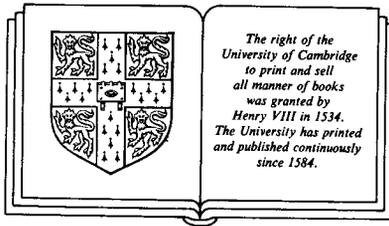


# *Dostoyevsky after Bakhtin*

READINGS IN DOSTOYEVSKY'S  
FANTASTIC REALISM

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## I

### Introduction: Dostoyevsky's fantastic realism

Most sympathetic readers seem to grasp intuitively what fantastic realism is. Some relate it to Dostoyevsky's immersion in German Idealism; some to his Christian beliefs; some to his anticipations of Nietzsche or Freud; some to his romantic penchant for contrasts and intensity and the traditions of Gogol, Dickens and Balzac; or latterly, in the wake of a rediscovered Bakhtin, to the carnivalization of literature; some to his polyphonic handling of point-of-view; some to his modern grasp of the way meanings recede indefinitely with truth as a mere vanishing point of the text. One thing is clear in all this: a wide variety of modes of reading responds to the magnetism of Dostoyevsky's text and plausibly claims him as its own, thus purporting to disclose the underlying characteristics of fantastic realism.

In this chapter I shall try to map out some of the choices and move towards some general principles for further exploration. At this stage I would venture just one generalization. Critical literature shows that Dostoyevsky's texts both attract common-sense readings in the tradition of social realism and strenuously resist them. This book takes the former phenomenon for granted and explores the latter.

I am not sure that Dostoyevsky ever actually used the expression 'fantastic realism' but his statements about his style fully justify its use as a shorthand term. In spite of many attempts to elucidate it, however, the concept is not altogether clear.

#### FANTASTIC REALISM: *OBITER DICTA*

There are a number of passages in Dostoyevsky's articles and letters which are relevant to the question, though it is doubtful whether any of them is capable of bearing the weight of an entire theory of fantastic realism. Five are quoted particularly frequently and we may begin by looking at them:

- (1) I have completely different ideas about reality and realism from our realists and critics. My idealism is more real than theirs. Good God! Wouldn't the realists proclaim that it was sheer fantasy if we tried to relate intelligibly all that we Russians have experienced in our spiritual development in the last ten years? Yet this is true realism! . . . With their type of realism it is impossible to explain even a small fraction of real, factual occurrences. And with our idealism we have even prophesied facts. We have actually prophesied them.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) I have my own view of reality in art and what in the view of most people verges on the fantastic and the exceptional is sometimes the very essence of the real for me. Everyday trivia and the conventional view of them do not, in my opinion, amount to realism, but the very opposite. In every newspaper you find reports of facts which are at the same time totally real and yet quite extraordinary. To our writers they seem fantastic and they do not take them into account; and yet they are reality, because they are *facts* . . . But is my fantastic *Idiot* not reality; reality, moreover, of the most everyday kind? Such characters must exist at this very moment in those strata of society which have become divorced from the soil – social strata which are in reality becoming fantastic.<sup>2</sup>
- (3) In Russia, truth almost always assumes an entirely fantastic character. In fact people have finally succeeded in converting all that the human mind may lie about and belie into something more comprehensible than truth, and such a view prevails all over the world.<sup>3</sup>
- (4) Granted that this is a fantastic tale, but when all is said and done the fantastic in art has its own limits and rules. The fantastic must be contiguous with the real to the point that you must *almost* believe in it. Pushkin, who gave us almost all kinds of art, wrote *The Queen of Spades* – the summit of fantastic art. And you really believe that Hermann had a vision in keeping with his world-view, and yet when you have read the story through and reached the end, you do not know what to think.<sup>4</sup>
- (5) They call me a psychologist: this is not true. I am just a realist in a higher sense, i.e., I depict all the depths of the human soul.<sup>5</sup>

When scrutinized closely there are some real difficulties here owing largely to inconsistencies in formulation. However, in terms of Dostoyevsky's own cultural environment, the general drift is clear. There is

no doubt that his views derive from the traditions of 'expressivism', as Charles Taylor calls them,<sup>6</sup> with their Russian origins in the influence of German Idealist philosophy and Romantic poetry to which Dostoyevsky was exposed from his adolescence onwards. According to this tradition truth was not to be discovered by the superficial procedures of experimental science or rational argument, but by peering by means of artistic intuition into the depths of the human soul, through which not only the secrets of the human soul itself but also those of the universe were to be discovered.

