DOSTOEVSKY’S CONCEPT OF REALITY
AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN ART

“By the word reality we understand everything that is,” observed Belinsky in 1840, “the visible world and the spiritual world, the world of facts and the world of ideas.” Belinsky’s definition—which belongs to his middle or so-called Hegelian period of rationalization of reality—comes close to characterizing Dostoevsky’s omnibus view of reality. We shall not encounter a single binding concept of reality in Dostoevsky’s thought; rather, his notion of reality is a syncretism. Reality for him

3 The syncretic character of Dostoevsky’s realism has been noted by L. P. Grossman and others. Grossman writes, “Close in many respects to the current of critical representation of reality, and frequently offering fine examples of it, the style of the novelist is unique and qualitatively different. A profound truthfulness of experience gives to his painting the sharp features of a realistic reflection of life. But this is . . . realism of a special type—psychological or grotesque, or in the words of Dostoevsky himself, ‘prophetic,’ i.e. striving to determine on the basis of the deep currents of contemporary history, the lines of its future development.” L. P. Grossman, “Dostoevskii-khudozhnik,” in Tvorchestvo F.M. Dostoevskogo, ed. L. D. Opul’skaia (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1959), 368. J. van der Eng in Dostoevskij Romancier (Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1957), 44–45, notes the range of definitions of Dostoevsky’s realism in critical literature: “mystical realism,” “symbolic realism,” “symbolic or transcendental realism,” “realism of an epileptic,” “demoniac realism,” “fantastic realism,” “réalisme du dernier degré,” “allegorical realism,” “psychological realism.”
embraces concrete, historical reality with its classes, its immediate problems and conflicts, and its social and national types which give expression to the life and development of society. But Dostoevsky's reality also encompasses the ideals and dreams that are part of social reality, and their embodiment in ideal types. These ideals and dreams, though they arise in a specific historical moment or context, relate ultimately to a universal spiritual reality; it is in this deeper, archetypal reality that Dostoevsky seeks the ultimate meaning of man’s existence. Reality, he writes in “Two Suicides,” in the October 1876 issue of *Diary of a Writer*, is “all available human meaning,” but “we can never exhaust the whole of a phenomenon, never reach its ends and beginnings. We are familiar only with the immediate, visible, current, and this only in its appearance, while the ends and beginnings—all this is still a realm of the fantastic for man.” But it is precisely this realm of reality without end—at its point of intersection with man’s “immediate” present—that is the exploratory realm of art for Dostoevsky. Reality for him, finally, is *man*: the journey of his life. This journey, like that of Dante in the *Commedia*, is eminently real, concrete, and historical; yet at the same time, like Dante’s, it is symbolic and imbued with a meaning and perspective that is transcendental and timeless.

In “Mr. [Dobrolyu]bov and the Question of Art” (1861) Dostoevsky writes that “one may know a fact, see it oneself a hundred times, and still not get the impression one would if somebody else, a particular person, stands beside you and points out to you that very fact, but of course, in his own way, explains it to you in his own words, compels you to look at that fact with his own glance. A real talent is recognized by just this influence.” This is a very simple way of describing the role of the artist in the artistic representation of reality. The “particular person,” the artist, distinguishes an ordinary fact; he gives it special shape or form (his own glance, his own words, his own way). The artist does not mirror reality (the ordinary observer performs this essentially unperceptive act a hundred times); rather, he acts upon reality, “explains” it through the shaping he gives to it, through form; he gives us a unique “impression” of it. The artistic power with which the artist compels us to view reality resides in the form that he gives to reality. We may note, finally, the basis here for a distinction between

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4 PSS, 23:145.
5 PSS, 18:89–90.
two kinds of reality: an apparent, everyday reality; and a real or underlying reality that is visible to the artist but hidden to the formless and unforming glance. The artist is the one who *sees into* life, perceives all its richness and complexity in depth. The image of the eyes—of sight and vision—is recurrent throughout all of Dostoevsky’s discussion of the artistic representation of reality. “Really, examine some fact of real life, even one which at first glance is not very striking,” Dostoevsky writes later in his *Diary of a Writer*, “and if only you are able and have the eyes you will discover in it a depth such as is not to be found in Shakespeare. But really here is just the whole point: *whose eyes and who is able?* Indeed, not only to create and write artistic works, but even just to note a fact, something in the way of an artist is also needed.”

The problem of the representation of reality in art and literature is at the center of “The Exhibition in the Academy of Arts: 1860–1861.” Dostoevsky singles out for particular criticism a work of the painter Valery I. Jakoby (1834–1902), entitled “Convicts at a Halting Point.” The picture is striking for its remarkable exactitude, he writes. “Everything is like that even in nature . . . if one looks at nature, so to speak, only from without.” The spectator looks at the picture as though he saw it in a mirror or in an expertly touched-up photograph. But the photographic snapshot or mirror reflection is by no means an artistic work, Dostoevsky insists again in “The Exhibition at the Academy of Arts.” “Not photographic faithfulness, not mechanical accuracy, but something else, larger, broader, deeper is demanded from art.” Accuracy and faithfulness are needed only in a basic sense, as material “out of which the artistic work is then created; it is a tool of creation. In a mirror reflection one does not see how the mirror looks at the subject, or put another way, it is evident that it does not look at all, but reflects passively, mechanically.” Dostoevsky insists that this is not the case with the true artist; whether in a picture, story, or musical work “he himself will be visible invariably; he will be reflected involuntarily; even against his will, he will speak out with all his views, with his character, in accordance with his development.” When we overhear two people discussing an ordinary street incident, Dostoevsky observes by way of

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6 PSS, 23:145.

