

# interpretation

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Volume 12 number 1

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## Book Reviews

**Character Names in Dostoevsky's Fiction.** By Charles E. Passage. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1982. 140 pp.: cloth \$27.50, paper \$6.50.)

JOAN RICHARDSON

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*Character Names in Dostoevsky's Fiction* is a well-honed, carefully fashioned instrument for interpretation. In the best tradition of useful, objective scholarship, this highly organized, thoroughly researched and documented text presents, in remarkably concise form, all the necessary information about Dostoevsky's naming of characters against a background of pertinent historical, political, personal, and literary details. Using this excellent reference tool, a reader of any one or all of Dostoevsky's works will be able to illuminate the text, as it were, enriching the translations with the colorful illustrative details Passage provides. Passage's contribution allows English-language readers an access to an immediate level of meaning previously reserved only for a Russian audience. Readers of the English translations will now be able to enjoy both the sense of unity and coherence belonging to Dostoevsky's onomastic "system" and the personal, political, and historical attitudes of the author clearly reflected in his name choices.

Up until very recently, readers of Dostoevsky's work in English translation have not had a very important part of the text—one of the central narrative devices—available to them. This—the author's complex and revelatory system of naming characters—is the subject of the book under review. To give a better idea of the difference this book makes, imagine reading Dickens thinking all the names simply proper names, being unaware of the range of denotative and connotative additions carried by each of them. It would be somewhat like Homeric characters without epithets. We could not imagine the characters in their particularity the way the author imagined them. We would have difficulty remembering and recognizing the host of personages as they disappear and reappear in the narrative. We would, in short, have the experience most of us have had when reading Nineteenth Century Russian novels—trying to invent our own mnemonic devices for each character paired with his or her name while trying, at the same time, to keep in touch with the narrative flow. We no longer have to attempt these mental acrobatics.

With these additions to understanding, the reader can begin to enter the region of Dostoevsky's mythology. It would be as if—to offer a parallel instance, using a mythology equally distant in different ways, though not for wholly different reasons—there were a translation of the *Odyssey* that restored to the text the associations and connections of its metaphors so that we could

see with the mind's eye, in the same way as the original audience, the images evoked by the poet's words. We would have a very different perception of the sea, for example, if we knew, or read through the translation, that its etymology ties it to the word for a pregnant woman. Having that kind of sense of language and the interconnectedness of words and names heard by original speakers of the language allows us to perceive fully what a different world-view means and allows us to move freely in that other world, feeling and understanding its complex system of relationships, seeing a name not simply as an arbitrarily appended tag or epithet, but as an integral part and necessary expression of an organic whole.

Passage accomplishes this task for Dostoevsky with the ease and economy that grow out of his excellent sense of order and his assiduous attention to excluding any personal interpretation. This is a tool, meant to be used incisively so that we can make our *own* interpretations once we have the information a Russian reader would have had automatically. A fine example of what a scientific, objective critical approach can offer, it works like the precision instrument it was designed to be.

Neatly divided into three main sections—Part One, Part Two and Tables—, subdivided into clearly labeled categories, the scholar or general reader will have no problem finding exactly what he or she is looking for. In addition there are a Preface and Introduction tersely covering the intention, personal and historical genesis, and placement of this kind of work, and its relevance to Dostoevsky as a Nineteenth Century Russian *and* European writer. In the Introduction, for example, Dostoevsky's "name-giving" is seen in a broad context ranging from the Greek "New Comedy" of the Fourth Century B. C. through its ties to Dickens—the English Nineteenth Century's archetypal name-giver—to its closer links in the Russian tradition to Pushkin and Gogol. Here and elsewhere, as well, Passage also points out Dostoevsky's carrying over of Hoffmannian mannerisms—very important in studying some of the earlier works.

