



Fictional Absence - Appendix 1: The Possibility of Providence

Pete Lowman

In Fictional Absence, which has been slightly revised for publication here, Pete Lowman considers the presence and absence of God in English literature.

Contents:

Introduction: The Practice of the Absence of God

One: The Birth of the Novel

Two: The Eighteenth Century

Three: The Nineteenth Century

Four: After the Funeral

Conclusion: Learning to go Blind

Appendix I: The Possibility of Providence

Appendix II: The Fictional Hypothesis

APPENDIX I: THE POSSIBILITY OF PROVIDENCE

One conclusion that has sometimes been drawn from the 'loss of God' in the English novel is that 'You can't have God in a novel, can you?' – in other words, that it is simply impossible to tell a long story which takes seriously either God or providence in any sustained way. That seems to have been Ian Watt's conclusion when he wrote *The Rise of the Novel*, where he suggests that an exclusively naturalistic approach is necessary even for the 'religious novelist':

This, of course, is not to say that the novelist himself or his novel cannot be religious, but only that whatever the ends of the novelist may be, his means should be rigidly restricted to terrestrial characters and actions: the realm of the spirit should be presented only through the subjective experiences of the characters. Thus Dostoevsky's

novels, for example, in no sense depend for their verisimilitude or their significance on his religious views; divine intervention is not a necessary construct for an adequate and complete explanation of the causes and meanings of each action, as it is in Bunyan. Alyosha and Father Zossima are portrayed very objectively: indeed, the very brilliance of Dostoevsky's presentation shows that he cannot assume, but must prove, the reality of the spirit: and The Brothers Karamazov as a whole does not depend upon any non-naturalistic causation or significance to be effective and complete.[1]

This assertion of the need to 'rigidly restrict' the novel's subject-matter obviously raises a fundamental question for our study. A number of interesting theoretical issues are involved, with wide-ranging implications, which we shall look at briefly below. But 'the text should come first': and the example Watt cites, the fiction of the Russian novelist Dostoevsky, is worth our attention, in that it is generally seen as looming rather larger in the novel's history than works like *Jane Eyre* or *Amelia* or *The End of the Affair*. But a careful reading of Dostoevsky demonstrates that Watt is mistaken: no such 'rigid restriction' or exclusion of providentialism is at all necessary.

(i) From Russia with God's Love?

Take *Crime and Punishment*, for example. This is the story of Raskolnikov's murder of an apparently useless old woman, and his subsequent guilt and eventual confession. Certainly its 'verisimilitude' does not *depend* on Dostoevsky's religious views: it can be read purely in psychological terms; providence is not a 'necessary construct' for an adequate explanation of events. But it is clearly present as one possible understanding of what has taken place; Dostoevsky carefully opens the door for the beyond.

Early references in the book to such a causality are, we may concede, ambivalent. When Katerina Ivanovna throws out the challenge 'Good God!... is there no justice upon earth? Whom should you protect if not us orphans? We shall see! There is law and justice on earth, there is, I will find it! [2]', all that results is her own death. Yet it is not quite impossible that she is right: as a result of her death her children are taken care of. Still, if there

is a providence at work here, it is one that works in mysterious ways.

But this mystery is central to what Dostoevsky does with the notion of providence in the book: the issue is raised, yet with a deliberate ambivalence. This becomes obvious in the passages leading up to the murder. Raskolnikov prays, 'Lord, show me my path – I renounce that accursed ... dream of mine' (ie. the murder) [3], and immediately, as if in response, the unexpected occurs:

Later on, when he recalled that time and all that happened to him during those days, minute by minute, point by point, he was superstitiously impressed by one circumstance, which, though in itself not very exceptional, always seemed to him afterwards the predestined turning-point of his fate. He could never understand and explain to himself why, when he was tired and worn out, when it would have been more convenient for him to go home by the shortest and most direct way, he had returned by the Hay Market where he had no need to go... But why, he was always asking himself, why had such an important, such a decisive and at the same time such an absolutely chance meeting happened in the Hay Market (where he had moreover no reason to go) at the very hour, the very minute of his life when he was just in the very mood and in the very circumstances in which that meeting was able to exert the gravest and most decisive influence on his whole destiny? As though it had been lying in wait for him on purpose.[4]

Here, in so fateful a result of his prayer, there is indeed a suggestion of a causality beyond the merely naturalistic, operating through his chance thoughts and wanderings. Its credibility is increased by the 'always seemed to him afterwards' – that is to say, in his moments of cool reflection much later, and not just in the periods of overheated intensity that follow the murder. But the result is not what might be expected: it must be noted that, so far from answering his prayer with deliverance, the 'chance meeting' serves to present him with a clear opportunity to carry out the murder. At the beginning of the next chapter Dostoevsky presents a plausible naturalistic explanation of the 'chance meeting', but immediately returns to the alternative, supernaturalistic, interpretation:

