Agency, Desire, and Fate in *Poor Folk*

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From the beginning of his literary career to its end, Dostoevsky explored how individuals can achieve empowerment and exercise their will, or agency, when their circumstances—economic, social, political, environmental, and psychological—would seem to thwart their every effort. Amidst these explorations, if not as openly, Dostoevsky also notably probed human aspirations, or desires.¹ In this essay I examine the subtle ways in which Dostoevsky engaged questions of agency and desire in his first published novel, *Poor Folk* [*Бедные люди*, 1846)], which shows us “poor folk”—whom Nikolai Dobroliubov, in a famous essay of 1861, labeled “downtrodden people” (301)—as they confront daunting, often crushing realities.²

Dostoevsky embarked on this initial exploration of agency and desire in *Poor Folk* at the age of twenty-four. In the fall of 1845, after nearly two years of drafting, revising, and then almost wholly rewriting this short novel, Dostoevsky took the advice of his apartment-mate and delivered the manuscript to the poet and publisher Nikolai Nekrasov for his reaction. Nekrasov gave it to the influential literary critic Vissarion Belinsky with great enthusiasm, and Dostoevsky’s career was launched.³

In his first review of the novel, Belinsky praised the distinctiveness of Dostoevsky's style, asserting that "[Dostoevsky's] is a talent both unusual and unique. Just in this first work [that talent is] immediately and sharply distinguishable from the whole crowd of writers who are more or less dependent on [Nikolai] Gogol for the direction and character [of their fiction], and thus for their success."⁴ To what we would now call popular literature Belinsky preferred literary works that stimulated serious thought. So his remark qualifies as high praise indeed. But he was even more explicit in concluding: "It is better that one read the novel in its entirety rather than enumerate just how much of it is superlative. And this is true for the simple reason that the entire novel, from beginning to end, is indeed superlative" (563).⁵

Despite Dostoevsky's subsequent dismissal of a Gogolian inspiration for *Poor Folk*, most contemporaneous readers affiliated Dostoevsky's novel with Gogol's works, and many twentieth-century critics followed suit, although differing on whether that affiliation constitutes imitation, homage, or parody.⁶ And the differences of opinion among critics do not end there. Criticism of *Poor Folk* tends to fall into four categories: the literary-historical, the socio-economic, the structural or linguistic, and the psychological or thematic. Those critics who delve into the novel's literary-historical antecedents (such as Leonid Grossman, Emma Zhiliakova, and Viktor Vinogradov) focus on the influence of Sentimental and Romantic European and Russian literature. Critics who focus on the social and economic strains of the novel (such as Valerii Kirpotin, Georgii Fridlender, and V. I. Etov, among legions of Soviet commentators) stress Dostoevsky's moving depiction of social injustice against the background of tsarist Russia. A third group of critics who emphasize the structural and linguistic foundations of *Poor Folk* (Jane Altman, Gary Rosenshield, Mikhail Bakhtin, and V. P. Vladimirtsev) elucidate divergent aspects of the novel, including its epistolary form, its deployment of secondary and tertiary characters, its use of dialogic language, and its incorporation of folkloric speech. And a final group of critics (Robert Belknap, Susan McReynolds, Joe Andrew, and Carol Apollonio) addresses the psychological make-up of the novel's protagonists and the larger thematic implications of their characterizations.

Among critics, William Leatherbarrow alone touches on the issues of agency and desire, if only in passing. He finds much in *Poor Folk* that presages the treatment of the related issues of self and will (and their negation) in

The Double [Двойник, 1847]) and later in *Notes from Underground* [Записки из подполья, 1864] and *Crime and Punishment* [Преступление и наказание, 1867]. Leatherbarrow faults Belinsky for failing to recognize the innovations Dostoevsky incorporated in *Poor Folk*, largely because of Belinsky's focus on social concerns:

Dostoevsky was groping towards a 'new causality,' a new logic and psychology of motivation that was already running against the grain of contemporary taste. He was tentatively immersing himself in the investigation of the psychological, rather than social, springs of man's behavior. In particular he was beginning to probe a problem which is of fundamental importance in his work as a whole—that of the individual's need to proclaim his freedom and self-will [своеволие] and the effects of this self-assertive impulse on the psychology of this individual.⁷

Even in the earliest works, Leatherbarrow concludes, Dostoevsky underscored the idea that "the human will in its search for total freedom of expression becomes a self-destructive impulse."⁸ But, as I dwell on the interrelations of agency, desire, and fate in *Poor Folk*, I will draw conclusions different from Leatherbarrow, as well as those of other critics, arguing that Dostoevsky demonstrated subtle and nuanced conceptions of human desire and agency far earlier than is generally acknowledged.

I will begin by observing the remarkable aptness of the form of Dostoevsky's novel to my subject. He chose not to employ an omniscient narrator or any other authorial surrogate. Nor did he place a frame around his narrative to provide a context or to guide the reader's response (except for the work's title and an ambiguous epigraph).⁹ Neither did he offer an epilogue or afterword to indicate what happens to his protagonists in the future. Instead, he turned to a narrative form favored by eighteenth-century European authors and readers alike, the epistolary novel. The narrative unfolds through a series of fifty-five letters exchanged by the two protagonists, a poor orphaned young woman named Varvara Alekseevna Dobroselova and a distant, increasingly impoverished relative of hers, a low-level bureaucrat named Makar Alekseevich Devushkin.¹⁰

However poor Varvara and Makar may be, and however outmoded the epistolary form Dostoevsky chose to depict their struggles, that form accords the protagonists a fundamental agency—they have the power to speak for

themselves. They may have few possessions and fewer appealing prospects, but they can convey their thoughts, their emotions, and their experiences in their own words. Indeed, *Poor Folk* may constitute the earliest example in Dostoevsky's oeuvre of what Bakhtin calls polyphony, a narrative technique whereby each character in a fictional work articulates "a particular point of view on the world and on oneself," which is granted a legitimacy equal to any other point of view. The characters thus acquire the authority "to interpret and evaluate" themselves and their lives, seemingly without authorial intervention.¹¹