7 Jacoby received a gold medal for his painting, “Convicts at a Halting Point” (Prival arestantov) at the Academy of Arts Exhibition in St. Petersburg, 1861.
example, we often guess their age, the nature and field of their work, their level of development, and even their rank in the civil service.\textsuperscript{8} The artist, then, cannot evade identification.

Dostoevsky does not elaborate upon the notion that a writer will be reflected in his art even against his will. Belinsky much earlier had advanced the view that the thought of an artist in his poetic creation may contradict his personal convictions.\textsuperscript{9} The radical critic Dobrolyubov later elaborated on this view with his theory that social type in an artistic work may reveal an author’s view independently of, and even contrary to, his conscious intentions.\textsuperscript{10} Dostoevsky appears to be echoing Dobrolyubov’s theory in the distinction he makes in “Stories of N. V. Uspensky” between the “preconceived view” of the artist and his “real view” expressed in social type.\textsuperscript{11}

“There is not, and cannot be, any epic, indifferent tranquility in our time,” Dostoevsky writes in “The Exhibition in the Academy of Arts: 1860-1861.” Only completely undeveloped, capricious, or mad people could manifest such tranquility. And since these “sad possibilities” are unlikely in the artist, Dostoevsky concludes that the artist’s audience is right in demanding that he “view nature not as a photographic

\textsuperscript{8} PSS, 19:153.

\textsuperscript{9} Belinsky argues in his article “Menzel as a Critic of Goethe” in 1840 that one must distinguish between the \textit{man} and the \textit{artist}. Art has its own laws, he insists, on the basis of which one must examine its works. “The thought, expressed by a poet in a creation, may contradict the personal conviction of the critic, without ceasing to be true and universal, provided the creation is really an artistic one, because man, as a limited individual, may err and nourish false convictions, but the poet, as the organ of the general and universal, as the direct manifestation of the spirit, cannot err and speak a lie . . . Therefore, to find out whether a thought expressed by a poet in his work is correct, one must first find out whether his creation is really artistic.” Belinskii, “Mentsel’, kak kritik Gete,” op. cit., 1, 429–430.

\textsuperscript{10} See, in particular, the opening section of N. A. Dobrolyubov’s essay, “Realm of Darkness.” Dobrolyubov distinguishes between the artist as artist and the artist as thinker. “Frequently even in abstract discussions [the artist] expresses concepts strikingly in contradiction with what is expressed in his artistic work.” Truth, according to Dobrolyubov, lies in the images created by the artist, in the \textit{types} created by him. See N. A. Dobroliubov “Temnoe tsarstvo,” \textit{Izbrannye sochinenia} (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1948), 104.

\textsuperscript{11} PSS, 19:179.
apparatus sees it, but as a man.” The representation of reality in art is a humanistic process.

Dostoevsky’s concept of the artistic representation of reality is brought out in his criticism of Jacoby’s painting. The subject of the painting, the representation of convicts, was one which could not but intensely interest the author of Notes from the House of the Dead. Jacoby’s painting (we summarize Dostoevsky’s description of it) represents a group of convicts surrounding a wagon; upon it lies a dead man and on his outstretched hand is a precious ring. The figure of the dead convict suggests a person of gentry origin. Another convict, “with a repulsive face,” reaches out from beneath the wagon and is in the act of removing the ring from the dead man’s hand. He produces upon the observer the impression of a “reptile that is foul and at the same time dangerous, like a scorpion.” An officer stands by the corpse, very indifferently smoking a pipe; he is holding open one of the eyes of the dead convict and calmly looking at it. His face expresses neither sympathy, nor compassion, nor surprise—absolutely nothing. Another convict dully examines a wound made by his chains.

In ancient times, Dostoevsky remarks, people would have said that the artist “must see with physical eyes, and, above all, with the eyes of the soul, or with a spiritual glance.” Jacoby, in his opinion, lacks this second pair of eyes. There is not a trace of artistry in the painting. The figures of the convicts, he complains, all appear as scoundrels, monstrous. The dead man alone is an exception to this impression of monstruousness. A splendid youth in life, academic demands made it impossible to give him “more ordinary or less classical features: thus one sees a man of birth among a vile people, vile in the sense that he has understood it all his life.” Dostoevsky acknowledges the hopeless condition of the convicts, but “at the same time it is impossible not to allow that they are people. At least present them to us as people, if you are an artist, and leave the photographing of them to the phrenologists and the judicial investigators.” But it is precisely man that Jacoby does not reveal.

Dostoevsky resents this caricature depiction of the convicts with its underlying class snobbism. But the basis of his criticism is esthetic: the artist must go beyond surface reality. “We think it insufficient to set forth faithfully all the given qualities of a person; one must resolutely

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illumine him with one’s own artistic vision," Dostoevsky writes in “Apropos of a New Drama” his Diary of a Writer in 1873. “A genuine artist should under no circumstances remain on one level with the person portrayed by him, contenting himself with the mere realistic truth of that person: the impression will carry no truth.”13 “Above all,” Dostoevsky writes earlier in his critique of Jacoby’s painting at the “Exhibition of the Academy of Arts in 1860–1861,” “one must master the difficulties of transmitting actual truth in order to rise to the heights of artistic truth.”14 Jacoby in his striving for photographic truth, in his play for effect, has depicted a lie. “This is melodrama and not reality,” Dostoevsky insists.15 The painting, in other words, appeals for its effect to the upper class view of the convict and of the people; it confronts the observer with his own luridly exaggerated and cliché notion of a “vile” people. Here there can be no true reality, no representation of deeper human reality, but only a crude caricature in which the surface, the face of reality as it were, is divorced from its meanings, from the deeper moral substratum of reality.