But Raskolnikov had become superstitious of late. The traces of superstition remained in him long after, and were almost ineradicable. And in all this he was always afterwards disposed to see something strange and mysterious, as it were the presence of some peculiar influences and coincidences.[5]

'Superstition' sounds pejorative. But Dostoevsky moves on straightaway to an incident for which coincidence is only marginally possible as an interpretation: Raskolnikov overhears a conversation in which it is suggested that the murder of the old pawnbroker, the very same woman whom he himself is thinking of killing, could be justified since it would set her money free for 'a hundred thousand good deeds':

This coincidence always seemed strange to him. This trivial talk in a tavern had an immense influence on him in his later action; as though there had really been in it something preordained, some guiding hint.[6]

The striking thing here is that this 'something preordained' sways Raskolnikov towards murder rather than away from it. It may all be the product of Raskolnikov's feverish imagination; or it may be evil in origin ('When reason fails, the devil helps!', Raskolnikov thinks as he solves the unforeseen problem of how to obtain an axe for the murder [7]). But the book also raises the bizarre possibility that the hand of God may be operating to provide Raskolnikov with a situation in which he is allowed to murder and so learn the falsity of his radical philosophical theories (an instance of the 'permissive will of God', in theological terms). The enigmatic detective Porfiry suggests a possible unity as he urges Raskolnikov to confess and accept a prison sentence:

Seek and ye shall find. This may be God's means for bringing you to Him... At least you didn't deceive yourself for long, you went straight to the furthest point at one bound. How do I regard you? I regard you as one of those men who would stand and smile at their torturer while he cuts their entrails out, if only they have found faith or God. Find it and you will live. You have long needed a change of air. Suffering, too, is a good thing... You ought to thank God, perhaps. How do you know? Perhaps God is saving you for

something.[8]

And certainly it will be through the sufferings of his sentence to Siberia that Raskolnikov will find his resurrection. It is at least possible, then, that these coincidences can be seen as God making a way for Raskolnikov to go *'straight to the furthest point at one bound'*. (Porfiry's assessment receives credibility in that it is he who detects Raskolnikov's guilt.) There is another character who strengthens the suggestion of the reality of God's presence and activity as a conceivable if highly paradoxical interpretation of events: the prostitute Sonia. Sonia is a crucial character in the novel; it is she who faithfully follows Raskolnikov into exile and is the means of his conversion and 'resurrection'. Obviously, then, her attitudes towards events carry some weight – backed up as they are by her ability to survive spiritually in enforced degradation. For Sonia has turned – agonisingly – to prostitution for her destitute family's sake, and – almost miraculously – *'has still preserved the purity of her spirit'*, as Raskolnikov observes:

He was still confronted by the question, how could she have remained so long in that position without going out of her mind? ... What held her up – surely not depravity? All that infamy had obviously only touched her mechanically, not one drop of real depravity had penetrated to her heart; he saw that.[9]

What *'holds her up'*, as it turns out, is – despite her own wretched experience – her strong belief in providence. Raskolnikov wonders, *'Does she expect a miracle? No doubt she does. Doesn't that all mean madness?'*[10] – raising the two alternatives of madness and supernaturalism that arise in the narrative of his own experience too:

'So you pray to God a great deal, Sonia?' he asked her.

Sonia did not speak, he stood beside her waiting for an answer.

'What should I be without God?' she whispered, rapidly, forcibly, glancing at him with suddenly flashing eyes, and squeezing his hand...

'That's the way out! That's the explanation,' he decided, scrutinising her with eager curiosity, with a new, strange, almost morbid feeling. He gazed at that pale, thin, irregular, angular little face, those soft blue eyes, which could flash with such

fire, such stern energy, that little body still shaking with indignation and anger – and it all seemed to him more and more strange, almost impossible. 'She is a religious maniac!' he repeated to himself... Everything about Sonia seemed to him strange and more wonderful every moment.[11]

Sonia's providential worldview receives considerable endorsement in what it does for her – though *'She is a religious maniac!'* keeps the alternative interpretation in view. And at their next encounter, the question of providence is brought to bear on the central issue of the book. Raskolnikov suggests that man's need to look after his own destiny gives him the right to direct events even at the cost of murder; Sonia asserts a different causality, albeit one with its own mystery:

'But I can't know the Divine Providence... And why do you ask what can't be answered? What's the use of such foolish questions? How could it happen that it should depend on my decision – who has made me a judge to decide who is to live and who is not to live?'

'Oh, if the Divine Providence is to be mixed up in it, there is no doing anything,' Raskolnikov grumbled morosely.[12]

Quite so: if God indeed acts in historical reality, then the whole ethical issue becomes totally different; there can be no grounds for murder committed on the basis that the ends justify the means. Instead, the life of faith will mean trusting God for deliverance against the probabilities of the situation. (But there is an unexplored problem here: faith in God would surely rule out Sonia's resort to prostitution to meet her family's needs as much as it does Raskolnikov's murder.)