Part One is diachronic, presenting brief plot summaries into which have been woven the meanings of each of the character's names. It is separated into four subsections following Dostoevsky's development as a writer: I. Early Stories, 1846–1849; II. Works of Various Kinds, 1857–1865; III. Short Novels and Short Stories, 1866–1881; IV. The Long Novels. The only place where the chronological order is interrupted is in Section III dealing with the short novels and stories which actually appeared in between the long novels. This change in ordering is appropriate because it allows the larger works to be examined as a group; those unfamiliar with the entire Dostoevsky corpus can simply go directly to the section dealing with the long novels, not distracted by the material about the shorter works. Also appropriate is Passage's greater attention to the analysis of names and their allusions as they pertain to the plots of the long novels. The nonspecialist in Dostoevsky will naturally be interested in these discussions. For the shorter, less-known pieces, Passage is very brief,

giving only the names' meanings without making all the connections to the characters' movements and functions in the unfolding of the plot. This is as it should be since most of these works have not yet been thoroughly analyzed in English, as have the major novels, and the specialists in Dostoevsky who will be interested in these minor works should simply be presented with the raw material and so allowed to begin themselves the more expansive analyses that will no doubt be suggested by Passage's elliptical presentation of the facts. Indeed, we can look forward to new, expanded analyses of the longer novels as well, following what Passage economically but enticingly has given us already.

Effectively punctuating each of the subsections of Part One are extremely useful biographical details, suggesting certain changes in Dostoevsky's attitude that might be reflected in his name choices. In addition, Passage brings to bear his easy erudition about the various editions of Dostoevsky's work and about the broader influences impinging on his namings. In this way, Dostoevsky's feelings about Russia, Orthodoxy, Russia's relationship to France, to Germany, her problem with minorities, the class system, figures from the historical past, as well as figures from his personal past and present are all illuminatingly suggested. At no point does Passage draw a one-to-one interpretation of a name and a particular fact; rather, he masterfully leaves the threads of all the facts hanging; these Dostoevsky's and his readers can weave together into their own tapestries of meaning. In all cases, however, he provides, in a well-chosen example of equivalence, the tone implicit in Dostoevsky's name choices. For example, in showing how the various diminutives function in Russian to indicate degrees of intimacy or affection, he points out the difference between calling someone "Johnny" or something like "my dear John." Or, in another instance, to communicate Dostoevsky's playfully disparaging attitude in a farcical piece towards two characters named Pyotr Ivanovich and Ivan Petrovich, he suggests that the effect of their names is similar to the effect Americans get from Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Part Two is synchronic. It is divided into all the possible categories applicable to Dostoevsky's system of naming: I. Types and Family Names; II. The Social Classes; III. Special Groups of Characters, for examples, "Doctors," and "Non-Russians," the latter section subdivided into various nationalities, such as "The English," "The French," "The Germans," "The Jews"; IV. Animals; V. Narrators; VI. Settings; VII. Russians with Non-Russian Names; VIII. Given Names (this section also has useful subsections covering "Patronymics," "Nicknames," and "Servants' Names").

With its structural approach, Part Two offers even the anthropologist or sociologist the necessary and important information to build a portrait of society in Dostoevsky's Nineteenth Century Russia. Also, by cataloging the names in various lists, Passage offers literary theorists interested in processes of composition a rare glimpse—objectively captured—into the workings of Dostoevsky's mind.

Though he never mentions it, we can hardly escape speculating that Dostoevsky used his taxonomies as mnemonic devices. Knowing that Dostoevsky was epileptic, and that he composed the greater part of his work under the pressure of meeting serial deadlines, often enough having a seizure from which he would recover with little or no short-term memory, suggests that, to some degree at least, the names he gave his characters were linked in some kind of personal associative pattern that would allow him, if necessary, to recognize them through their names and to reconstruct their personalities and their actions in the context of the narrative he had already completed. The preponderance of “Animal,” “Bird,” “Plant” names, as Passage lists, will prompt fanciful readers to reconstruct for themselves Dostoevsky’s personal memory scheme—a scheme that seems to have a great deal in common with the memory schemes of Antiquity. These schemes continued in use through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, contributing, as Francis Yates points out in *The Art of Memory*, to the order and imagery of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as well as to that of Giordano Bruno’s Hermetic religious message. Though Dostoevsky could no doubt have devised his system naively, in response to dealing with the more terrifying aspects of his condition in relation to his work as a writer, it might also be possible that he had learned this system as part of his own education, the monkish methods of the Middle Ages being preserved until very late in the Orthodox tradition. In any case, this is the kind of speculation that is generated by the material collected and presented in schematic form in Part Two of Passage’s handbook.