The faces of the convicts are disfigured; this is “actual” or surface truth. But surface reality, Dostoevsky points out in “Apropos of the Exhibition” in his Diary of a Writer for 1873, is deceptive. Why—he asks—does a portrait painter long scrutinize the subject of his painting before setting to work? “Because he knows in practice that man does not always resemble himself, and therefore he seeks out ‘the main idea of his physiognomy,’ that moment when the subject most resembles himself.”16 Versilov in Dostoevsky’s novel The Raw Youth (1875), echoing Dostoevsky’s views, observes that only on rare occasions does a man’s face express his “main idea, his most defining idea.” The painter “studies and divines this idea,” whereas on the other hand “photography catches man as [he] is, and it is quite possible that Napoleon at one moment would have turned out looking stupid, and Bismarck—tender.”

The “main idea” is the organizing principle in a work of art. On the other hand, when the detail or aggregation of details substitutes

13 PSS, 21:97.
14 PSS, 19:154.
15 Ibid.
16 PSS, 21:75.
Dostoevsky’s Concept of Reality and Its Representation in Art

for the idea, the result is not realism but caricature. Thus, the quixotic hero of Dostoevsky fantastic story, “Bobok” (Diary of a Writer, 1873) discussing a portrait of which he is the subject, remarks that he believes the artist did his portrait “not for the sake of literature, but for the sake of my two symmetrical warts on my forehead: it’s a phenomenon, so to speak. They have no idea, so now they go to town on phenomena. Well, but how well he succeeded with my two warts in the portrait—they’re alive! They call this realism.”

The unselected and unilluminated truth of detail, “mere realistic truth”—is caricature or, simply, ugliness. This idea is suggested indirectly in Dostoevsky’s formulation of a remark by the young Arkady Dolgoruky in The Raw Youth; recalling a past incident: “I remember (for I remember that whole morning to the detail) that there followed between us a scene most disgusting in its realistic truth.” The realistic truth here, like the realism of the portrait in “Bobok,” has nothing to do with artistic realism; it is chaotic, detail-crammed reality of everyday life; it is untransfigured actuality. The writer Uspensky, Dostoevsky writes in “Stories of N. V. Uspensky,” sets up his photographic machine on a plaza, without even selecting a point of view, and takes in everything “faithfully, as is. Naturally, everything that is absolutely unnecessary to this picture, or rather, unnecessary to the idea of this picture, will enter into the picture.” Some laud this kind of approach for its accuracy. But is this accuracy, Dostoevsky asks, and does accuracy consist in this? “This is confusion, not accuracy.” “You needed chaos, disorder at all costs,” Dostoevsky remarks apropos of Jacoby’s arbitrary use of detail. “Reality strives toward fragmentation,” the narrator remarks in Notes from the House of the Dead. On the other hand, art imposes order upon reality—not mechanical order, but the order of organic form; and artistic form for Dostoevsky is inseparable from idea. There is little, he insists, that can be transmitted through the mere description of material. The playwright A. N. Ostrovsky, he observes in “Stories of N. B. Uspensky,” would have had to be stretched out to two hundred volumes, and then these volumes would not convey what Ostrovsky

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17 PSS, 21:42.
18 PSS, 19:180.
19 PSS, 19:155.
gave us in two volumes. “Moreover, one cannot faithfully transmit even the material with only a daguerreotype.”20

Dostoevsky’s sharp criticism of Emile Zola’s naturalism in the 1870s, in light of the above discussion, is not unexpected. In “Children’s Secrets,” in the July–August 1876 issue of *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky refers scornfully to our “so-called realist” Zola.21 “In realism alone there is no truth,” Dostoevsky writes in his notebook in 1875 in connection with a reading of Zola’s *Le Ventre de Paris*. And again these notes: “Photography and the artist. Zola overlooked in George. Sand (in the first tales) poetry and beauty, something far more real than leaving mankind with only filth.”22 In connection with Zola’s naturalistic method, Dostoevsky writes, “He will describe every nail in the heel of a boot, and in a quarter of an hour, when the sun rises, he will again describe this nail in another illumination. This is not art. Speak to me one word [Pushkin], but let it be the most essential word.”23 “I can scarcely read him—what muck!” he writes to his wife, July 15, 1876. “And we scream about Zola as a celebrity, a luminary of realism!”24

“I am terribly fond of realism in art,” Dostoevsky wrote in “An Isolated Case” in his March issue of *Diary of a Writer* in 1877, “but there is no moral center in the pictures of some of our contemporary, realists.”25 Jacoby’s painting of Russian convicts lacked precisely a moral center. The criticism of his painting appears in sharp relief against the background of Dostoevsky’s own canvas on convict life, *Notes from the House of the Dead*. The moral center in this work, the restoration of the image of the “lost people,” was reached through the esthetic accomplishment: the penetration of surface, or naturalistic, truth. A “repulsive crust,” the narrator observes, covered even the most decent convicts. Yet “one need only remove the outer superficial crust and examine more attentively the kernel itself, more closely, and without prejudice, and some of us will see things in the people that we never expected.” Here,