Varvara's and Makar's letters reveal that they embody two different types of desire and two different senses of agency. Varvara's desires are pragmatic and delimited—she wants to rise up from poverty and to stabilize her social position—and she has a reduced sense of agency that she exercises in order to gratify those desires. By contrast, Makar's desires are idealistic and inchoate—he wants to form a romantic relationship with Varvara and to establish himself as a noteworthy member of society (he occasionally fantasizes about becoming an author)—and he initially succeeds in exercising his agency actively on Varvara's behalf, yet he descends into poverty as he grows increasingly passive. Hence their divergent plot trajectories—hers possibly upward, his probably downward. I will chart these divergent trajectories, first by highlighting the expression of Varvara's and Makar's desires at the outset of the novel, and then by tracing each one's sense of agency as measured by the quantity and quality of references throughout the novel to some higher power controlling the course of human affairs.

I will argue that *Poor Folk* does not portray Varvara and Makar as traditional star-crossed lovers, but as protagonists with desires at cross purposes and criss-crossed senses of agency. Through these portrayals, Dostoevsky suggests that individual efficacy does not derive solely from will or desire, but from a complex intermingling of desire and an individual's belief in a higher power controlling the course of human lives.

Desires at Cross Purposes

When we pick up the narrative thread, Makar's and Varvara's relationship has already taken shape and reached a point of fruition. Neither ever explicitly states how the two met and how long they have known each other.¹² When the narrative begins, however, we learn almost immediately that Makar has fairly

recently gotten acquainted with this distant relative of his, having found her in near servitude to a procuress, Anna Fedorovna. Exercising his agency, he has extracted her from this dreadful situation.¹³ Furthermore, we learn that Makar has found Varvara safe haven with one of his acquaintances, the seamstress Fedora, who provides a room and assists Varvara in securing honest work. He then moves into living quarters nearby.¹⁴

Makar desires one thing above all: Varvara's love. His first letter to her—or, more precisely, the first letter we see—is filled (more overtly than he may think) with his love for her:¹⁵

My precious [безценная моя] Varvara Alekseevna!

Yesterday I was happy—inordinately, impossibly happy! For once in your life, you stubborn girl, you have done as I asked. In the evening, at about eight, I woke up (you know, little mother, how I like to sleep for an hour or two after the completion of my duties). I had found a candle and some paper, and was sharpening my pen, when suddenly I happened to raise my eyes—and I will tell you that my heart fairly gave a leap! So you had guessed, after all, what it was my poor heart desired! I saw that one tiny corner of the curtain at your window had been pulled up and hitched onto the pot of balsams, precisely, oh, precisely in the way I had hinted you might do it when we met that time; I at once fancied that I saw your little face at the window for a moment, that you were looking at me from your little room, that you were thinking about me. And oh, my little dove, how disappointed I was when I simply could not discern your charming little face properly!”¹⁶

At the start of his letter, he lists what he has taken to be signs that she might reciprocate his love: “you have done as I asked,” “you had guessed ... what it was my poor heart desired,” “you were looking at me,” “you were thinking about me.”¹⁷ She has the power to fulfill his heart's desire.

In this first letter he also provides a reason to believe she reciprocates his feelings: “In my imagination your smile fairly shone [when I saw you in the window], my little angel—your kind, affectionate little smile and in my heart I had exactly the same sensation as that time I kissed you. Varenka, do you remember, my little angel?”¹⁸ Makar feeds off this recollection, thrives on imagining her responses to his affections, and builds castles in the air.

It turns out that Makar has planned to win his heart's desire based on his reading of second-rate Sentimental and Romantic literature.¹⁹ In his first letter, no sooner does he complete the description of his “curtain” fantasy than he

embarks on a surprising description of the world about him. This description is the first of several comic passages linking the text to Gogol. But it is also touching. He intermittently borrows language from the literature he is reading because he feels inadequate to express his love. Thus two distinct voices—one matter-of-fact and prosaic and another stylized and literary (if somewhat antiquated)—alternate in his letter:

Prosaic Voice	Literary Voice
<p>I am able to report to you, Varvara Alekseevna, my little mother, that last night, contrary to expectations, I slept in regular order and am accordingly most satisfied; it is always difficult to sleep in new lodgings one has just moved into; there is always something that is not quite right.</p> <p>well, and everything else was likewise in corresponding manner; everything was in order, spring-fashion. I even had some rather nice daydreams today, and they were all about you, Varenka—.</p> <p>It suddenly occurred to me, Varenka,</p>	<p><i>I rose this morning as fresh as a daisy—happy and cheerful! What a wonderful morning it was, my dear. Our window had been opened; the sun was shining, the birds were chirruping, the scents of spring were wafting on the air, and all nature was waking to life—</i></p> <p><i>I compared you to a bird of the air, made for the delight of human beings and as an ornament for nature.</i></p>

well, and so on, and so forth; i.e., I continued to make similar far-fetched comparisons. I have a book here, Varenka, which says the same sort of thing—all described in the greatest detail.²⁰

that we human beings who live in care and trouble ought to envy the carefree and innocent happiness of the birds of the air,

Makar is not perturbed by borrowing words from books—he explicitly tells her he is doing so—for borrowing reflects his freedom to choose and hence some sense of agency in the pursuit of his own ends.²¹ So he is not embarrassed in the least when he tells Varvara that he has taken passages straight from literature. Makar is too naïve and honest to attempt to deceive her. Most significantly, however, the sentimental words give him the means he evidently lacks to express his love. They become his.²²

Whereas Makar’s first letter makes clear his desire for romance, Varvara’s first letter conveys her desires more ambiguously, in what she rejects, or in what she does not say:

Makar Alekseevich, Sir!