Leaving aside for a moment passage 4, one may paraphrase Dostoyevsky as follows. 'Realism in a higher sense', or what he calls his 'idealism', gives a unique access to the truth, i.e., the depths of the human soul, and permits an intelligible account of the spiritual development of a society or nation. This realism is not to be found in everyday trivia or the conventional view of them and is not reducible to the positivist conceptions of contemporary Russian 'realists' and critics. Where then is it located? Sometimes the essence of the real is to be found in the fantastic and exceptional (in the sense of abnormal). In Russia, as a matter of fact, the fantastic is sometimes not exceptional at all (in the sense of rare) but an everyday occurrence. As people become divorced from their native traditions (the soil) they become more fantastic and the depths of the human soul are more easily discerned in them (as, one might say, the psychopathology of everyday life is more easily discerned in the abnormal patient). Indeed in Russia the truth almost always seems to assume a fantastic character.

In outline, and within the expressivist tradition, this may seem clear enough. But some serious problems remain. Most serious of all are questions about the parameters of this 'fantastic' dimension and its relationship to material reality. Debate on the subject, taking its cue from different ideological postures adopted by Dostoyevsky himself, has been inconclusive.

There is, for example, a difference of opinion between prominent Western critics about whether fantastic realism designates a higher spiritual or poetic reality and if so what kind of realm this is; whether, for instance, it is a higher religious realm in which the multivoicedness of human discourse (Bakhtin's heteroglossia) finds unity in what Derrida calls a metaphysics of presence in which the transcendental signified finds a divine guarantee.

Robert Jackson, who in this passage begins by distinguishing

between the fantastic as in passage 4 and the use of the term elsewhere, writes,

One may distinguish in Dostoyevsky's thought, so far, two formally distinct categories of the fantastic in art, or of so-called fantastic realism: the *seemingly* fantastic facts or phenomena which are represented in art and which find a real (even if sometimes rare) correlative in life, and the *actually* or literally unreal phenomena that we encounter in one degree or another, for instance, in Hoffmann and Poe . . . But the very distinction – assumed here – between real and unreal phenomena or facts is obliterated, or at least seriously blurred, in Dostoyevsky's Christian religious illumination of reality. We noted at the beginning of this chapter Dostoyevsky's view that man is familiar only with the immediate and visible, 'and this is only in its appearance, while the ends and beginnings – all this is still a realm of the fantastic for man'. The 'fantastic' here, of course, is precisely ultimate reality in the philosophical or religious sense . . . Ultimate reality for the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the transcendent reality of the universal, Christian ideal.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere Jackson convincingly explains that what Dostoyevsky objected to most of all in contemporary realism (naturalism) was the lack of a moral centre.<sup>8</sup> But this does not mean, and Jackson does not claim, that the presence of a moral centre in itself constitutes the essence of fantastic realism.

Some readers have come to exactly the opposite conclusion to Jackson's. Sven Linnér, referring to the third passage quoted above, says,

We would, I believe, miss Dostoevskij's point if we were to take his words as primarily referring to some kind of higher and, for that reason, poetic truth.<sup>9</sup>

And, referring to the fifth passage, he adds,

To say . . . that the attributes 'full' and 'in a higher sense' imply a vision of some higher order is hardly warranted; in any case, since such a vision is also found among the people, it is not the privilege of the artist. The annotation, as it stands, is far too fragmentary to be taken as Dostoevskij's authoritative statement on the nature of his realism. A passage so fragile cannot carry that much weight. If, nevertheless, critics prefer to use the line 'a realist in a higher sense' when defining his position as a writer, they do so not because they know what he intended it to mean, but only because the words summarize *their* opinions.<sup>10</sup>

That is well put. No doubt 'fantastic realism' was used by Dostoyevsky to designate a realism with perspectives other than those of

unreflective, everyday experience, even when informed by his highly modern understanding of human dialogue, but we look in vain in his writings for a wholly consistent and satisfactory definition of the perspectives which it does afford.