Raskolnikov proceeds to confess his murder to Sonia. He has several possible explanations of his act. First he justifies it in the terms of man having to look after his own destiny, as the necessary foundation for his career. Then, acknowledging that as *'all nonsense, it's almost all talk'*, he presents it as his solution to the problems of his mother and sister. Sonia objects, *'No, that's not right, not right'*, and Raskolnikov changes his mind and describes it in terms of moral self-criticism: *'Better... imagine – yes, it's certainly better – imagine that I am vain, envious, malicious, base, vindictive and... well, perhaps*

with a tendency to insanity.' But he swings back immediately (*'No, that's not it. Again I am telling you wrong'*) and proceeds to assert his rights as the potential master-spirit, breaking free from the ethics of the common herd, who *'dares most of all'* and thereby *'will be most in the right... I... I wanted to have the daring... And I killed her.'* Sonia counters immediately on grounds that are not only ethical but also supernaturalistic:

'Oh, hush, hush!' cried Sonia, clasping her hands, 'you turned away from God and God has smitten you, has given you over to the devil!'

'Then, Sonia, when I used to lie there in the dark and all this became clear to me, was it a temptation of the devil, eh?'

'Hush, don't laugh, blasphemer! You don't understand, you don't understand! Oh God! He won't understand!'

'Hush Sonia, I am not laughing. I know myself that it was the devil leading me.'

His last attempt at explanation is that *'I did the murder for myself, for myself alone... I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man'* (ie. a master-spirit ethically free to *'step over barriers'*). But by now he will accept the supernatural framework: *'I want to prove one thing only, that the devil led me on then and he has shown me since that I had not the right to take that path, because I am just such a louse as all the rest.'*[13]

In this crucial discussion, Dostoevsky is presenting us with several alternative interpretations for the events of the book. One of these, the one that closes that part of their conversation, has the weight of Sonia's character behind it; and that is the interpretation that involves a providential perspective. To say this is not to say that Sonia is to be understood as Dostoevsky's mouthpiece: rather, it is to say that, among the various different approaches we are offered, the supernaturalistic understanding should be considered as having some weight. But then it becomes a possibility that the ambivalences of the earlier narrative are events that should be read along supernaturalistic lines. The final conclusion of the narrative has the same effect. Raskolnikov confesses his murder and is sent to Siberia; Sonia follows him loyally, and it is through his relationship with her that he finally attains *'a full resurrection into a new life'*[14] –

expressed in his taking up the New Testament for the first time, four paragraphs before the book's close. Such a denouement gives a real endorsement to a (re)reading of the book's events in terms of providentialist causality: the final revelation of a pattern suggests that the earlier mysterious hints were perhaps not illusory.

This conclusion is not rendered unavoidable. The book's theme is not supernaturalism versus naturalism, but rather 'crime and punishment': it is first of all the narrative of Raskolnikov's rediscovery of the reality of ethical categories, his realisation that 'crime' and 'punishment' are meaningful terms – and, indeed, 'love', as proven by Sonia's faithfulness. It is possible to share Sonia's *'feelings, her aspirations at least'*, as Raskolnikov hopes at the close, without necessarily endorsing her assertions in the area of causality. Nothing is 'proven'; nonetheless, Dostoevsky has modelled a process in which the Christian worldview, with its real moral categories and its interpretation of events that denies them to be *'rigidly restricted to terrestrial characters'*, might well be worthy of a faith-commitment as a correct picture of how things are.

Dostoevsky creates a similar situation in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is often seen as his masterpiece. This novel is in part concerned with the clash between the scepticism (mixed with a longing for faith) of Ivan Karamazov, and the faith (mingled with doubt) of the saintly Father Zossima and his pupil Alyosha, Ivan's brother. The fifth and sixth books of the novel exemplify this clash; and in them the issue of supernaturalism is clearly raised. In the fifth book, 'Pro and Contra', Ivan is portrayed presenting a powerful series of arguments against Christianity, drawn from such areas as the problem of the suffering of innocent children. Dostoevsky then presents the memoirs of Father Zossima in the sixth book as a kind of reply.

And for Father Zossima, God is involved in human life, superintending its development. He tells the story of how he came to enter the monastery: *'Five months later by God's grace I entered upon the safe and blessed path, praising the unseen finger which had guided me so clearly to it.'*[15] No overt miracle is involved; what is asserted is God's sovereignty and activity over and through the development of Zossima's

thinking. The same is true when Zossima befriends a murderer who has gone undetected for fourteen years, but with an agonised conscience; the murderer tells him, *'I have been for fourteen years "in the hands of the living God", that's how one must think of those fourteen years'*.^[16] Next day he confesses the murder in public; nobody believes him. Zossima sees this as God's answer to prayer; and the murderer himself agrees – even when he falls mortally ill: *'God has had pity on me and is calling me to Himself. I know I am dying, but I feel joy and peace for the first time after so many years'*.^[17] In the sixth book, then, the 'Christian' option that Zossima represents includes, as a matter of course, a providentialist way of looking at the causes underlying events; *'the hands of the living God'* are carrying out their purposes in men's lives. Such a perspective is only one man's opinion; but that man, Zossima, is one whom the book presents in a very favourable light.