Do you know that I am at last forced entirely into quarreling with you? Upon my word, good Makar Alekseevich, I find it hard to accept your presents. I know what they cost you, what deprivations and denials to yourself of the very necessities of life they involve. How many times have I told you that I need nothing, nothing at all; that I have not the wherewithal to repay you for the good deeds with which you have showered me to date. And why these pots of flowers? I mean, the balsams are all right, but why the geranium? I have only to utter one unguarded word, as for example about that geranium, and immediately you go out and buy it; yet I am sure it was expensive, was it not? What wonderful flowers it has! Crimson, like little crosses. Wherever did you get such a pretty geranium...our room is now like paradise—so clean and bright! But listen—why sweets as well? . . .²³

For every expression of desire Makar makes, Varvara offers a gentle rebuff. She begins her letter with the formal salutation: “Makar Alekeevich, Sir”

[“Милостивый государь, Макар Алексеевич”], in striking contrast to his letter’s much more intimate “My precious Varvara Alekseevna,” implicitly reproving him for excessive familiarity. She scolds him for the extravagance of his many gifts (all traditional symbols of love). She regrets that he used to have a much nicer residence than the new dwelling into which he has moved, evidently both to save money and to be closer to her: “You could live much better than this, judging by your salary. Fedora says the way you used to live was better by far. Have you really spent all your life in solitude, in hardship and joylessness, without a friendly word, renting corners from strangers?” She chides him for excessive sentimentality: “All those bits about paradise, and spring, and scents wafting, and birds chirping. What’s this, I thought.” She brushes aside their secret lovers’ code of communication: “About the curtain, I never gave it any thought; I expect it must have got hitched up of itself when I was moving the pots of flowers; well I never!”²⁴ And she ignores his reference to a kiss they exchanged. Varvara dismisses every romantic gesture Makar makes and rebuts every romantic thought he utters. Apparently she does not desire a romantic relationship with him.²⁵

Yet it would be misleading to suggest that Varvara does not desire anything from Makar. While attempting to rein in his excessive gifts and to tone down his discourse, in her first letter Varvara conveys genuine concern for Makar’s well-being, shows that she appreciates his gifts, asks him to visit her, cautions him not to ruin his health, confesses to harboring doubts, to feelings of sadness and of anxiety about her future, and requests that he write to her again.²⁶ She evidently wants him to continue playing a role in her life, only on her terms. She wants him to be a friend, a confidant, an advisor—but not a lover.

So strongly does she wish to keep him in her life that she acquiesces to one of his romantic desires: “Write to me. Today I will hitch up a corner of the curtain intentionally. Go to bed a bit earlier; last night I saw your candle was lit until midnight.”²⁷ Her precarious circumstances—she suffers from poverty, isolation, and ill health—may force her to succumb to his fantasy of romance a bit, but only a bit. These circumstances arguably transform Varvara’s desires into needs for money, shelter, and protection, needs that at times cause her to strategically play upon Makar’s desires for love.

But, as her subsequent letters reveal, Varvara has other desires for her future—for social stability, financial security, and psychological equilibrium.

These desires are rooted not only in her pressing needs of the present but also in her past, in cherished memories of her childhood. She frames these memories within the standard oppositions of the Sentimental canon—country/city; nature/culture; youthful love/loss; illiteracy/literacy; family/others; privation/privilege²⁸—and collects them in what she labels her “memoir.”²⁹ This memoir describes her early life, which was built around a happy home with a loving mother, the financial security of a simple existence in the countryside, and true love. She has gradually lost all of it as she has grown up, and her life of loss shapes her desires for the future. For Varvara longs to preserve something of her happy childhood: “And I should think that I should have been truly happy if it had been necessary for me to spend my entire life never leaving the village and staying in the same place.”³⁰

In hopes of fulfilling those desires, she eventually decides to accept a proposal of marriage from the man, Bykov, who, she hints, had despoiled her honor. Although she knows that “he’s always in a bad temper and yesterday he administered a beating to the house manager, as a result of which he got into trouble with the police,” she accepts his proposal as much because acceptance may restore what she has lost as because she desperately needs to have her needs met.³¹ By marrying Bykov, she will return to her beloved countryside, she will raise and solidify her social position by becoming the wife of a landowner [помещица], and she may have children, since Bykov wants an heir. “Bykov is said to be a kind man,” she tells Makar, although she may be trying to convince herself more than Makar of this lie. “He will respect me; perhaps I will respect him, too. What more can be expected of our marriage?” she asks rhetorically.³²

In the same letter, however, where she tells Makar that she and Bykov may come to respect each other, she concludes on an ominous note: “Bykov has arrived; I am leaving this letter unfinished. There was much more which I wanted to tell you. Bykov is in the room!”³³ Clearly, she fears being caught writing to Makar. And later, she confesses that she is “afraid to look into the future. I have a certain premonition of what will happen, and am living in a kind of daze.”³⁴ Rather than receiving respect, she has a premonition that she is choosing physical and emotional abuse.

Neither Makar nor Varvara has good reason to believe their desires will be fulfilled. Their basic needs may be met—Makar’s through the generosity of his

office superior, Varvara's through her marriage—but their desires for love and respectability, it appears, will not.³⁵

Nonetheless, Varvara does act. She attempts to exercise her agency, as Makar does not. His will does not prevail in the world; by the end, he can only beg Varvara to write to him again. But she evidently falls silent, as their correspondence—and the novel—end. Why can Varvara actively seek to fulfill her desires while Makar cannot?

Critics have suggested a number of reasons for Makar's passivity: among them, social injustice, psychological instability, and moral weakness.³⁶ In my view, a crucial factor contributing to this passivity (in contrast to Varvara's activity) is the extent to which each believes in a higher power—be it God or fate or destiny—imposing order on human experience and controlling individual lives. I will now turn to the subtle way Dostoevsky conveys the differences between the two characters' references to a higher power as those references correlate with their divergent senses of agency.