#### FANTASTIC REALISM AND EXPRESSIVISM

It has seemed obvious to some that the elusive key is to be found in Dostoyevsky's idealist philosophical environment. N. N. Strakhov, his colleague on the journals *Time* and *The Epoch*, tells us that Dostoyevsky liked to hear his ideas formulated in terms of contemporary philosophy.<sup>11</sup> By this he meant post-Kantian idealist philosophy of which he was himself an exponent. This is hardly surprising, for Dostoyevsky was inevitably in constant dialogue with contemporary culture, and it is no more surprising to find occasional passages in which he makes the attempt to formulate his ideas in such terms himself. Some have argued that his portrayal of individuals and their relationships derives from or echoes Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*<sup>12</sup> or Carus' *Psyche*.<sup>13</sup> The question is not whether or not such echoes can be heard – they demonstrably can and could be in Dostoyevsky's own day – but how far they take us in understanding fantastic realism. There can be no doubt that a philosophical environment which held that ideas constitute the ultimate reality sensitized Dostoyevsky and many of his contemporaries to the role which conflicting ideas and ideologies play in human consciousness, in a way which bears marked similarities to the effect in our own day of the view that nothing can properly be said to exist outside the text. Although I have suggested that appeal to the cultural environment has in itself been of limited value in elucidating Dostoyevsky's use of the term 'fantastic realism', we cannot ignore the fact that he inevitably conceived and expressed his thoughts in terms which derived from it, and a brief examination of some of these thoughts may at least give us some clues. There are times, indeed, when his words sound not unlike a popularization of Schelling's philosophy:

Some ideas are deeply felt but remain unuttered and unconscious; there are many such ideas fused, as it were, with the human soul. They exist in the nation and in humanity as a whole. The nation experiences living life of the deepest kind only while they lie unconscious in the national life and are simply felt, strongly and unmistakably, and while all its life-energies are concentrated on bringing these hidden ideas to self-consciousness. The more faithfully the

nation preserves them and the less prone it is to betray them or succumb to false interpretations of them, the more powerful, the stronger and the happier it will be. But this does not mean that some false development of these ideas cannot knock it off course.<sup>14</sup>

Here and elsewhere Dostoyevsky reflects several expressivist emphases.<sup>15</sup> The first is the view that the essence of each organism lies deep within its subconscious spiritual life and that it directs its energies towards clarifying this spiritual life as well as living it out. The second is the view of feelings as modes of awareness, coupled with a strong anti-dualism and a passionate demand for unity and wholeness. The third is the realisation that authentic self-expression may be threatened by distortions of external origin. As Taylor points out, the new expressivist anthropology founded by Herder conceives of people defining themselves not in relation to an ideal order beyond, but rather to something that unfolds within themselves. While Fichte, Schelling and Hegel situated this anthropology within a metaphysical system that related personal development to that of a cosmic subject and a spiritual principle underlying the whole of nature, Dostoyevsky's position in this respect is entirely unclear.