20 PSS, 19:181.
21 PSS, 23:94–95.
22 PSS, 24:248.
23 PSS, 24:239.
24 PSS, 29:2:100.
25 PSS, 25:90.
of course, is a very simple and clear statement of Dostoevsky’s notion of realism. To be sure, he in no way ignores the repulsive crust—the frightful details, the ugly actuality of convict life. The multitude of raw details, however, is never presented for themselves alone. Reality, however chaotic and disfigured at first glance, yields to an inner, organizing idea, a moral idea. The ugly, the repulsive, the disfigured presents itself to the reader invariably as a deformation of a norm: that norm is the moral-esthetic shape of man-created in the image of God, a preeminently humanistic norm for Dostoevsky. He sought the truth about the convicts not only in the cross section of the moment; *Notes from the House of the Dead* is not a series of snapshots. “After all, the whole truth must be told: these were an exceptional people,” the narrator remarks at the conclusion of his memoirs. “Indeed, they are, perhaps, the most gifted, the strongest of all our people. But mighty forces perished in vain, perished abnormally, wrongfully, irrevocably. And who is to blame? And this is just the point: who is to blame?”

The young Arkady Dolgoruky remembers an episode to the detail, remembers it, he says, in all its disgusting realistic truth. The narrator in *Notes from the House of the Dead* also recalls his past, but differently. “This was really long ago,” he observes at the beginning of his memoirs, “it all seems like a dream to me.” The narrator’s passing reference to the dreamlike character of his recollections is not without significance. The so-called dream here is artistic transfiguration; it marks esthetic distance between the writer and his material. Much later, in his semiautobiographical sketch, “The Peasant of Marey,” published in the February 1876 number of *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky offered a clue to his artistic approach in *Notes from the House of the Dead*. He relates how, as a convict, he once had dreamed of a kindly peasant who had befriended him as a child. The dream came to an end. He got off his bunk and looked around. “I suddenly felt that I could look at these unhappy creatures with quite different eyes and that suddenly, by some miracle, all hatred and malice had disappeared completely from my heart.”26 The dream here has both a psychological and esthetic character; it is both catharsis and revelation; it opens what Dostoevsky calls the eyes of the soul. The miracle affected by the dream is the miracle of artistic transfiguration.

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26 PSS, 22:49.
In his entry “Apropos of the Exhibition” in his *Diary of a Writer* in 1873, Dostoevsky leaves no doubt as to the philosophically idealist character of his conception of reality. “‘One must depict reality as it is,’ they say, whereas there is simply no such reality, and indeed such a reality never existed on earth, because the essence of things is inaccessible to man, and he apprehends nature as it is reflected in his idea, passing through his feelings; therefore one must give far more expression to the idea and not fear the ideal.” In a letter to Apollon Maikov, December 11, 1868, Dostoevsky defines the “idealist” character of his realism. He confides to his friend the plan of a “huge novel” to be entitled “Atheism.” At its center is a Russian man who suddenly loses faith in God, gets involved with atheistic groups, falls into the power of a Jesuit, but finally, in the end, rediscovers Christ and the Russian land. At this point in the letter, Dostoevsky pauses to exclaim:

Ah, my friend! I have completely different notions about reality and about realism from our realists and critics. My idealism is more real than theirs. Lord! To relate intelligibly all that we Russians have experienced in the past ten years in our spiritual development—now wouldn’t the realists shout that this is fantasy! Yet this is the old genuine realism! Precisely this is realism, only deeper, and they are swimming in shallow waters. Now isn’t Lyubim Tortsov [the central character in A. N. Ostrovsky’s play *Poverty Is No Crime*, 1854] really insignificant in essence—and yet this is all the ideal that their realism allows. Deep realism—hardly! With their realism you won’t explain one-hundredth of the real, actual facts that have occurred. And with our idealism we have prophesied even facts. It has happened.

Dostoevsky’s point of departure for his defense of his idealism is his formulation of the drama of Russian man in terms of an immense moral and spiritual quest. But this is “realism, only deeper”; it is more real for Dostoevsky because it focuses the historical reality of the

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27 PPS 21:75.

28 PSS, 28(2):329. Dostoevsky has in mind here a murder committed by the student A. M. Danilov in 1865. The circumstances of Danilov’s crime and his motives were somewhat similar to those of Raskolnikov. (For commentary on Danilov’s crime, see PSS, 9:391-392).
moment against a background of the permanent spiritual strivings and aspirations of man. Dostoevsky speaks of “explaining” real facts; he is proud that he even has prophesied facts, that he has grasped the inner dynamic of reality and anticipated its “facts.” “They understand only what takes place before their eyes,” he is reported to have said of his critics, “but because of nearsightedness they themselves are not only unable to look ahead, but cannot understand even how for another person the future consequences of present events can be clear as the palm one’s hand.”  

It is the cognitive function of realism that Dostoevsky values: in its most immediate action true realism captures social reality in movement; in its deeper action artistic cognition approaches religious revelation. 

Dostoevsky’s defense of his realism in his letter to Maikov had a definite purpose: it was to defend himself against the charge that his art (specifically, The Idiot) lacked verisimilitude as a depiction of reality, that his realism was fantastic. Maikov had written Dostoevsky apropos of the second half of part 1 of The Idiot: 

Here’s my impression: an awful lot of strength, genius-inspired strokes (for example, when the Idiot is slapped, and what he says, and various other places), but in the whole action there is more possibility and plausibility than truth. The most real person, if you will, is the Idiot (does this seem strange to you?) but the others—all, as it were, live in a fantastic world; all of them have a strong yet fantastic, somewhat exceptional luster. One reads avidly, and at the same time—one doesn’t believe in it.