Higher Powers

The bulk of *Poor Folk*—and of critical commentary on the novel—focuses on the major events that occur along the way toward Makar's failure to realize his desires, in contrast to Varvara's possible realization of hers. One way to explain Makar's and Varvara's divergent courses through the narrative comes by looking at the quantity and quality of their references to some higher power. Through these references we can see that, while Makar's fluctuate, Varvara's remain constant, thus suggesting that faith in an orderly universe may contribute to belief in oneself and to the assertion of one's agency.

Makar and Varvara refer to higher powers in *Poor Folk* slightly over one hundred times, which on average amounts to nearly two references per letter. Only 26 percent of these references occur in the first half of the narrative. They come in various guises, most often as manifestations of habitual speech (exclamations, formulaic blessings, phatic social gestures), and far less often as expressions of religious belief (invocations, confessions, and lamentations). 74 percent of those references appear in the novel's second half, where they most often express, if not authentic religious belief, at least faith in some superior force imparting order to human affairs.

Not surprisingly, Makar and Varvara make reference to higher powers differently, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The number of Varvara's

references is relatively constant—in the first twenty letters (that is, nearly halfway through the novel), she refers to God or fate or destiny in some form [бог, господь, рок, судьба, доля, жребий, etc.] twenty-two times; in the novel's second half, she refers to them twenty-six times, hardly a significant increase. By contrast, Makar refers to God or fate or destiny in some form only seven times in the novel's first half, mostly in habitual locutions. But his references increase dramatically in the novel's second half—to fifty-nine, approximately 90 percent of his total—growing in intensity, only to disappear in his final letter. Varvara's references tend to be fairly precise and pragmatic, whereas Makar's are more general, even idealistic.

Makar's first letter contains three references to God or the Lord typical of the first half of his letters, each reference seemingly a common set phrase rather than a reflection of religious belief. The first reference appears after his disquisition on the little birds of the air [небесные птицы] and his confession that he has copied out the flowery passages from a "little book": "There are various other thoughts in [the book], but God go with them" ["Там и еще есть разные мысли, да бог с ними"]. He immediately turns to other matters, suggesting that the expression "God go with them" is no more than a standard Russian turn of phrase that completes the preceding topic and enables the transition to a new one: "Now tell me, where were you going this morning, Varvara Alekseevna?"³⁷

The second reference uses the same expression, but not as a transition to a new topic. It appears as something more akin to a blessing and is applied to

Fedora: “It’s true that Fedora’s a bit grumpy sometimes; but don’t you pay any attention to that, Varenka. God be with her! She’s such a kind one.” This reference may have more substance than the previous one, conveying a positive attitude toward Varvara’s servant. Makar similarly describes his servant, Teresa, invoking God a third time: “I have already written to you about the Teresa we have here—also a kind and reliable woman. And there I was getting so worried about our letters. How would they ever be delivered? And then, to our good fortune, the Lord sent Teresa. She is a kind, meek, gentle woman.”³⁸ Whether Makar truly believes that the Lord sent Teresa or not remains moot, given the absence of other indications of his faith up to this point in the novel.

Throughout the first half of *Poor Folk* Makar uses a greater variety of expressions to refer to higher powers than Varvara, thereby suggesting a more imprecise feeling about them than she has.³⁹ His verbal habits seem drawn from a common fund of clichés, which themselves reflect largely unconscious, culturally acquired, unquestioned beliefs. And only Makar uses passive constructions like “written by God” [“написано богом”], both echoing and reinforcing his characteristic passivity.⁴⁰ In the second half, Makar’s references to higher powers increase in number and intensity. For Makar, they seem to be accompanied by his growing loss of any sense of agency.

By the time Varvara announces her decision to marry Bykov and to move with him to Siberia, Makar responds in a letter of September 23 that makes

more—and more substantive— references to higher power than in any other letter:

I hasten to reply to you, little mother; I hasten to tell you, little mother, that I am amazed. This is somehow all wrong. . . . Yes, it is right, Varenka, it is right; Bykov has acted honourably; only you are agreeing to his proposal, my darling. Of course, God's will is in all things [конечно, во всем воля божия]; it is right, it must unquestionably be so [это так, это непременно должно быть так]—that is to say, God's will must be in this [то есть, тут воля-то божия непременно должна быть]; and the providence of the Heavenly Creator is, of course, blessed and unfathomable, and human fates, too—they are the same [и промысел творца небесного, конечно, и благ и неисповедим, и судьбы тоже, и они то же самое].⁴¹

Makar's letter, all searing emotion, is cast in the darkening shadow of permanent loss and the stark terror of meaninglessness. Any sense of agency has forsaken him. The letter is meant to change Varvara's mind—it does not—as well as to reassure himself that life still has some order and therefore potential meaning. He repeatedly attributes Varvara's decision to marry Bykov to variations of "God's will": "Of course, God's will is in all things"; "it is so, it must unquestionably be so—that is to say, God's will must be in this"; "and the providence of the Heavenly Creator is, of course, blessed and unfathomable, and human fates, too—they are the same."⁴² In courting Varvara, Makar has sacrificed everything for her—his health, a modest degree of dignity, and financial security. He has maintained a minimal sense of agency, if only verbally, throughout the course of his correspondence with Varvara. Confronting the extinction of any hope of romance he had entertained over the past six months, Makar becomes almost completely passive. He feels powerless to change his fate, or, as he puts it here, to alter the Creator's "blessed and unfathomable" plan. Makar utterly submits to that plan, acting only to run pre-wedding errands for Varvara.

As an ironic sign of his submission, his final letter almost completely lacks reference to higher powers of any kind. Given that Varvara will be married to Bykov and thus likely to disappear from his life, higher powers, Makar seems to have concluded, do him no good.⁴³ They work only to exclude him. His fragile sense of agency, captured in his first letter, is completely shattered.