Dostoyevsky seems true to the expressivist tradition in his view of art too. For the expressivist/romantic, art is the paradigm human activity: language and art (or sign systems as some might say nowadays) are the privileged media through which expression is realized. Dostoyevsky stresses here too that deviations may take place under outside pressures:

No doubt in the course of his life man may depart from normal reality and from the laws of nature, in such cases art will go along with him. But this only goes to prove its close and unbreakable ties with man, and its eternal loyalty to man and his interests.<sup>16</sup>

There is nothing strictly incompatible between these views and the view of human psychology inscribed in the novels. Yet I think Dostoyevsky is here leading us up a cul-de-sac (in which I have spent too much time myself). As we shall see as the argument of this book unfolds, the characteristic features of fantastic realism are not to be located in the process of spiritual evolution described by Dostoyevsky in such passages, but in the 'deviations', 'false developments', the 'departures from normal reality', the result of external pressures, the destabilizing effects of what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia in urban life where

man is torn from his roots. Dostoyevsky might indeed be thought of as the novelist of 'deviations' and 'false developments' *par excellence*. Deviations and false developments do not however imply a dialectic movement in which they are recuperated on a higher level.

But where and what is this 'normal reality'? The quoted passages may be seriously misleading if they suggest to us that Dostoyevsky reveals a clear grasp of an objective norm grounded in natural processes, from which the deviant phenomena of his novels depart. On the contrary the implied norms from which modern men and women depart seem to be not natural laws but dreams of the Golden Age, childhood memories, speculations about the past, life-long quests after utopian or spiritual ideals, philosophical fantasies. Some are driven to the conclusion that the laws of nature themselves demand that disharmony which for others is evidence of 'false developments'. We seem to be in a world where the norms themselves appear to shift relative to the observer and where any relationship to objective laws of nature is radically uncertain. To trust assertions like those quoted above serves little purpose except to give encouragement to critics anxious to stabilize a discourse which itself thrives on instability. The character of this instability together with the ceaseless search (shared by the sympathetic reader) for a firm ground will be examined further in later chapters.

Dostoyevsky did not attempt to define these complex interactions, yet his novels are about nothing else, and it is there that we may hope to find the secret of fantastic realism with its many and varied though inexact echoes of precursor texts: in his examination of the 'deviations' and 'false developments', the 'departures from normal reality' which are characteristic, in his view, of the modern world.

#### FANTASTIC REALISM AND ROMANTIC INTENSITY

One way in which the reader may seek to define these 'deviations' is to scan the topography of the novels themselves. As I have noted, some readers see Dostoyevsky as one of the great nineteenth-century realists, and this entirely plausible but limited view, with appropriate qualifications, has been particularly prevalent among Soviet critics. Others see him as one of the votaries of the cult of romantic intensity, who 'does not portray the world of nineteenth-century reality; [but] reveals the myths upon which that reality is founded'.<sup>17</sup> The combination and interaction of the two may be said to underlie Dostoyevsky's peculiar

'reality effect' (or as we may feel at times his 'unreality effect'). Critics who have looked to his novels for the phenomenology of fantastic realism have sometimes found its essential characteristics in a combination of contemporary 'public opinion' and 'the rules of the genre' (to borrow two principles of verisimilitude from Todorov).<sup>18</sup> It is not always easy in practice to distinguish them (the second may be seen as a sub-set of the first or the first as the product of the second). However, the first category focuses on areas of human life regarded at the time as particularly 'real' (for instance, the lot of the humiliated and oppressed supported by concrete details from contemporary life) and also perhaps on newspaper sensationalism, those dramatic, exceptional events with which in our own day English tabloid newspapers regale their readers under the pretext that 'all human life is there'. The second draws attention to what Donald Fanger has called the traditions of 'romantic realism' (Gogol, Dickens, Balzac, Sue),<sup>19</sup> this same social context presented through the devices of the melodrama and the Gothic novel: the enigmatic, the mysterious, modes of intensity, suspense, mysticism, the occult, illness as a path to higher knowledge, the excitement of gambling, heightened awareness, extreme emotional situations, oxymoron, stark contrasts, dreams, the unconscious mind, coincidence, the blurring of conventional distinctions, and so on in no particular order. The myth of St Petersburg, expressed variously in the works of Pushkin and Gogol and developed by the *feuilletonists* of the forties, bridges the two realms. Most of Dostoyevsky's stories and novels (though not *The Devils* or *The Brothers Karamazov*) are set in St Petersburg. Of this myth Fanger writes,

