Justice* says that the jury trial is the key to understanding not only Dostoievsky's greatest novel but also the preoccupations of all his fiction and journalism (6). The *Diary* was largely viewed as a monthly journal full of short stories, sketches and articles on current events. Dostoievsky wrote from Geneva to his niece, S. A. Ivanova, that he was anxious to return to Russia because "when I return I would certainly like to publish something like a newspaper (I even recall mentioning it to you in passing, but here both the form and the purpose have now become completely clear). But for this it is necessary to be home and to see and hear everything with my own eyes" (qtd. In Baehr 27). Morson continues jotting that nevertheless, the 1873 *Diary* does seem closer to the mature work than to the "new publication" projected in Dostoievsky's letters. For instance, unlike those early plans but like the monthly issues, the 1873 *Diary* contains fiction (the "certain person's" story, "Bobok," and his journalistic polemic, the "Half-letter") as well as nonfiction. It now becomes clear, moreover, how great is the "unprecedented" publication's debt to the early feuilletons and sketches: even new literary forms, it would seem, may have a genealogy. The *Diary* unifies its heterogeneous material as the impressions of a digressive author, who in this case, jots down whatever interests him in his irregular "diary" (e.g. the way he digresses from one issue to another in the Kroneberg case and jots down whatever interests him,

whether they are long forgotten or recent jury trial cases). In the manner of a feuilletonist, Dostoievsky too wanders from topic to topic and place to place in his The *Diary of a Writer*, recording "spontaneous" impressions and "apologizing" for his unconventional form and for violating vague or unstated promises (29).

The structure or unity of the book is based not merely on a linear principle, but a complex design of linkages and juxtaposition of materials and problems discussed in the separate chapters and sections. Chapter I, "Dostoievsky's Icon of Chaos," is devoted wholly to the *Diary* in the context of Dostoievsky's poetics and literary development. It begins and ends with a discussion of the *Diary* proper. Each of the remaining chapters begins with a theoretical issue (e.g. the discussion of literature and fiction as a class of verbal structures in Chapter II), continues, with the concrete application or illustration of theory or the consideration of particular works or genres, and concludes with a discussion of the *Diary*. Dostoievsky's *Diary*, then, is the work's point of departure and continual point of return; it serves to raise theoretical issues and in turn is illuminated by these issues on their return "home." Our concern therefore remains on not what is interpreted, but how it has been interpreted, i.e. our focus remains on the generic form of the *Diary* rather than its thematic concern.

The Kroneberg case published in the February issue of *The Diary*, Vol. I, is a division of an unbroken narrative into six fractions, each digressing into a different themes and arguments. Dostoievsky very ardently touches upon different concerns and issues, which he says, "…could serve as a guide to those many who are looking for answers to their queries in our confused time" (*The Diary of a Writer*, 238). In the first part titled "Apropos the Kroneberg Case" Dostoievsky reports the incident of a seven-year-old daughter severely flogged by her father and his acquittal; in the second part titled "Something About Lawyers In General. My Naïve And Incompetent Presumptions. Something About Talents In General And In Particular" he draws the attention of the readers on lawyers, their hired conscience and also on a literary discourse on talent and capital; the third part titled "Mr. Spasovich's Speech. Adroit Methods" deals with the speech of the defense lawyer (Sapsovich) who narrates the life history of the father, proving him to be a compassionate man and thus resulting in his

acquittal; the fourth part titled "Little Berries" distresses the reader with the dilemma of code of punishment, an advocate's vanity and questions the limit of authority; the fifth part "Hercules's Pillars" justifies the act of the father as torture, inflicted on a child of seven (earlier proved to be as punishment rather than as torture by Spasovich) through anecdotes; and in the last part "The Family Our Sanctities. A Concluding Word About A Certain Young School" Dostoievsky argues on the solidity of family and relationships and calls the courts as a school, which cultivates shrewd minds and dry hearts. All these six divisions melt into one cohesive narrative. Dostoievsky mingles fiction into newspaper reporting and goes much beyond the realms of mere reporting incidents. He sporadically jumps from one issue to another, as in this narrative he touches upon sensitive issues like family, relationships, and usefulness of courts, also enters into a literary discourse between talent and capital and drifts back to from where he had launched his narrative.

The boundary between the artwork and 'real life' in *Diary* is blurred as we can witness how each section of the narrative begins with a theoretical issue (of law, courts, lawyers, family, talents, relationships, art etc.) and culminates into one cohesive narrative joined together by Dostoievsky's thread of story telling which transcends much beyond the traditional definition of literature (with a beginning, middle, and end) and Todorov's definition of literature which "requires the unfolding of an action, change, difference" (Todorov 28) by digressing into new thematic narratives every time and melting into a common narrative at the end. René Wellek in Bakhtin's View of Dostoievsky: "Polyphony" and "Carnivalesque" deliberately focuses on a few questions: the role of the hero in Dostoevsky's novels, the way ideas are presented in the novels, the question of the genre tradition to which Dostoevsky was indebted or is supposed to belong and finally the special use of language and dialogue in the novels. One observes that Dostoevsky could reflect several versions of a "true" story and create a cacophony of voices, which unite into the organic unity he often sought in his creative works. Dostoevsky uses dialogues, questions and answers, imaginary conversations, and debates to combine feuilleton with fiction in his narrative space and thus enter into a new literary genre, which transcends much beyond the genre of mere rewriting or re-reporting newspaper articles or events. Dostoievsky also introduces imaginary voices and characters that bring fiction and journalism together in *The Diary*. For e.g. in the first

part of the Kroneberg narrative Dostoievsky writes that "…when the father, prior to flogging, was told by someone that at least a twig should be broken off, he replied: "No, this will add zest" (*The Diary,* 211). One questions who this "someone" is. By the introduction of these "someone" and their independent voices, Dostoievsky's journalism enters into the realms of fiction and becomes a narrative.