Varvara's sense of her own agency develops in the opposite direction. She is introduced as a recent victim with virtually no agency. Over the course of the

narrative, however, she discovers that she *does* have some agency. For example, she manages her relationship with Makar, earns a modest, irregular, but honest income, and even—reversing roles—provides Makar with small amounts of money when he is most in need. As her sense of agency builds, she briefly entertains the possibility of employment as a governess. Then, within the limitations imposed by circumstances, she exercises what agency she can and decides to marry Bykov. We do not know whether that exercise succeeds.⁴⁴

By contrast to Makar, who initially refers to higher powers only in passing and more as a habit of speech, in her first letter—when her sense of agency is presumably at its lowest ebb—Varvara mentions those powers seriously, without seeming either to blame them or to seek solace for her still-perilous circumstances. Lamenting those circumstances, she writes: “Oh, what is to become of me, what will be my fate? [Ах, что-то будет со мною, какова будет моя судьба!] The worst of it is that I am in a state of such uncertainty, that I have no future, that I cannot even guess what will become of me. I am afraid to look back, too. There is such misery there that its mere recollection is enough to make my heart tear apart. I shall grieve forever over the evil people who have destroyed me.”⁴⁵ Notably, as she voices her fears here, Varvara refers to fate, not God or the Lord, as the impersonal force controlling her life—she does not hold God responsible.⁴⁶

Yet in her subsequent letters, Varvara refers to God as a higher power over her life thirty-six of the forty-seven times she mentions such powers (in comparison, Makar refers to God only twenty-five out of fifty-eight times), and she uses fewer terms for higher powers than he does. Varvara’s more precise, albeit more frequent, invocation of higher powers suggests that she mentally confines their influence to a narrower realm. She thus indicates that she has—or discovers—a greater sense of her own agency than Makar has. She displays this sense when she informs Makar that she has decided to marry Bykov: “I must agree to his proposal” [“я должна согласиться на его предложение”], not because she feels destined to do so, but because marrying Bykov is the most practical step she can take: “If there is anyone who can save me from my shame, restore to me my honorable reputation, and rescue me from poverty, deprivation and unhappiness, it is him, and him alone,” she declares.⁴⁷ And she concludes, “God knows whether I will be happy, my fate is in His holy, ineffable power, but I have made up my mind” [“Знает бог, буду ли я счастлива, в его святой,

неисповедимой власти судьбы мои, но я решилась”].⁴⁸ God may control her future, but Varvara can make her own decisions in the present. Her belief in God apparently goes beyond mere rhetoric. Yet she does not merely submit to divine authority. She retains a sense of agency sufficient to act even against great odds, and to hope that her actions might avail.

Nonetheless, Varvara’s final letter contains more references to higher powers than any previous letter. Although she has chosen a future with Bykov, she knows she cannot control that future: “It is all done! My lot is cast [Выпал мой жребий]; I have no knowledge of what it is to be, but I am obedient to the Lord’s will. . . . Don’t grieve for me, live happily, remember me, and may God’s blessing descend on you!”⁴⁹ Later in the letter she says, “God alone knows what may happen.”⁵⁰ Dostoevsky leaves it to his readers to imagine what that future holds for Varvara.

Varvara’s remark “My lot is cast” requires close scrutiny. On the surface, it may simply, even tritely, indicate that she will accept whatever comes her way. Beneath the surface, however, this remark may constitute something of a ruse on her part. Knowing that she has chosen to abandon Makar to pursue her desires, hence denying his, Varvara removes the implication of her own agency from her letter and attributes her fate to powers beyond her control. Then she attempts to assuage Makar’s feelings of helplessness and isolation by proclaiming that she loves him deeply [крепко]. We must wonder, of course, whether this profession of love is even more torture for Makar than the prospect of her leaving and completely severing their relationship.

I do not mean to suggest that Varvara is insincere in her profession of love for Makar in her final letter. But she is expressing her guilt, too.⁵¹ He has given her everything—and she has taken it, and now is leaving him forever. This is no small matter. Varvara has become, in effect, the tragic “lot” that has befallen Makar. To be sure, she does what she can. She encourages him to exercise his agency on his own behalf. She tells him that she will remember him and will pray for him, and that she hopes “God’s blessing descend[s]” upon him.⁵² But she has learned from her own experience that individuals, no matter how poor, can muster the agency to attempt to fulfill their deepest desires in an orderly universe. She herself desires wealth over penury, health over disease, hope over despair, life over premature death, and she pursues those desires. She will no longer be one of the poor folk. Makar must do the same.⁵³

In a postscript, she begs him to “remember, remember your poor Varvara.”⁵⁴ What Makar should remember, however, is her moving example of agency, her courage. He will need it desperately now that she is gone.

Reading for (Dis)Closure

Dostoevsky subtly yet tellingly underscores the protagonists’ differing desires and opposite senses of agency in their responses to what they read—most notably, Pushkin’s “The Stationmaster” [“Станционный смотритель,” 1830]. (Makar also reads Gogol’s “The Overcoat” [“Шинель,” 1842], which he strongly dislikes.⁵⁵) As students of Russian literature know, the stationmaster of the title, Samson Vyrin, lives in a remote corner of Russia with his beautiful but bored daughter, Dunia. Dunia escapes the dull, unfulfilling life she leads with her meek, downtrodden father by running off with a young nobleman, Minsky. Pushkin leads readers to expect that the nobleman would ruin her and then leave her to return home in disgrace, only to be forgiven by her benevolent father, as in a gender-toppled parable of the Prodigal Son. Instead, Pushkin turns the parable on its head. Vyrin travels to the city to rescue Dunia, only to be repulsed by Minsky. Broken-hearted, Vyrin goes home alone, and within a few years he drinks himself to death. Dunia returns to visit after she is elegantly established, apparently married to Minsky, and living quite well, thank you, as the mother of their two children.