The next book, 'Alyosha', narrates a crisis in Alyosha's development, and raises the issue of supernaturalism again, in a rather more complex manner. Father Zossima has gained something of a reputation of a miracle-worker, and after his death crowds visit his monastery expecting miracles. Instead, Zossima's body decomposes much more rapidly than it ought. This is taken as a sign of divine displeasure by Zossima's opponents in the monastery, and causes considerable confusion amongst his friends. The narrator comments:

In reality it was the most natural and trivial matter... Afterwards, even many years afterwards, some sensible monks were amazed and horrified, when they recalled that day, that the scandal could have reached such proportions.^[18]

But the narrator is not querying the doctrine of providence; instead, he simply rejects the naively simplistic way in which the monks interpret it. And he stresses his own orthodoxy as he does so: he goes on to say that *'it seemed as though God had in this case let the minority'* (that is, the minority of monks who were opposed to Zossima) *'get the upper hand for the time'*^[19]; which retains a supernaturalistic context by placing the whole action within the permissive will of God.

However, Alyosha's faith is severely shaken:

Why this sign from heaven.... where is the finger of providence? Why did Providence hide its face 'at the most critical moment' (so Alyosha thought it), as though voluntarily submitting to the blind, dumb, pitiless laws of nature?^[20]

And Alyosha, demanding 'justice' (ie. that God's will should be shown visibly to be righteous), echoes his sceptical brother Ivan's words: *'I am not rebelling against my God; I simply "don't accept his world"'*^[21]. Then, in repudiation of his monastic vows, he eats sausage, orders vodka, and goes off to the disreputable Grushenka (who is conducting an affair with both Alyosha's father and his brother Mitya). But at Grushenka's house, it would seem, Alyosha gets his miracle, a miracle of character transformation, of conversion: Alyosha's selfless pity and loving interest trigger off a spiritual crisis in Grushenka, and she confesses to him her own guilt. Alyosha returns to the monastery in a changed mood: *'There was reigning in his soul a sense of the wholeness of things'*.^[22] He dreams of Christ at Cana, and on waking has an ecstatic experience of love for the entire heavens, and the world, human and natural; at the end of which we read, *"Someone visited my soul in that hour", he used to say afterwards, with implicit faith in his words'*.^[23] Alyosha has come to an understanding of God's providential will, and God's world, in contrast both to his original, highly simplistic expectation of miracles, and his subsequent rejection. And in that experience Dostoevsky is presenting the involvement of the supernatural (the true experience of miracle as distinct from the false expectation, and also the supernatural visitation) as – almost certainly – a fundamental part of Alyosha's spiritual development.

The events that befall the third and wildest Karamazov brother, Mitya, surely offer themselves to be read as containing the same movement: retaining a deep-rooted providentialism while demonstrating the falsity of a superficial faith. Mitya is threatening to kill his father; yet he tells Alyosha that:

I believe in miracles.... In a miracle of Divine Providence. God knows my heart. He sees my despair. He sees the whole picture. Surely he won't let something awful happen. Alyosha, I believe in miracles.

Mitya is not exactly a paragon of virtue: but Alyosha is, and he concurs.[24] Yet *'something awful'* does happen. The Karamazovs' father is murdered; and Mitya is the main suspect, since he has threatened to kill his father. So, although he is innocent, he is judged guilty and sentenced to Siberia: *'Divine Providence'* has failed to perform as expected, it seems. But in fact Dostoevsky refers to this event a number of times in a manner that suggests the real involvement of God; and in these we see just how his hints at supernaturalism are operating. First of all, it is clear that Mitya Karamazov, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, is a character in need of some kind of reformation. He embodies what Alyosha calls *'the primitive force of the Karamazovs...a crude, unbridled, earthly force. Does the spirit of God move above that force? Even that I don't know.'*[25] This is one of the many questions the book raises: if God and Mitya Karamazov exist in the same universe, what will happen? What will God do?