Petersburg is established as the most real of places in order that we may wonder at what strange things happen in it: it is, in fact, the condition of our perceiving the full force of the strangeness, the lever that forces the suspension of our disbelief. But once our wonder has been stimulated, the city itself becomes its object, and all that seemed most real a moment before may at any time begin to appear the sheerest fantasy. The dialectic process is the Dostoevskian hallmark: he himself called his method 'fantastic realism'.<sup>20</sup>

According to this view the world of fantastic realism discovers the strange in the familiar, the subjective in the objective, the melodramatic in the humdrum and sustains a precarious balance on the threshold between the one and the other.

Different critics focus on different sides of this picture. Alex de Jonge

in his book *Dostoevsky and the age of intensity* places his emphasis on the non-referential side of fantastic realism. No doubt many readers would agree that underlying Dostoyevsky's 'idealism' ('realism in a higher sense', the 'fantastic' side of fantastic realism), is a cult of intensity which incorporates a 'sense of cultural collapse and disruption', 'a perpetual stressed tension between the ideal and the real', 'a pathological distortion of the personality', a conception of the city as 'a root cause of contemporary trauma and spiritual loss', in which 'violent oscillation is the base component of Dostoyevsky's grammar of human behaviour'. In this world the quest for 'the intensest possible moment' is the *summum bonum*, and this is 'that world's most telling indictment'.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever else may be said about this vision, it is undoubtedly based upon the extreme contrasts and oppositions of which the romantics were so fond and which fed into the Decadent movement, oppositions between the real and the ideal, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the evil, the normal and the abnormal, the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the irrational, and so on, and also upon the effects of bringing these opposites into close proximity and dwelling on the threshold between them. Heightened awareness of various kinds, from the fevered consciousness of the gambler or the dying consumptive to the Underground Man's morbid introspection or Myshkin's epileptic mysticism, are the subjective by-products of these tensions.

#### FANTASTIC REALISM, MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM

Although de Jonge's view of Dostoyevsky, in this respect like Fanger's, situates him among the romantics and romantic-realists of his own time, similar features of the novelist's work have been highlighted in attempts to define his relationship to modernism. Such an attempt is that of Marshall Berman in his chapter on 'The modernism of underdevelopment' in *All that is solid melts into air*.<sup>22</sup> Berman sees the connection between such modernism and some of Dostoyevsky's links with his precursors and locates it in the image of Petersburg. He recalls that for Dostoyevsky Petersburg is 'the most abstract and premeditated city in the world'. One is reminded of several passages where the solidity of Petersburg seems (to borrow Marx's expression) to melt into air. Here is one such passage from 'A Weak Heart' (1848).

It was already dusk when Arkady returned home. Approaching the Neva, he stopped for a moment and cast a penetrating glance along the river into the foggy, turbid, frosty distance, which suddenly flushed with the last shades of a blood-red sunset, burning out on a misty horizon. The night hung over the city and in the last reflections of the sun the vast surface of the Neva, distended by the frozen snow, was veiled by a shower or sparks from innumerable needles of frost. It was twenty degrees below zero. Horses were being driven to death and people were running as their frozen breath hung in the air . . . It seemed as though in this twilight hour that whole world, with all its inhabitants, the strong and the weak, with their dwellings, the refuges of the poor or the gilded palaces of the great ones of the world, took on the likeness of a fantastic, magical reverie or dream, which in its turn would suddenly disappear and evaporate in a dark blue sky.<sup>23</sup>