And in another letter, Maikov comments: 

Various reviews, the chief reproach being the fantastic quality of the characters; one gentleman even says that such country houses are not to be found in Pavlovsk. 

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31 Letter of A. Maikov to Dostoevsky, September 30, 1868, ibid., 2: 426.
The charge that his artistic vision, or embodiment, of reality was “fantastic” certainly was not a new one to Dostoevsky. “As far back as the 1840s I was dubbed mockingly a fantasist,” he observed in “Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose” (1861).32 “I am a frightful hunter after mysteries. I am a fantasist, I am a mystic, and, I confess to you, Petersburg, I don’t know why, has always seemed to me something of a mystery.”33 Pushkin perceived and projected the historical-philosophical contradictions of Russian history, its social drama and pathos, in the complex image of a fantastic Petersburg; Gogol further contributed to this image through his Petersburg tales. The notion of the city as a vast, abstract, and impersonal entity, expropriating from man his humanity, threatening to transform him into a nonentity, making his whole existence strange, fantastic, unreal, finds embodiment in Dostoevsky’s early stories, as well as in his later novels. The “fantastic titulary councillors” in the early tales—Mr. Proharchin, Vasya Shumkov, Golyadkin Sr., and others—are victims of their own convoluted natures and at the same time are sacrifices of the Petersburg bureaucratic anthill state. Netochka Nezvanova, in Dostoevsky’s work of the same name, writes: “I am not surprised that among such strange people as my father and mother I myself became such a strange, fantastic child.” She is spoiled by her “fantastic, exceptional” love for her father. Her life and the world about her she compares to a “fairy tale,” a “novel,” a strange “dream.” G. M. Fridlender has observed that these comparisons serve to emphasize precisely the strangeness, the fantastic and exceptional character of the reality around Netochka, a reality which appears to the reader of her notes and to Netochka herself not as stable and normal, but as extraordinarily unstable and abnormal.34 Yet it is recognizably and vividly the real world in a picture that shows, in its distortion, how that world deviates from the ideal.

The criticism of his art as fantastic spurred Dostoevsky to a sharper definition and defense of his realistic method. He writes to his friend Nikolai N. Strakhov, February 26, 1869:

32 PSS, 19:73.
33 PSS, 19:68.
34 G.M. Fridlender, Realizm Dostoevskogo (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1964), 76.
I have my special view of reality [in art], and what the majority calls almost fantastic and exceptional, for me is sometimes the very essence of the real. The everyday aspect of phenomena and the cliché view of them, in my opinion, is still not realism, and even the opposite. In every issue of the newspapers you encounter a report about the most real facts and about most strange ones. For our writers they are fantastic; and indeed, they don’t busy themselves with them; and yet they are reality, because they are facts. Now who will note them, explain them, write them down. They are daily and of the moment, and not exceptional . . . We let all reality . . . pass by our noses. Now who will take note of the facts and go deeply into them? . . . Is it possible that my fantastic Idiot is not reality, indeed even the most common sort! Why, it’s just these days that such characters are inevitably found in those social strata divorced from the soil—strata that are in reality becoming fantastic.35

Dostoevsky, it will be noted, does not deny that certain phenomena, facts of reality, do indeed appear fantastic, improbable, exceptional. Indeed, as he affirms several years later in “Mummer” in Diary of a Writer in 1873, “true events, depicted in all their exclusiveness of their chance occurrence (sluchainosti), almost always assume a fantastic, almost improbable character.”36 Lebedev in The Idiot observes that “almost every reality, though it has its immutable laws, is always incredible and improbable.” But the central question here is: fantastic, incredible, improbable from what point of view and to whom? Dostoevsky answers that the facts of reality often appear incredible from the cliché viewpoint of the majority, appear fantastic to those who look at reality with merely surface, as it were, photographic eyes. A fact of reality from this viewpoint often appears fantastic (and indeed, statically perceived, is fantastic) because it turns up in all its exclusiveness in a clutter of unrelated and haphazard detail; it

36 PSS, 21:82. The chronicler in The Devils echoes Dostoevsky’s idea of fantastic realism. He observes at one point in his narrative (part I, chapter 2, section vi) that it was difficult to know what was in Varvara Petrovna’s heart and that he was not going to try to unravel the contradictions in her plan. “As the chronicler I limit myself only to presenting events in a precise form, exactly as they occurred, and it is not my fault if they appear improbable.”
appears fantastic, essentially, because it is unexplained (esthetically—
unformed), because it is unrelated to the underlying “immutable laws”
which govern its appearance. “The aim of art,” Dostoevsky writes
again in “Mummer,” “is not the accidentalities of day-to-day life, but
their general idea, keenly perceived and correctly removed from the
whole multiplicity of identical phenomena of life.”37

Dostoevsky insists, as we have seen, that his “fantastic Idiot”
is perhaps a part of even common reality, that there must be such
characters in those strata of society divorced from the people. But it
is not primarily upon faithfulness to common reality that Dostoevsky
ultimately justifies his special realism (though he is proud that he has
anticipated real facts in his art). He recognizes, for example, that a fact
of reality may indeed be uncommon, exceptional, a rarity. A cruel monk,
for example, beats to death a ten-year-old boy in a famous monastery.
“Well, now isn’t this a fantastic story at first glance?” Dostoevsky
remarks. “And yet it is, it seems, wholly true.” But if one were to
write about it, he adds, people would shout that it was improbable,
exceptional. “And they would be right, if the matter was judged only
from the standpoint of faithfulness in depicting the ordinary run of
life in our monasteries.” Life in the monasteries, Dostoevsky freely
acknowledges, is quite different, and the incident involving the evil
monk will always stand out as an exception to the rule. “But for the
narrator, for the poet, there may also be other tasks besides the ordinary
run-of-life aspect; these are the general, universal, and, I think, eternally
inexhaustible depths of spirit and human character.”38