Pushkin’s foiling of his readers’ expectations is both serious and comic. But Makar takes the story quite seriously. Makar deems himself a Vyrin (a sweet, humble, if besotted man thoroughly dedicated to a female relative, actively seeking to rescue her from the consequences of poor choices). Makar so identifies with Vyrin’s desire to save Dunia that he ignores the complete collapse of Vyrin’s sense of agency and his utter failure to fulfill his desires and restore Dunia to their home. Makar misreads strength of desire for the successful exercise of agency.

Varvara’s response to “The Stationmaster” is also a misreading, although for a different reason.⁵⁶ She likely finds a role model in Dunia, and secretly harbors desires for marriage and wealth similar to Dunia’s. Moreover, Varvara discovers an inspiration to exercise her sense of agency in the success of Dunia’s elopement. She misreads the exercise of agency for the assured satisfaction of desire.

Unfortunately, these misreadings do not bode well either for the fulfillment of their desires or the expansion of their senses of agency. For Makar and Varvara arguably misread themselves and their circumstances, as much as Pushkin's story. At the conclusion of the novel, Makar has prosaic options available to him. He remains employed at the novel's end and could return to living on the just adequate salary he continues to receive and that sustained him well enough prior to his meeting and falling in love with Varvara. He might again find quarters like those he enjoyed contentedly for twenty years in the bosom of a surrogate family. But his prospects do not look good because, in focusing so much on his desires and refusing to temper them, he forsakes his sense of agency, convinced that he has been victimized by an uncaring God and an unforgiving fate whose plan it is, he concludes, to subdue him.⁵⁷

Varvara, by contrast, may accord her agency too much efficacy. Even the cautious optimism she voices about her future seems unjustified: "Bykov is said to be a kind man," she tells Makar. "He will respect me, perhaps I will respect him, too. What more can be expected of our marriage?"⁵⁸ But what we see of Bykov does not bespeak respect, for Varvara or anyone else. He appears arrogant, selfish, irritable, and insensitive. Moreover, in her penultimate letter, the exercise of her agency is reduced to attaining practical, even materialistic, goals. She sends Makar to her seamstress to ensure that the letters of the monograms on her handkerchiefs are embroidered correctly ("*tambour a broder*" and not "satin stitch"); that the leaves on her cape be sewn "in relief"; that the cape's collar be made of "lace or wide furbelows"; and—"the most important thing"—that the seamstress "must change the silk and match it with the pattern we chose yesterday." Her desires have been reduced to the size and shape of needlepoint stitches, her agency diminished to getting Makar to spend "the whole morning running around" performing these mundane tasks.⁵⁹ Still, she retains her faith in higher powers, as Makar does not, declaring in her last letter: "I am obedient to the Lord's will."⁶⁰

Humans seem unwilling to alter their conception of higher powers, for that conception binds the universe and makes sense of what might otherwise be construed as randomness and meaninglessness. Few of us operate within an abiding consciousness of those powers—we take the order of the universe for granted until a crisis occurs, when we suddenly question the role of God or fate in our lives, suddenly doubting the validity of our desires and the extent of our

agency. This is in its own way a form of misreading, and, like misreading literary texts, it delivers potentially erroneous conclusions about the nature of the universe. Makar, for one, concludes that losing Varvara is due to the workings of God and fate alone—he takes no responsibility for the loss.⁶¹ Varvara has at least accepted a modicum of responsibility for her actions and, therefore, Dostoevsky suggests, has acquired a more realistic view of herself and her circumstances, as she sustains her faith in the cosmic order.

This last point raises questions about our relationship to the novel as readers. In this case the theme of reading reaches beyond the novel into our own lives. We are invited, if we are willing, to see ourselves in Makar's and Varvara's mold—as readers, if sometimes mistaken ones. The absence of closure in the novel opens up the possibility of taking responsibility for our own actions, even if only for the conclusions we draw from having exercised agency. As we envision what happens afterwards to Makar and Varvara (beyond the text we have in hand), we project our own desires, senses of agency, and the beliefs that undergird them, onto the characters. These conclusions can disclose us to ourselves. Moving readers to contemplate the weighty burden of self-knowledge and the dark-glassed complexity of individual responsibility is a remarkable achievement of Dostoevsky's in his first published fictional work, *Poor Folk*.

Endnotes

- 1 In this essay I will use the term “agency” in a narrow sense to signify the ability of the individual to act at will in the world. I will use the term “desire,” in contrast to “need” or “want,” to signify the subjective wishing for something that activates the quest for agency.
- 2 Dostoevsky may not have been prepared to fully depict the sources of his protagonists' desires. René Girard offers a provocative model in his theory of “mediated,” or “triangular” desire (1-52), but applying that model to *Poor Folk* would require a good deal of conjecture about what takes place both before the narrative commences and after its conclusion.
- 3 *Poor Folk* appeared in *The Petersburg Almanac* [Петербургский сборник] in January 1846, but by then it was already widely known amongst literati. The history of Dostoevsky's work on *Poor Folk* is presented in Dostoevsky, *ITCC* 1: 464-80. See also Joseph Frank, *Seeds*, 127-156. Frank notes that Dostoevsky first mentions working on *Poor Folk* to his brother, Mikhail, in