Or, in *A Raw Youth* (1875),

However, I would mention in passing that Petersburg mornings, even the most prosaic, seem to me to be among the most fantastic in the world. That is my personal view, or, more exactly, my personal impression, which all the same I stand by. Such Petersburg mornings, damp, humid and foggy, must, it seems to me, encourage the wild dreams of some latter-day Hermann from Pushkin's 'Queen of Spades' (a colossal character, an unusual, typically Petersburgian type – a type of the 'Petersburg period'!) Repeatedly, during such fogs, I would fall prey to a strange, persistent dream: 'What if the fog should lift and take the whole damp, viscous city with it, rising with the fog, disappearing like smoke and leaving nothing but the old Finnish marshes, and – in the middle, for the sake of ornament perhaps – the Bronze Horseman on his exhausted, hotly breathing steed?' In other words I can't express my impressions properly, because it's all fantasy, that is, poetry, or consequently, rubbish; all the same I have often been and still am troubled by one completely nonsensical thought, 'There they all are, rushing hither and thither, and perhaps it is all just someone or other's dream, and there is not a single real person there, not a single actual deed. Whoever has been dreaming will suddenly wake up – and everything will suddenly disappear.' But I have let myself get carried away.<sup>24</sup>

In Berman's view, Petersburgers responded to the failure of the Decembrist Revolt with a 'brilliant and distinctive literary tradition, a tradition which focussed obsessively on their city as a symbol of warped and weird modernity, and that struggled to take possession of this city imaginatively on behalf of the peculiar sort of modern men and women that Petersburg had made'. Dostoyevsky stands amid a tradition that begins with Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman', passes on

through Gogol, and finds its later incarnations in the work of Belyy, Zamyatin and Mandelstam. The list could be extended. In Belyy,

modernism is preoccupied with the dangerous impulses that go by the name of 'sensation of the abyss'. Second, the modernist imaginative vision is rooted in images rather than abstractions; its symbols are direct, particular, immediate, concrete. Finally, it is vitally concerned to explore the human contexts . . . from which sensations of the abyss arise. Thus modernism seeks a way into the abyss, but also a way out, or rather a way *through*.<sup>25</sup>

It is easy to get carried away. Although Dostoyevsky claims that 'reality strives towards fragmentation', his texts are not modernist in the way that Belyy's fragmented vision is. Yet most of these generalizations – especially about the concern with exploring the human contexts from which sensations of the abyss arise – could equally well be made of him.

Perhaps indeed what we need is a distinction between modernism and post-modernism, such as that sketched by Ihab Hassan who stresses that post-modernism 'veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences – veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities'.<sup>26</sup> Does not Dostoyevsky find himself drawn towards such a vision in spite of his traditional starting points? More recently Brian McHale has distinguished between modernism and post-modernism as between literature which foregrounds epistemological questions (e.g. 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?' 'What is there to be known?' 'Who knows it?' 'What are the limits of the knowable') and literature which foregrounds ontological questions (e.g. 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What is the mode of existence of a text and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?')<sup>27</sup> Readers of Dostoyevsky will intuitively recognize questions of both kinds in his novels, the latter especially in those regions of his texts where, as some would argue, he seems on the verge of losing control.

The suggestion that Dostoyevsky is a precursor of post-modernism is not of course a new one. In 1956, Nathalie Sarraute, while admitting that his techniques were perhaps a little primitive, situated him squarely in this tradition. She writes,

Le temps était bien passé, où Proust avait pu oser croire qu' 'en poussant son impression aussi loin que le permettrait son pouvoir de pénétration' (il pourrait)

'essayer d'aller jusqu'à ce fond extrême ou gît la vérité, l'univers réel, notre impression authentique'. Chacun savait bien maintenant, instruit par des déceptions successives, qu'il n'y avait pas d'extrême fond. 'Notre impression authentique' s'était révélée comme étant à fonds multiples; et ces fonds s'étagaient à l'infini.<sup>28</sup>

It is to this vision that she assimilates Dostoyevsky and concludes that the 'ground' on which all the surface signification seems to rest may be no more than what Katherine Mansfield, 'avec une sorte de crainte et peut-être un léger dégoût' called 'this terrible desire to establish contact'.<sup>29</sup>