Within the categories of Part Two, Passage provides all the details necessary for specialists and nonspecialists alike, reading at their various levels. Indeed, the nonspecialist looking at only one particular section will soon be tempted to become a specialist as well, wanting to read more of both Dostoevsky’s fiction and Passage’s illuminations, prompted by the concrete sense of writer and work that emerges from Passage’s erudition. The sense of reality derived, for example, from learning, as we do from Passage, that the weather and newspaper stories as described and referred to in *Crime and Punishment* correspond to the real weather and feature stories of a summer in St. Petersburg when Dostoevsky was feverishly writing, allows us to participate in the kind of response his original audience would have had, waiting for the next installment of the novel to appear during the same hot summer. Knowledge of this sort belongs only to the true scholar, and it is the sort that makes true scholars of others.

Closing this neat volume are three tables listing, in alphabetical order: “Given Names,” with their English equivalents and translated meanings (for example, “Fomá—Thomas—Biblical twin” and beneath it its diminutive forms, “Fomká, Fomushka” = “Tom, Tommy”); “Non-Russian Names,” indicating in which works they appear, with cross-references; and “Family Names,” with indications of the works in which they appear, again cross-referenced, their transliterated forms, their Russian forms, and their meanings (for

example, “*Brok*—Belyávkí—Белявский—“white hare”). To these tables any reader could go immediately to find, in the most direct and concise form, the meaning that is automatically available to the native Russian reader. Whenever the derivation is not certain, a question mark prefaces the offered possibilities. In short, no matter which section of this wonderful guide is turned to, there is no bit of information that is not thoroughly researched and carefully presented. It is a book useful at all levels and should be on the shelves of anyone having even one Dostoevsky novel.

*Charles Passage's death is a loss not only to those of us who knew him and worked with him, but a loss to all those who love letters and know the difference the best of scholarship makes in our appreciation of texts that show us how to live and what to do. His gentleness and generosity—the qualities most apparent to those who knew him—were the features that made his scholarship fit for the category “best.” His gentleness translated into the sensitivity with which he read and with which he composed his careful sentences. His generosity shows itself to anyone whose enjoyment of reading Dostoevsky, E. T. A. Hoffman or any of the other figures to whom he devoted attention has been enriched by his additions. Many more than those who knew him will miss him, because there will be no more of his work.*

## Two Critiques of Nihilism

**After Virtue.** By Alasdair MacIntyre. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. 252 pp.: cloth \$15.95, paper \$7.95.)

**Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay.** By Stanley Rosen. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969. xx + 241 pp.: cloth \$22.50, paper \$6.95.)

WILL MORRISEY

“There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture,” MacIntyre writes. Morals are said to reduce to the sentiments of individuals. When on occasion they have not simply endorsed “emotivism,” both ‘analytic’ and existentialist philosophers have failed to overcome it. In this they echo the nineteenth-century debate on “utility” versus “rights”—that “matching pair of incommensurable fictions.”

The language and even the “integral substance” of morality have been destroyed, albeit slowly and often quietly, leaving us with today’s farrago of petty calculation and arbitrary self-righteousness. MacIntyre traces this destruction to the Enlightenment, wherein philosophers attacked religion but in effect judged philosophy morally incompetent to replace religion. He traces the En-