The intuitive Father Zossima suggests an answer after Mitya has taken part in an outrageous scene in his presence. Zossima astonishes everyone by bowing to the ground before him; and he explains later to Alyosha, *'I bowed down yesterday to the great suffering in store for him.'*[26] Alyosha likewise tells Mitya after his arrest that *'To-morrow will be a great and awful day for you, the judgement of God will be accomplished.'* In his reply, Mitya voices the same awareness of providential judgement:

Brother, these last two months I've found in myself a new man. A new man has risen up in me. He was hidden in me, but would never have come to the surface if it hadn't been for this blow from heaven. I am afraid! And what do I care if I spend twenty years in the mines breaking out ore with a hammer? I am not a bit afraid of that – it's something else I am afraid of now: that that new man may leave me... I didn't kill father, but I've got to go... Oh yes, we shall be in chains and there will be no freedom, but then, in our great sorrow, we shall rise again to joy, without which man cannot live nor God exist, for God gives joy: it's His privilege – a grand one. Ah, man should be dissolved in prayer!... One cannot exist in prison without God: it's even more impossible than out of prison.'[27]

Mitya says many bizarre things in the book, and his mood changes swiftly: by putting the full expression of these ideas into Mitya's mouth, and so casting a certain doubt on them, Dostoevsky avoids giving them too great an endorsement, avoids sacrificing the conflict and ambivalence of beliefs and attitudes that is so fundamental to his novels. But he wants his readers to take the idea seriously. *'I've sworn to amend, and every day I've done the same filthy things'*, Mitya says. *'I understand now that such men as I need a blow, a blow of destiny... Never, never should I have risen of myself!... I want to suffer and by suffering I shall be purified. Perhaps I shall be purified, gentlemen?'*[28]

Here, therefore, as in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky seems to offer his reader a possible, and complex, providentialistic interpretation of horrific events, while keeping his distance from a naive, over-simplistic approach – though Mitya, unlike Raskolnikov, does not express his depravity to the point of murder in order to be brought to his 'resurrection'. (Mitya states more than once that it was because *'God was watching over me then'*[29] that he did not murder his father when the opportunity arose.) Mitya is a dubious and highly-strung character, but what he says gains credibility through its endorsement by Zossima and Alyosha, both of whom possess some measure of 'second-sight'. And the plan has room for the sceptical Ivan too; as Alyosha prays for his brothers, he perceives Ivan's brain-fever (in which, incidentally, Ivan has visions of the devil) as part of it: *'God, in whom he disbelieved, and His truth were gaining mastery over his heart, which still refused to submit.'*[30]

Yet Dostoevsky is a novelist who creates worlds into which different perspectives are interwoven, in which God's providential will is perceived not by sight but by faith; and, indeed, worlds where in the long run it is possible to deny the accuracy of the faith-perspective altogether, and to conclude that the non-supernaturalistic perspective is adequate. Mitya may have been preserved by divine intervention from committing murder; nevertheless, the murder still takes place – one reptile devours another, in Ivan's phrase. Similarly Mitya, though guiltless, is pronounced guilty, which would be in line with the providential pattern of the sections that have just been quoted;

but that is not how the book ends, for Mitya is last seen planning, not to go to his sentence in Siberia, but to escape and go to America – a course of action he sees possibly as running *'away from suffering. A sign has come, I reject the sign. I have a way of salvation and I turn my back on it... What becomes of our hymn from underground?'*[31] The tidiness of the pattern disappears, leaving the reader with Alyosha's final opinion that *'You are not ready, and such a cross is not for you.'*[32] The perspectives shift and change, and no interpretation of events has assured certainty.

And of course this has the taste of reality; even seen from a providentialist point of view. Every Christian must frequently face the situation Alyosha faces at the close, where an apparently tidy conception of God's strategy is suddenly thrown into doubt. Considered as supernaturalistic fiction, then, this is thoroughly realistic. But the doubts extend deeper in this novel. The above quotations have been from the sections representing matters from Alyosha's point of view; but there is the point of view of the sceptic Ivan too. And from Ivan's perspective, Alyosha's reinterpretation of the will of God at the close of the novel merely demonstrates that a providentialist understanding of events is unnecessary. Putting the two perspectives together creates a world about the foundations of which there remains a deep ambiguity.

In this ambiguity lies the essence of Dostoevsky's vision. Janko Lavrin writes that the *'very form of a Dostoevskian novel results from the dynamic tension between several contradictory planes and trends of one and the consciousness – each of them with its own conclusions... Entire chapters of his have a power of their own precisely because they are so ambiguous.'*[33] In building such a successful model of this ambiguity lies some of his greatness. Twentieth-century Christian novelists have confronted these issues too: Jack Clemo's *Wilding Graft* presents the same two perspectives on providence – raising in particular the problem of suffering, as Ivan Karamazov does; while C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces* asks the related question, If the gods exist and are good, why do they not speak clearly? But Dostoevsky's vision is not marked by the convinced faith of Clemo or Lewis: the ambiguity, the contradiction, is what stands out most

strongly. Ivan Karamazov is easily as persuasive as Father Zossima.