- the fall of 1844 (131). Commentary in *ИСС*, however, suggests that Dostoevsky began the novel as early as January 1844 (464-465). Iakubovich treats the biographical elements that appear in the novel (39-55). Vetlovskaja also discusses the genesis of the novel (5-10). Kirpotin assesses the immediate critical response to the novel (*Молодой*, 10-14).
- 4 Belinsky, "Петербургский сборник," 9:551.
 - 5 Ibid., 563. A year later, in reviewing literary activity for the entirety of 1846, Belinsky's opinion had shifted from enthusiasm to only qualified support: "Almost all unanimously found in Mr. Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* a capacity for wearying the reader even while it evoked his admiration, and attributed this, some to prolixity, others to excessive fecundity. Indeed, it must be admitted that if *Poor Folk* had appeared condensed by at least one-tenth and if the author had been judicious enough to expurgate needless repetitions of words and phrases his would have been an impeccably artistic work" ("A Survey," 409).
 - 6 See Tynianov, 412-55; Bem, 127-36; Bakhtin, 204-11; Vetlovskaja, 125; Trubetskoi, 158-161; Terras, *Young Dostoevsky*, 15-19; and Frank, *Seeds*, 113-136. Jackson provides an intriguing synthetic reading of Gogol's significance by coupling the perspectives of Belinsky and Rozanov in *Dialogues*, 188-207.
 - 7 Leatherbarrow, "The Rag with Ambition," 607-8.
 - 8 Ibid., 617.
 - 9 Peace alone treats both title and epigraph (56-57). He views the epigraph's antilogy, taken from Vladimir Odoevsky's short story "The Living Corpse" ["Живой мертвец," 1844], as a covert reference to Gogol. He maintains that the epigraph also reflects the influence of reading on the formation of Makar's desires (57). And Dostoevsky may have had yet another purpose in choosing as his epigraph the concluding lines of "The Living Corpse." For the epigraph Odoevsky affixed to his work presents in a dialogue format what Dostoevsky takes on as his challenge in writing *Poor Folk*—memorializing poor people. Odoevsky's epigraph reads: "I wanted to give expression (in letters) to that psychological law by which not one word pronounced by a man, not one action, is forgotten . . . but without fail produces some kind of action; so that responsibility is connected with each word, with each apparently insignificant action, with each impulse of

a man's soul.' 'About that it would be necessary to write a whole book'" (66). Dostoevsky wrote that "whole book." See also Zhiliakova (20-21) and Vetlovskaiia (55-56).

- 10 Dobroserova and Devushkin are characteronyms meaning, respectively, something like Goodtown and Younglady. These names have been much remarked in the critical literature for their associative and polemical qualities. The text is replete with characteronyms—e.g., Bykov (bull), Gorshkov (pot), Pokrovsky (intercessor). See Vinogradov, 187; Peace, 53; Vetlovskaiia, 56-59.
- 11 Bakhtin, *Problems*, 47.
- 12 A number of critics have commented on the ambiguities of the novel's beginning. For instance, Robert Belknap remarks: "Dostoevsky plays a very different plotting game at the beginning of *Poor Folk*. The first five letters outline a situation obscurely, suggesting that the plot begins in the middle of things, but giving virtually no information on what [those] things are" (39). Peace expands on the point: "It is clear that [Varvara and Makar] meet in the intervals and silences between the literary exchanges. It is a form which, by its very nature, forces the reader to exercise his imagination, and his own analytic skills. It also allows Dostoevsky in this first of his literary works to display what will become basic features of his writing—hint, innuendo, allusion. Thus even here, typically, evil is shrouded in ambiguity: is Bykov Varvara's former seducer?; is he the father of Pokrovsky?; is his offer to marry her mere loveless calculation?; and what are Varvara's real feelings toward him?" (61). I think, however, that the initial letters provide fairly precise suggestions about the protagonists' relative desires and senses of agency in the period immediately preceding the events portrayed.
- 13 This traditional reading of the plot has been challenged recently by Apollonio, who suggests that Makar is a predator as much as is Bykov, that Bykov's attempts to seduce Varvara have been forestalled by her, and that Makar's failure (and Varvara's success) has cost Anna Fedorovna her investment in the girl. Anna Fedorovna then seeks to recoup her losses by encouraging Bykov to marry the object of his (sexual) desire (19-22). But seeing *Poor Folk* from this perspective does not account for (1) Makar's ineffectiveness and weakness, as well as his lineage from the Natural School that makes buffoons of humble clerks [чиновники] (Makar is no Bykov),

- (2) Dostoevsky's insistence on the goodness and charity of Makar, Varvara, and other poor characters in the face of the evil represented by Anna Fedorovna and Bykov, and (3) suggestions about the nature of good and evil presented in Dostoevsky's other works of the 1840s. To re-evaluate the novel in this way is to isolate it from its social, historical, and literary contexts. Apollonio's interpretation nonetheless poses a valuable challenge to conventional thinking about *Poor Folk*.
- 14 Makar's third letter, dated April 12, sets forth in gruesome detail the indignities to which he is subjected in his new boarding house (1:19-21; 14-16). Apollonio comments (in reference to Ippolit's poverty in *The Idiot* [*Идиот*, 1869]: "He encounters the kind of squalor that often signals Dostoevsky's coded image of grace: a squalid garret with its impoverished family, the apparently drunk man on the bed, the rickety furniture piled with rags, the teapot, the crumbly black bread, the ever-present candle, the pale, sickly woman, the downtrodden husband, the toddler, *the newborn baby*" (34). This description perfectly fits the living quarters of a neighbor in Makar's boarding house.
 - 15 Regarding the intimate tone of the letters exchanged between the two correspondents, Grossman maintains: "Dostoevsky's basic requirement [in using a novel in letters was] to reveal and reflect life not in its finished and polished forms, but in its ever-changing stages of formation, maturation and development" (62).
 - 16 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:13; 3-4. Quotations of *Poor Folk* come from F. M. Dostoevsky, *Полное собрание сочинений* [*Complete Collected Works*], first cited by volume and page number, then followed by the page number in the translation of *Poor Folk* by McDuff.
 - 17 Bakhtin finds in *Poor Folk* a more complex form of hidden dialogue than I present here. According to Bakhtin, the second voice must be inferred from the utterances of the first voice. Bakhtin fills in what he takes to be the missing half of the dialogue implied by Makar's utterances (207-11).
 - 18 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:14; 4.
 - 19 Fridlender, *Реализм*, 64-65.
 - 20 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:14; 4-5 (italics mine).
 - 21 Compare Makar's frankness with the duplicity of, for instance, Germann in Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades" ["Пиковая дама," 1834]. Germann

woos the naïve lady's companion Lizaveta with letters that he copies word for word from German Romantic literature. Germann does not disclose this fact to Lizaveta, and she falls for the ruse. Here Dostoevsky explicitly elevates Makar's moral stature above Germann's.