#### FANTASTIC REALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Many readers would claim that what sets Dostoyevsky's major texts apart from the rest of romantic realism, and what is neglected by Alex de Jonge, is the ideological dimension, expressed in its most extreme form in Raskolnikov's dream (or nightmare) of a world of conflicting ideas impervious and hostile to each other, each embodied in a separate human individual. For some, for example, Joseph Frank, the ideological dimension constitutes Dostoyevsky's principal claim to fame.<sup>30</sup> From *Notes from Underground* onwards, with the concept of 'idea-feelings' (according to which personal ideology and personal emotions are inseparable), Dostoyevsky becomes not only a great novelist, but also a great metaphysician – a view which Berdyayev propounded<sup>31</sup> and the present-day Jesuit philosopher Frederick Copleston finds defensible.<sup>32</sup> A naive attempt to read the novels as fictional representations of contemporary ideological debate is limiting. But such naive readings are not here at issue. Whereas Frank has amply documented, Bakhtin has performed the inestimable service of theorizing the place of ideas in Dostoyevsky's text. We shall return to Bakhtin shortly for other purposes, but we may here summarize his principal contributions to this theme, as expounded in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*.

Bakhtin argues that in Dostoyevsky's work each opinion or idea really does become a living thing and is inseparable from an embodied human voice affirming the 'I' of the other not as an object, but as another subject (in what Martin Buber would call an 'I-Thou' relationship).<sup>33</sup> Dostoyevsky's novel is ultimately dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses into itself (as in the traditional monologic novel), but as a whole formed by

the interaction of several consciousnesses, *none of which entirely becomes an object for the other*. Dostoyevsky's world is the artistically organized coexistence and interaction of spiritual diversity, not stages in the evolution of a unified spirit. However, the heroes of his novels are not ideas, as Engelhardt thought.<sup>34</sup> His hero was humanity, or to use his own words, 'man in man'. For Dostoyevsky there are no ideas in themselves. Even 'truth in itself' he represents as incarnated in Christ. Bakhtin appears to equate 'man in man' with 'individual consciousness in intense relationship with another consciousness'.<sup>35</sup> 'Dostoyevsky could hear dialogic relationships everywhere, in all manifestations of conscious and intelligent human life; where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well.'<sup>36</sup> The author of the polyphonic novel does not fix and define his characters once and for all but himself enters into dialogue with them.

The hero, then, interests Dostoyevsky not as a fixed character that can be defined, finalized and closed off from without, but as a point-of-view on the world: how the world appears to his hero and how he appears to himself (though, of course, this does not prevent his heroes and narrators from trying to define each other and their world monologically). A human being always knows something about himself that will elude external definition. The truth about the world is inseparable from the truth about the personality and, according to Dostoyevsky, an idea can and must be not only understood but also 'felt'.<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin rightly notes this point, upon which Dostoyevsky repeatedly insists. Some critics have represented it as the most important feature of Dostoyevsky's perception of human thought.

Without doubt, Bakhtin has made some comments of fundamental importance about the Dostoyevskian novel which spotlight a number of interrelated problems. But how far does this help us to define fantastic realism?

For his part Bakhtin directs attention to the dislocation of narrative point-of-view:

The self-clarification, self-revelation of the hero, his discourse about himself not predetermined (as the ultimate goal of his construction) by some neutral image of him, does indeed sometimes make the author's setting 'fantastic', even for Dostoyevsky. For Dostoyevsky the verisimilitude of a character is verisimilitude of the character's own internal discourse about himself in all its purity – but, in order to hear and display that discourse, in order to incorporate it into the field of vision of another person, the laws of that other field must be violated,

for the normal field can find a place for the object-image of another person but not for another field of vision in its entirety. Some fantastical viewpoint must be sought for the author outside ordinary fields of vision.<sup>38</sup>

Bakhtin goes on to quote at length from the author's foreword to 'A Meek One' where Dostoyevsky explains how he has created a 'fantastic' element in the composition of the story which for him is highly realistic. He writes as if a husband whose wife has just committed suicide is pacing up and down thinking while her body is lying there in the room. He tries to put his thoughts together logically; he recalls past events, and gradually moves towards the subjective truth. Of course such a person could not really write his thoughts down in this way; nor could anyone else take them down in shorthand, yet the process recorded is psychologically true.