Now to say this is not to insist that Dostoevsky ought to have weighted the scales to present Zossima's and Alyosha's perspective with a certainty Dostoevsky did not feel it truly possessed. But to recognize Dostoevsky's novel for the thing it is, it is necessary to perceive the nature of its underlying vision.[34] The ambivalence of *The Brothers Karamazov* may be fairly 'realistic', since to many people the world does seem to possess just this ambivalence regarding any providential design; and even those who have come to assured faith must regard the perception of ambivalence as something understandable, even if it calls for further exploration. But such an evenly-balanced 'dynamic tension' exists as the *final* basis of the novel because it matches Dostoevsky's own uncertainty.

'How dreadfully it has tormented me – and torments me even now – this longing for faith', he wrote in 1854, *'which is all the stronger for the proofs I have against it.'*[35] He knew his novels were a great deal else besides expressions of an assuredly Christian vision: *'These fools',* he wrote of his critics in his journal, *'could not even conceive of so strong a denial of God as the one to which I gave expression... You might search Europe in vain for so powerful an expression of atheism'*[36] – which is certainly true of Ivan Karamazov's arguments. (To this reader, at least, Dostoevsky's ability to draw his reader into the turmoil of his own doubts has created some of the most powerful anti-Christian fiction in the history of the novel.) Dostoevsky's novels show the reader what a providentialist perspective might look like; it *can* be portrayed, and *might* be accurate, and the supernatural *might* be operative – but then again, it might not.

There is a second reason for this, and that is Dostoevsky's concentration on the subjective aspect of religious belief.

It is not miracles that dispose realists to belief. The genuine realist, if he is an unbeliever, will always find strength and ability to disbelieve in the miraculous, and if he is confronted with a miracle as an irrefutable fact he would rather disbelieve his own senses than admit the fact.... Faith does

not, in the realist, spring from the miracle, but the miracle from faith.[37]

And in Ivan Karamazov's celebrated fable of the Grand Inquisitor, the suggestion is that only such a person would be prepared to use such evidence – this being, implies Ivan, a surrender to the temptation Christ rejected, to win adherents by the use of miracles: *'Thou wouldst not enslave man by a miracle, and didst crave faith given freely, not based on miracle.* [38]

But to understand Dostoevsky's novels in relation to the biblical worldview, it is necessary to note the rather more complex manner in which the New Testament treats this issue. For although Christ did indeed refuse to validate his claims by signs given on demand [39], this was because the evidence was being demanded, not as part of a *bona fide* search after the truth, but merely as a challenge, or even, as it would seem in one case, from a desire for entertainment.[40] Christ was not demanding a blind faith, a leap in the dark: rather, He promised that those who would commit themselves to following Him would 'know' the truth of the matter.[41] Accordingly, John, when he refers to Christ's miracles in his gospel, uses the word *semeion* or 'sign', and states that the purpose of his recording these was to bring about belief.[42] It should also be noted that Christ's refusal to provide signs for any and all was not total: He made one exception, the resurrection.[43]

Dostoevsky, however, seems to see faith as something separate, not only from the kind of confirmation and endorsement that could be provided by dubious contemporary miracles, but from any objective confirmation whatsoever. It may be that this was a result of a nineteenth-century despair of the external evidence that left him in a position close to a Kierkegaardian Christian existentialism, with a leap of faith, a belief marked by real devotion but unconnected to facts. *'If any one could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I would prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth.* [44] Or, as Ivan Karamazov says in the preface to his fable: *'It is fifteen centuries since man has ceased to see signs from Heaven.*

*No signs from Heaven come today
To add to what the heart doth say.*

There was nothing left but faith in what the heart doth say.[45] 'Nothing left': it is not surprising that radical uncertainty should be the result.

'If you believe – or if you desire very much to believe – then devote yourself to Him', wrote Dostoevsky in 1880 shortly before his death, *'and the torments resulting from the inner duality will be considerably relieved; your spirit will be pacified, and this is the main thing'*.[46] Whether it is an illusory peace is left unclear (four years later Ibsen would raise that very issue of life-illusions in *The Wild Duck*); the internal is *'the main thing'*, not what is happening outside. As a result, although he is very aware that values, morality and meaning in life depend on God's real existence (as he suggests in different ways in *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and also *The Possessed*), yet the religious content of Dostoevsky's novels centres on the internal, *'what the heart doth say'*. Alyosha, he says, took on his vocation *'because, at that time, it alone struck his imagination and presented itself to him as offering an ideal means of escape for his soul from darkness to light'*[47]; and the object and anchor of Alyosha's faith tends to be his veneration for Father Zossima, even more than for Christ Himself. And, significantly, the end of the book is concerned with the regenerative function (*'there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future'*) of *'some good memory'*; not of God, but *'especially a memory of childhood, of home'*.[48] The Godward dimension in salvation is missing from the finale. We should not be surprised that such a novelist does not resolve the ambiguities of his world, as to whether God is truly present in it or not.[49]

In many ways, therefore, we should see Dostoevsky as a child of his time, and the foundation of his novels as nineteenth-century doubt. Yet, even so, they demonstrate (*pace* Ian Watt's words cited at the beginning of the chapter) that the novel need not be *'rigidly restricted'* to the non-supernaturalistic. He shows his readers a little of how the world appears when seen through the providentialist worldview of Sonia, Zossima, or Alyosha; he depicts what the objective, supernatural forces might look like, that they believe are active in their lives, even though he does not commit himself conclusively to their

affirmative vision. To step into the world of Dostoevsky's novels, and watch his gigantic semi-lunatics lumbering around in the half-light, is both to expose oneself to a profound assault on faith in the God who acts, and yet, at the same time, to be aware that it is possible to present the activity of that God in fiction.