The ultimate test of verisimilitude of a fact, the test of “realism,”
then, is not in the identity of fact A to fact B to fact C and so forth;
it is in the degree to which fact A, however isolated and exceptional,
conducts us to the larger realities of society and the human spirit.
An exceptional, seemingly strange or fantastic incident may open
up a startling perspective of human evil or goodness. Realism in
Dostoevsky’s novelistic universe, as in Dante’s Commedia, is vertical;
the facts of our lives are starkly represented, sometimes even with
naturalistic precision, but they are selected in such a way as to illuminate
the hierarchical reality of the human spirit.

37 PSS, 21:82.
38 PSS, 21:83.
The facts of crime for Dostoevsky clearly were prime conductors to reality of human nature. Evidence of his preoccupation with these "facts" and with their deeper significance may be found in his editor's note in his journal Vremia in 1861; here, he informs the readers that his publication will carry accounts of criminal trials:

We are thinking of entertaining the readers when from time to time we give accounts of famous criminal trials. Apart from the fact that they are more entertaining than all sorts of novels, because they illuminate these dark sides of the human soul which art does not like to touch (and if it does then only in passing, in the form of an episode)—apart from this, reading about such trials, it seems to us, will not be without use to the Russian reader . . . In the trial we now present we are concerned with the personality of an extraordinary, enigmatic, terrible, and interesting man. Low instincts and weakness in the face of need made him a criminal, but he dares to present himself as the victim of his century. And all this with a boundless vanity. This is a type of vanity carried to extreme limits. The trial was conducted with magnificent impartiality, conveyed with the exactitude of a daguerreotype, of a physiological sketch.39

Dostoevsky does not appear to conceive of the journalistic account of criminal trials as an art form. The account of the trial is offered to the reader as a fact of reality that has the exactitude of a daguerreotype. But in a few casual strokes, Dostoevsky suggests that these facts have broad social and human significance. The daguerreotype is but the raw material of reality. He leaves it to the reader to perform, in effect, the act of artistic cognition which gives meaningful shape to the "exceptional" fact of reality.

The novel Crime and Punishment, of course, is that act of artistic cognition focused on an "exceptional" crime. Dostoevsky boldly "touches upon" the dark sides of man and society. The problem of the exceptional and fantastic character of Raskolnikov’s crime (inseparable from his idea of the crime) is noted by the police investigator Porfiry. “Your article is fantastic and absurd,” he comments to Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov’s ideas on the relation of the superior man to the human herd, and the rights of crime which derive from this superiority, are

39 PSS, 19:89–90.
indeed fantastic when seen from an everyday point of view. But Porfiry is aware of the deeper social import of Raskolnikov’s ideas. “We are dealing with quite a fantastic affair, a somber affair, a modern one . . . We are dealing with bookish dreams.” Raskolnikov’s crime has social reality (or typicality) for Dostoevsky not because students in the 1860s killed helpless pawnbrokers every day with axes, but because the syndrome of Raskolnikov’s moral, psychological, and ideological being reveals in its roots deep imbalances within Russian society, profound spiritual disorder.

It was his critics, Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook around 1875, who were “ignoring facts. They do not observe. There are no citizens, and nobody wants to make an effort and compel himself to think and observe. I cannot tear myself away, and all the cries of the critics that I am depicting unreal life have not dissuaded me. There are no foundations to our society, no norms that have been worked out [vyzhity—literally “lived out”] because there have been none in life even. A colossal eruption and all is crumbling, falling, being negated, as though it had not even existed. And not only externally, as in the West, but internally, morally.”

“Does the fantastic have a right to exist in art?” Dostoevsky asks in a letter of December 23, 1863, to Turgenev in which he defends Turgenev’s story-fantasia, “Ghosts.” “Now just who answers such questions! If there is anything that one might criticize in ‘Ghosts’ it is that it is not quite fully fantastic.” Dostoevsky has in mind here the use of the literally fantastic or unreal in art. Only art can provide an answer to the question Dostoevsky raises. Know-nothing people demand “limited utilitarianism.” “Write for them a most poetic work—they will put it aside and take something in which a thrashing of somebody is described. Poetic truth is considered nonsense. Only that alone which is copied from real fact is needed.” It is the inner reality revealed in Turgenev’s fantasy that interests Dostoevsky. The form of “Ghosts” will astonish people, he writes. But the main thing is to understand its real content. What is real here is the anguish of an intelligent and aware person living in our time. Dostoevsky sympathizes with a nostalgic, melancholic element in Turgenev’s story, an anguish which Dostoevsky,

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40 PSS, 16:329.
41 PSS, 28(2):61.
as we have noted earlier, considered a distinguishing mark of the human condition. Dostoevsky significantly singles out in Turgenev’s stories images which hint at the “elemental still unresolved idea (that very idea which is in all nature) which we do not know whether human intelligence will ever resolve—but now the heart only anguishes over it and is frightened even more, although it does not want to wrench itself away from it.” And Dostoevsky concludes that “such a thought is precisely timely and such fantastic things are extremely positive.”