As Dostoyevsky acknowledged, the technique is not original. But Bakhtin is pointing towards another possibility, that the fantastic realism of Dostoyevsky's novels may have something to do with a mode of narration and its capacity for rendering the truth of subjective reality. Indeed Dostoyevsky's experimentation with narrative point-of-view gives rise to some of the most striking characteristics of the texture of his imaginative world. As we shall see when we look at *The Idiot*, changes in narrative point-of-view serve not principally to light up the subject from different angles, but more often to subvert the integrity of the reader's perception of the imaginative world, particularly to subvert the refuge of the familiar, to lure readers into thinking they know 'where they stand' in relation to characters, setting and plot, only radically to undermine their suppositions. To put it another way, they think they understand the 'world' they are in, only to find their confidence repeatedly shaken. Characters are in a similar position in relation to each other. In a realm which consists of discourse the difference between world and world-view is a fine one.

Rosemary Jackson finds a prominent place for both Dostoyevsky and Bakhtin in her study of *Fantasy, the literature of subversion*.<sup>39</sup> She accepts Bakhtin's view that Dostoyevsky's novels are sustained dialogues, interrogating the 'normal' world and relativizing its values. 'Dostoyevsky effectively "hollows out" the real world, discovering a latent emptiness.' The same techniques of subversion apply to his characters:

Dostoyevsky's protagonists are in opposition to monological definitions of the real, or of fixed personal identity ... Through the double, 'the possibilities of

another man and another life are revealed', writes Bakhtin. 'The dialogical attitude of man to himself . . . contributes to the destruction of his integrity and finalizedness.' Dostoyevsky does not present 'characters', but disintegrated figures who no longer coincide with their 'ideal' selves, i.e. their culturally formed egos.

Perhaps this last sentence is a bit misleading. He does present characters, or at least it is perfectly possible to make 'characters' out of the bundles of events, descriptions and connotations which create the illusion of character, by deploying the strategies we generally deploy when defining character in fiction or lived experience. What is right about the Jackson/Bakhtin sentence is that they are constantly subject and subjected to processes of disintegration and reformulation, by themselves, other characters, the narrator and, no doubt, the reader. Like 'living life', 'characters' in Dostoyevsky ultimately elude our grasp. And Bakhtin is undoubtedly right in his view that fantastic realism, 'my idealism' or 'realism in a higher sense' was for Dostoyevsky ultimately about people's dialogic discourse generated by other voices. In the end Dostoyevsky's realism is fantastic because, as in the literature of fantasy (or for that matter much modern literature), "meanings" recede indefinitely, with truth as a mere vanishing point of the text'.<sup>40</sup> In the end readings of Dostoyevsky as the Christian, the Marxist, the existentialist, the psychoanalytic are misconceived if they are seen as definitive, as would be a naive realist or naturalistic reading.

In a notable passage, which is perhaps his most important and most neglected theoretical statement, Dostoyevsky wrote 'Ideas fly in the air, but always according to laws . . . Ideas live and spread according to laws which elude our grasp.'<sup>41</sup> What all the passages about 'fantastic realism', 'my idealism', 'realism in a higher sense' and so on have in common is the belief that (at least in a period of crisis) human perceptions do not exist in a stable relationship to an anterior reality, unless it be an elusive spiritual reality which we cannot grasp, but live lives of their own, validated as much by some principle of internal coherence as by conformity or responsiveness to an objective reality and constantly in a state of flux and reformulation. Dostoyevsky's own novels are designed in such a way as repeatedly to challenge the reader's (and the character's) easy identification of signifier with signified, sign with meaning, verisimilitude with reality.

The strategies which Dostoyevsky adopts are to be found in both character-to-character relationships and in the narrator-reader