When one wonders on Dostoievsky's concern of rewriting newspaper events one finds that, it not only brings forth Dostoievsky – the novelist, but also represents the voice of Russian folk. This narrative embodies spiritual values and also spiritual regeneration through suffering, by not aiming for a single vision alone rather describing all the situations from various angles, which serve as guide to those many who, according to Dostoievsky "… are looking for answers to their queries in confused times" (*The Diary*, 238). One observes that, Dostoievsky time and again switches over to various themes and concerns, with one central theme and others as its contending ideas. By digressing into various themes from the central theme and then rushing back to it occasionally, Dostoievsky contests, checks, and challenges the expectation of a reader, who by training is conditioned to encapsulate reality in terms of genres. These six divisions of the Kroneberg narrative, bearing different titles, all amalgamate into one narrative but at the same time also hold their individual entities. The narrative involving thus can be viewed as a pretext for the author, which problematizes notions of law, justice, relationships, family, politics etc. and also introduces to us a new narrative, which engulfs several other narratives. As Mikhail Epstein stated in his article "Essayism: An essay on the essay" that an essay written in a confessional tone becomes a diary; it has a nomadic spirit as it attempts to write everything without yielding anything; it originated from myth and branched out into various branches of knowledge; essay unites fragmented cultures, giving each their own space. Likewise, the Kroneberg narrative too branches out with Dostoievsky's nomadic spirit of story telling, with an attempt to write everything without yielding anything, yet uniting the fragmented parts into a common narrative. Morson further records that the most important boundary genres with which Russian writers were experimenting in the 1840s were the feuilleton and the sketch. Dostoievsky too in his *The Diary of a Writer* (in the Kroneberg case, divided into six parts) captures this unfinished and haphazard quality apparent in the feuilleton, a boundary

genre. Morson also records that when in 1876 Dostoievsky was at last about to realize the *Diary* as a monthly, his correspondence and notebooks reflects his intense concern over the work's form. This is evident in *The Diary of a Writer*, which is a special type of structure, related to the early feuilletons.

Gary Saul Morson in one of the chapters titled "Dostoevsky's Icon of Chaos" in his book *The Boundaries of Genre* compares *The Diary of a Writer* with an unusual painting noticed by Ishmael in The Spouter-Inn at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* and says that "like this obscure painting, Dostoievsky's *The Diary of a Writer* has gone largely unexamined. So formless has *The Diary* appeared to most modern readers, and so meagerly does it seem to reward investigation of its structure, that it has often not been taken as a literary work at all. As a result, its great popularity with its many original subscribers has not lasted and has been largely attributed to the purely topical interest of its political articles. Dostoievsky's occasional address to his readers transforms his *Diary* into a semi-fictional piece of work where he takes autonomy by sporadically recording his personal details, travel account, quotes newspaper articles, and fictionalizes the trial cases reported in the newspapers, through imaginary courtroom arguments and also through the imaginary speech of the president of the court, in the last section of the narrative. Harriet Murav in *Russia's Legal Fictions* while questioning about "…what legal and literary authority are" notes down that Edward Said in his *Beginnings* (a study of European novel) "emphasizes that to author means to found and generate". "In doing so, the author may borrow, modify, or violate already existing rules governing how particular types of literature are to be written, what sort of language may be used, for example, or what topics may be addressed. According to Murav, two works that occupy a prominent place in this study – Dostoievsky's *A Writer's Diary* and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* – reveal how authors dispense with the conventions governing literary genres. Murav says, ". . . in each work, languages, styles, genres, and disciplines are crossed: fiction, history, law, medicine, autobiography, and journalism form one vast heterogeneous narrative" (3).

Thus the reader of this encyclopedic 'composition' is invited to infer meaning not only from the parts, but also from their 'linkages,' their place in the work's total structure. It follows

that readers who do not consider that structure, or who know particular articles and stories only from anthologies, are likely to be unaware of or insensitive to contextual ironies, to imagine neat beginnings and endings where they are lacking, and to overlook allusions to other articles and stories. They are also likely to interpret fictive passages as if they were nonfictive, and to take as authoritative without qualification articles that lie under a shadow of irony cast by other sections of the work. Thus, in contrast to a number of Russian novels that appeared in periodicals, *The Diary* is a periodical. When read in book form, as Dostoievsky intended it to be republished, it directs its readers to reconstruct its original appearance as a monthly journal. Those who have taken *The Diary* as a literary work have been especially puzzled by its thematic and formal heterogeneity, therefore in short, Dostoievsky conceived of *The Diary* not as a collection of articles and stories, but rather as a literary work in the form of a collection.

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