Dostoevsky has the highest regard for E. T. A. Hoffmann’s fantasy: it is imbued with poetic truth. Hoffmann, he writes in a “Preface to Publication of ‘Three Stories by Edgar Poe,’” “embodies the powers of nature in images . . . and sometimes even “seeks his ideal beyond the earth, in some kind of extraordinary world, positing this world as most lofty, as though he himself believed in the certain existence of a mysterious, magical world.” Dostoevsky, however, highly values Poe, his unrivaled “power of imagination,” and linked with it his “mastery of details” (sila podrobnosti). Yet in the end, he places Hoffmann “immeasurably higher than Poe as a poet. Hoffmann has an ideal, perhaps not very precisely formulated, but in this ideal there is a purity, a real, genuine beauty indigenous to man . . . What a thirst for beauty, what a luminous ideal!” Dostoevsky exclaims with regard to Hoffmann’s story. Just this striving for beauty is central to Dostoevsky’s higher esthetics in his post-exile period.

Dostoevsky’s observations on Edgar Allan Poe’s stories provide a further insight into his general conception of the uses of the unreal-fantastic in art. Poe’s writing, he argues, cannot be regarded as wholly fantasy, or if his art is fantastic, it must be considered so only in an external sense, and then only initially fantastic. Poe allows for an improbable event, but then “in everything else he is completely faithful to reality.” He might be called “not a fantastic but a capricious writer.” “He almost always takes the most exceptional reality, places his hero in a most exceptional external or psychological situation, and, with what power of insight, with what striking faithfulness does he not relate the spiritual condition of this man!” Not surprisingly, the feature of

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42 PSS, 28(2):61.
43 PSS, 19:88–89.
44 PSS, 19:88.
Poe’s realism that Dostoevsky so admires here is an integral aspect of his own realistic method. The same may be said of his admiration for Hoffmann’s “ideal”: for Dostoevsky presence of an ideal is the characteristic of a great “poet.”

Dostoevsky outlines his concept of fantastic realism in his authorial foreword to “A Gentle One: A Fantastic Story” in the November 1876 number of his *Diary of a Writer*. The form of the story (in it the hero or antihero speaks to himself, and as it were, to “some kind of judge”), according to Dostoevsky, constitutes the story’s fantastic element. “This supposition about a stenographer writing everything down (after which I polish up the notes) is just what I call the fantastic in this story.” Yet the story is “real in the highest degree.” Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky adds, employed a similar method in “The Last Day of a Man Condemned to Death.” He assumed an even greater improbability, namely, that the condemned man could put down his notes right up to the last minute. “But had he not allowed for this fantasy, there never would have come into existence the work itself—the most real and most truthful of all the works written by him.”

Dostoevsky’s interest in the fantastic in art reaches back to the earliest beginnings of his creative work. In his story “The Double” (“Dvoinik,” 1846), he strives to combine the wholly real phenomenon of a real clerk’s (Golyadkin Sr.) moral and psychological ambivalence with the improbable (in a literal sense) existence of a “real” double, Golyadkin Jr. We have no record at that time of Dostoevsky’s views on the fantastic in art. But in the final year of his life, he did set forth a view regulating the use of the fantastic in art, as pertains especially to what might today be called scientific fantasy.

In a letter of June 15, 1880, to Iu. F. Abaza, an amateur writer who had sent him the manuscript of a story he had written, Dostoevsky praised the author’s idea as a good one, “but God how impossibly you carried it through! The thought that a breed of people, having received an initial idea from their forebears and *having subordinated themselves to it exclusively* in the course of several generations, subsequently must necessarily degenerate into something peculiar to humanity . . . even . . . something hostile to humanity . . . this thought is correct and profound.” But the “descendant” is “impossibly depicted.” He should have been given only moral suffering. But the writer has invented

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PSS, 24:5–6.
“something crudely physical, some kind of block of ice instead of a heart. The doctors after curing him for so many years did not notice that he had no heart. Now how can a man live without a physical organ?” 46

Dostoevsky’s objection to the absence of a physical heart, however, seems less an objection to an unreal or scientifically impossible occurrence than an esthetic objection: the failure of the storyteller to make the reader suspend his disbelief in the face of the unbelievable, that is, to do what Alexander Pushkin succeeded in doing in his story, “The Queen of Spades” (1834). At the end of his letter, Dostoevsky writes:

Granted that this is a fantastic tale, but after all the fantastic in art has limits and rules. The fantastic must be contiguous with the real to such a degree that you must almost believe it. Pushkin, who gave us practically all forms of art, wrote “The Queen of Spades”—the pinnacle of fantastic art. And you believe that Hermann really had a vision, and precisely in accordance with his world view, and yet at the end of the story, that is, after having read it through, you do not know what to think. Did this vision emerge from the nature of Hermann, or is it really one of those [visions] which have touched on another world, full of spirits evil and hostile to mankind? (N.B. Spiritualism and its teachings.) Now this is art! Now in the place where the chemist creates a heart out of wine and communion bread—this you do so crudely that it even makes one laugh. (As a writer I must confess, however, that this scene is daring and not lacking in the picturesque.) 47

The failure of Abaza, then, is not scientific, but artistic. The notion that the “fantastic must be contiguous with the real to such a degree that you must almost believe it,” undoubtedly constituted the ideal which Dostoevsky sought to achieve, but without complete success, in one of his earliest stories, “The Double” (1846).