If we wish a final proof of that, we could find it in certain of the fictions of Dostoevsky's great contemporary and compatriot, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was no evangelical; but at certain points in his life he wrote rather like one. Tolstoy's approach is to tell a story of ordinary, human, social events, and then suddenly to draw the curtain aside and reveal that, behind all this, a higher power is at work shaping events; in *Resurrection*, for example:

So Nekhlyudov, now appreciating the baseness of what he had done, felt the mighty hand of the Master; but he still did not realise the significance of what he had done, or recognize the Master's hand. He did not want to believe that what he saw now was his doing; but the inexorable, invisible hand held him and he already had a presentiment that he would never wriggle free.[50]

Another example is the striking short story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* – a powerful 'conversion story' if ever there was one. God is absent from the early pages of realistically-described social interaction, just as He is absent from Ivan Ilyich's perception of his experience at this point. But as time goes on, and Ilyich becomes stricken by a steadily-worsening disease, he grows nauseated at the bourgeois shallowness of his life. As he confronts the reality of death, deeper realities begin to come into focus:

He only waited till Gerasim had gone into the next room and restrained himself no longer but wept like a child. He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God.[51]

The big questions come into his mind: 'Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done... But how could that be, when I did everything properly?' But the bourgeois 'properly' is proving inadequate. His mind returns to his law-court experiences and the ushers' proclamation 'The judge is coming, the

judge' (a tactful way of introducing the reality of the ultimate 'judge' who is indeed coming); and *'he ceased crying, but turning his face to the wall continued to ponder on the same question: Why, and for what purpose is there all this horror?[52]*

We are moving here through the Eliotesque progression: the boredom, the horror....and then the glory.[53] But conventional religion does not bring the glory to Ilyich: it is only another pointless component of the '*what was considered good by the most highly placed people*' that has dominated his life. Hence it is after he takes communion at his wife's urging that there comes the final realisation. '*All you have lived for is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you.[54]*' This passage is sometimes seized upon as a precursor of Sartrean negation; but in Tolstoy's hands it represents the final collapse of that which is sham, making room for the One who is reality itself to pass through. After another page (and three days solidly screaming 'I won't'), he has a sense of approaching something that terrifies him:

He felt that his agony was due to his being thrust into that black hole and still more to his not being able to get right into it. He was hindered from getting into it by his conviction that his life had been a good one. That very justification of his life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him most torment of all.[55]

In the terms of the Acts account of St Paul's conversion, he is '*kicking against the goads*'; by his self-justifications he is evading 'repentance', in the truest, life-encompassing sense of that word. But two hours before his death, the 'outside' takes a decisive hand:

At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. He is able to express this repentance in its implications for his wife and son. And it is all in the presence of God now: 'He tried to add, "forgive me," but said "forego" and waved his hand, knowing that He whose understanding mattered would understand.'

Ilyich has faced up to the God who is the true priority; and so – immediately – his pain ceases to

be significant, having accomplished the task for which 'He whose understanding mattered' had permitted it:

"And the pain?" he asked himself. "What has become of it? Where are you, pain?" He turned his attention to it. "Yes, here it is. Well, what of it? Let the pain be... And death... where is it?"... There was no fear because there was no death. In the place of death there was light. "Death is finished," he said to himself. "It is no more!" He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out, and died.[56]

It is a powerful, unsentimental story. To this reader, at least, it is 'true' where the death in *Brideshead Revisited* discussed earlier is not, because Tolstoy's treatment so clearly presents the deathbed transformation as a meaningful culmination of all the process of disillusionment that has gone before. Pain, death, and meditation are brought together, through tactfully-stated but nonetheless quite overt divine revelation, to a meaningful pattern of grace; creating one of the most powerful statements about death in European fiction. And it is given its shape by providence: in the world of this highly effective fiction, God is a God who is ultimately present and intimately active: the overt revelation at the close makes clear that He has been sovereign in the process throughout.

Ian Watt is wrong: providentialist fiction is entirely possible. It is just our post-Enlightenment consensus that has made it so difficult.

© 2009 Pete Lowman

Fictional Absence is published here by the kind permission of the author.