One may distinguish in Dostoevsky’s thought, so far, two formally distinct categories of the fantastic in art, or of so-called fantastic

47 PSS, 30(1):192.
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. In the first instance, real phenomena (e.g., facts of crime, violence, eccentric behavior) serve to illuminate the larger reality of man and society; in the second instance, art, returning to its mythic root and function, either strives directly to illuminate the mystery of a deeper reality with purely imaginative elements or posits a palpably unreal, fantastic fact or detail as a point of departure for an otherwise “real” representation of reality.

We say “actually or literally unreal phenomena” in defining the notion of the fantastic as it is exhibited, for instance, in Poe or in Turgenev’s “Ghosts.” But the very distinction assumed here between real and unreal phenomena or facts is obliterated, or at least seriously blurred, in Dostoevsky’s Christian religious illumination of reality.

We noted earlier Dostoevsky’s view that man is familiar only with the immediate and visible, “and this 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. The philosophically idealist understructure of Dostoevsky’s thought on reality is evident at all stages of his career; it is strikingly visible, however, in the last decade of his life, a time when the Christian religious emphasis of his thought is most pronounced. Ultimate reality for the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the transcendent reality of the universal Christian ideal. Much on earth is concealed from us, Zosima observes in the chapter “Talks and Homilies of the Elder Zosima” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “but instead there is granted us a mysterious, precious perception of a living connection with another world, with a lofty and sublime world, indeed the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here, but in other worlds. That is why also the philosophers say that it is impossible to perceive the essence of things on earth.” The assumption of a connection or bond between an earthly reality and “another world,” the affirmation of the reality of that other world, leads Dostoevsky to affirm the reality of “facts” which are not of earthly origin but which are manifest in man’s earthly existence. Thus, we find these notations or comments in the notebooks of *The Brothers Karamazov*: “NB. If there is a connection with that world, then it is perfectly clear that it can and must be manifested sometimes by unusual facts (a flying coffin) which do
not always take place on this earth.” “In the world much is inexplicable, if there are no miracles.” 48 We read again in the notebooks, “But the lack of faith of people did not disturb him at all; these people do not believe in immortality or another life, hence too they cannot believe in miracles because for them everything is entirely on earth.” 49

We are confronted here not merely with a “fantastic” spiritual reality (revealed, for example, in Myshkin’s epileptic fits), but with fantastic facts (miracles) on earth. We cannot, therefore, maintain a distinction between “real” and “unreal” facts; we can only distinguish between the origins (earthly or transcendental) of observable facts and phenomena. As Dostoevsky put it—after reading “The Queen of Spades,” “You do not know what to think. Did this vision emerge from the nature of Hermann, or is it really one of those [visions] which have touched on another world?” Dostoevsky, to be sure, was concerned with the art of the fantastic in this letter, but the question he raises demands attention, too, in regard to his spiritual, indeed, fantastic realism.

The inaccessibility to man of ultimate reality, the lofty and sublime world which is revealed to Zosima, is the tragic fact of man’s earthly existence. “The individual cannot divine completely the eternal universal ideal even though he be Shakespeare himself,” Dostoevsky writes in his article on Dobrolyubov in 1861. 50 Yet in the final analysis, he believes it is the artist (and above all Shakespeare) who comes closest to divining this universal ideal, to disclosing the idea (the ideal) of reality. “This is not simply a reproduction of the everyday [world] with which, many teachers assure us, all reality is exhausted,” Dostoevsky writes in his notebook to The Devils apropos of Shakespeare. “All reality is far from exhausted by everyday existence, because a huge part of it exists in it in the form of a still hidden, unexpressed, future Word. From time to time prophets appear who divine and express this integral Word. Shakespeare is prophet sent by God to announce to us the mystery of man, of the human soul.” 51 The mystery of man lies not only in the present. “The realists are wrong,” Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook to the Diary of a Writer, “because man is a whole only in the

48 PSS, 15:201.
49 PSS, 15:201.
50 PSS, 18:102.
51 PSS, 11:237.
future and is by no means entirely exhausted by the present.” The role of the artist, then, is ultimately that of seer; in him, imaginative (poetic) consciousness and religious prophetic consciousness are one; phenomena to him are not divided into real and unreal, actual and fictitious; he reveals man to himself in the completeness of his destiny, his timeless being.

It is not surprising, considering the syncretic nature of Dostoevsky’s thought, that we should find in it a conscious striving to reconcile, indeed, to merge the notions of realism and idealism. Dostoevsky, unlike Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and other radicals of his generation, stood permanently at the crossroads of realism and philosophical idealism. “The idealist and the realist, if only they are honest and high-minded, have one and the same essence—love for mankind, and one and the same object—man; only the forms of the representation of the object differ,” Dostoevsky wrote in “Is It Shameful To Be an Idealist?” in the July–August issue of his Diary of a Writer in 1876. “There is no reason to be ashamed of one’s idealism: it is the same path [as that of realism] and to the same goal. So that idealism, in essence, is just as real as realism and can never disappear from the world.”

The real and the ideal, then, merge in man. It is man in the fullness of his material and spiritual being who is both the center and circumference of Dostoevsky’s “reality.” The highest form of representation of reality, the most supreme realism for Dostoevsky, is inextricably linked with the revelation of man’s quest for the ideal, with the revelation, finally, of that ideal itself.

The final dimension of realism belongs to art itself. What is artistic reality? “They say that the artistic work must reflect life, and so forth,” Dostoevsky wrote to his young friend E. N. Opochinin. “All that is rubbish: the writer (the poet) creates life, a life in such full amplitude as did not exist before him.”

52 PSS, 24:247.
53 PSS, 23:70.