References:

- [1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Pelican edition of 1972), pp.93-94.
- [2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66), trans. Constance Garnett (1914), p.356. Except where indicated otherwise, all references are to the Heinemann edition of 1945, henceforth referred to as *CP*.
- [3] *Ibid*, p.55.
- [4] *Ibid*.
- [5] *Ibid*, p.57.
- [6] *Ibid*, pp. 60-61.
- [7] *Ibid*, p.66.
- [8] *Ibid*, pp.404-05.
- [9] *Ibid*, p.286.
- [10] *Ibid*.
- [11] *Ibid*, p.287.
- [12] *Ibid*, p.359.
- [13] *Ibid*, pp.365-69.
- [14] *Ibid*, p.481.
- [15] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80), trans. Constance Garnett (1912), pp.324-25.
- [16] *Ibid*, p.321.
- [17] *Ibid*, p.323.
- [18] *Ibid*, pp.342-43.
- [19] *Ibid*, p.344.
- [20] *Ibid*, pp.352-53.
- [21] *Ibid*, p.354; cf. Ivan's peroration on p.251.
- [22] *Ibid*, p.375.
- [23] *Ibid*, p.379.
- [24] *Ibid*, p.121-22.
- [25] *Ibid*, p.225.
- [26] *Ibid*, p.292.
- [27] *Ibid*, pp.625-26.
- [28] *Ibid*, pp.538-39. Amongst other things, this is a partial answer to Ivan's arguments against faith, which are based on the problem of suffering.
- [29] *Ibid*, p.412; and cf. p.498.
- [30] *Ibid*, p.695.
- [31] *Ibid*, p.630.
- [32] *Ibid*, p.807.
- [33] Janko Lavrin, *Dostoevsky: a Study* (1943), pp.30, 31.
- [34] Of course in our humanistic era, with its loss of assured faith, that final uncertainty or ambiguity can tend itself to be used as a criterion of excellence. But that is no more an *aesthetic* judgement than is an assessment from an earlier era which would have condemned it as a 'bad' novel for not concluding with an affirmation of orthodoxy. (Either judgement might still be a *valid* judgement; that would be decided on other grounds – and hopefully in the open, not as a covert value-judgement. Neither is a specifically *aesthetic* judgement.)
- [35] Letter to Madame Fonvizin, quoted *ibid*, p.64.
- [36] Quoted *ibid*.
- [37] *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.21.
- [38] *Ibid*, p.263. Of course an important school of modern theological thinking has followed Dostoevsky in this understanding of faith; in particular Bultmann and his disciples.

[39] Eg. Matthew 12:38, Mark 8:11-12, Luke 23:8-9, John 6:30.

[40] Luke 23:8-9. Furthermore, such demands were often made *after* he had worked a miracle for a specific purpose, ignoring the evidence already granted and demanding a further spectacle. Thus John 6:30 follows the feeding of the five thousand; similarly Matthew 12:38 comes after an argument about Christ's exorcisms which took as its starting-point an awareness shared by all concerned that the events had occurred.

[41] Eg. John 7:17.

[42] John 20:30-31. Peter takes a similar attitude towards the evidential value of miracles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22).

[43] Eg. Matthew 12:39-40 – a statement He repeats elsewhere – and John 2:19-22. In Romans 1:4 and Acts 17:31 Paul sees the resurrection as the final verification, to all, of Christ's claims. Throughout the Acts the early church refer continually to the recent event of the resurrection as the indisputable evidence for the gospel; and it has retained this centrality to the Christian proclamation ever since.

[44] Quoted Lavrin, *op.cit.*, p.64.

[45] *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.254.

[46] Quoted Lavrin, *ibid.* Cf. Colin Brown on Kierkegaard's similar predicament: '*At times his view of God seems to have a good deal in common with the Wizard of Oz. It is not so much his existence that counts, but the thought of his existence*' (*Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969), p.130).

[47] *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.21.

[48] *Ibid*, p.819.

[49] Therein, of course, lies the route to the situation in which many 'religious novelists' end up, where religion tends to become a mere biographical phenomenon, as we noted in our earlier discussion of the nineteenth-century English novelists. ('*What matters about the "recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self" is not its truth but its function*', writes Laurence Lerner (*The Truth-tellers* (1967), p.43)).

[50] Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (1899; trans. Rosemary Edmonds, 1966), p.111.

[51] Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886; the Aylmer Maude translation is conveniently reprinted in *Eleven Modern Short Novels*, ed. Leo Hamalian and Edmond L. Volpe (New York, 1970)); p.46.

[52] *Ibid*, p.48.

[53] Eliot uses this phrase to sum up the ultimate realities in *The Use of Poetry*, and Helen Gardner aptly applies the progression to Eliot's own work in *The Art of T.S. Eliot* (1949), p.79.

[54] *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, pp.51-52.

[55] *Ibid*, p.53.

[56] *Ibid*, pp.53-54.

© 2009 Pete Lowman

Fictional Absence is published here by the kind permission of the author.