- 22 Gary Saul Morson reminds us that, once someone extracts a quotation from someone else, that quotation "belong[s] to the second speaker, who may or may not coincide with the historical first speaker of the extract" (155).
- 23 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:17-18; 7-8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 1:18; 8.
- 25 Arguing to the contrary, John Lyles in "Makar Devushkin as Eligible Bachelor?" asserts that, had Makar only proposed to Varvara, she would have accepted him (347-76). I am not persuaded by his arguments.
- 26 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:19; 9.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 1:19; 9.
- 28 Karamzin's short story "Poor Liza" ["Бедная Лиза," 1792] provides the model here, which Varvara's memoir follows in spirit, if not to the letter.
- 29 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:27-45; 20-45.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 1:27; 20.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 1:103; 12.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 1:101; 120.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*, 1:103; 123
- 35 Zhiliakova predicts a more benign outcome for Makar: "Under the influence of love there flows a torturous, but unusual process of awakening in Makar Alekseevich's self-consciousness. It is love for Varen'ka that has raised him higher in his own eyes" (72).
- 36 Terras goes so far as to claim that in "An Honest Thief" ["Честный вор," 1848], it is suggested that Makar has died of drink (42).
- 37 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:14; 5.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 1:14; 5.
- 39 There is no explicit reason provided in the first half of the novel to consider Makar's invocations of higher powers as anything other than common parlance.
- 40 Makar also uses "calculated by God" ["рассчитано богом"] and "arranged by God" ["устроено богом"] (1:61).

- 41 Dostoevsky, *ИИСС*, 1:101-02; 120.
- 42 Another reading is possible here, due to a grammatical ambiguity (ambiboly). The word normally translated as “fates” [“судьбы”] (nominative plural) could also be translated as “of fate” (genitive singular). This would result in the translation: “The plan of the Heavenly Creator is, of course, blessed and unfathomable, and [the plan] of fate is too—they are the same.” This translation would underscore Makar’s inability to make even a modicum of sound theological sense.
- 43 As Leatherbarrow poignantly observes, “A man’s position is ordained by the Almighty, but recognition of the will of God is for Devushkin tantamount to an act of self-effacement in that it calls for recognition and acceptance of his own insignificance” (“The Rag with Ambition,” 608).
- 44 We may harbor some hope that Bykov’s desires for sexual and emotional dominance will be thwarted. The basis for this hope comes from Pushkin’s ironic conclusion to “The Queen of Spades,” where Germann’s once-naive victim, Lizaveta, now secure in a marriage that moves her socially upward (and overturns the model of Karamzin’s “Poor Liza”), seems to have acquired from her cruel mistress and from her bitter encounter with Germann a sense of agency sufficient to hold her own with her husband, if not to dominate him.
- 45 Dostoevsky, *ИИСС*, 1:18; 9.
- 46 In 2700 B.C.E. as he looked out over an empty, flood-washed world, Ziusudra of Sumer wrote a letter to the future. In it he reminds us that “fate, my dear friends, is like a wet bank. It is always going to make you slip” (<http://ourlittleseal.wordpress.com/> entry for January 22, 2011). My thanks to Emily Rapp for providing this quotation. Buzina discusses the language of fate, destiny, lot, etc., as a function of social class and educational level (9-10).
- 47 Dostoevsky, *ИИСС*, 1:101; 119.
- 48 Ibid., 1:101; 120. We must note that, for Varvara, God, fate, destiny, lot, etc. are not synonymous, as they seem to be for Makar. Varvara stands on more firm theological grounds. For her, God subsumes fate.
- 49 Ibid., 1:106; 126.
- 50 Ibid., 1:106; 127.

- 51 And more than guilt. Her utterance shows signs of an alien voice—Makar's. Yet what better way for her to express her love—or to convince him of it—than in his language? Makar's peculiar speech characteristics are well-known to her. His letters are suffused with his distinctive forms of repetition, affectionate forms of address, and epithet strings, which, if anything, have convinced her of how very much he loves her. Her use of Makar's style might in turn convince Makar of her love at the very moment that she reckons he needs it most. She calls him "precious" in the salutation (reminiscent of Makar's first letter). She repeats herself, in Makar's stylistic manner, to indicate the intensity of her feelings: "My soul is so full now, so full of tears... my tears are choking me... Remember, remember your poor Varenka." She strings epithets together: "I bid you goodbye for the last time, my precious one, my friend, my benefactor, my darling!" ["Прощаюсь с вами в последний раз, бесценный мой, друг мой, благодетель мой, родной мой!"] (1:106; 126-7).
- 52 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:106; 126.
- 53 "The total absence of sentimentality and the great restraint shown by Dostoevsky in passing judgment on [the hero's] pathetic figure are credentials of the mature, disciplined artist" (Terras, *Young Dostoevsky*, 117).
- 54 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 1:106; 127.
- 55 Makar's reaction to Gogol's story has elicited a great deal of critical commentary. See, for example, Leatherbarrow ("Pushkin," 368-85), Frank (*Seeds*, 101-56), Belknap (33-5), Fridlender (*Реализм*, 63-68), and the profound treatment in Jackson (*Dialogues*, 202-07). Makar misreads Gogol's famous short story "The Overcoat," which depicts an impoverished, self-effacing clerk, Akaky Akakyevich, who purchases a new, made-to-order overcoat, only to have the coat stolen. Akaky Akakyevich subsequently dies, and his ghost makes a brief return, only to be supplanted by a larger ghost. It is a tale of utter futility, redeemed only by a comic narrator and the absurdity of its conceit. Makar takes this story seriously, but to radically different effect. In fact, as numerous critics have remarked, he resembles Akaky too closely for comfort. Makar also identifies with Akaky, and he resents the comic treatment of his fellow clerk, yet he cannot admit the emotional connection. Jackson chalks this response up to Makar's denial of reality: "Devushkin's inability to find any

- 'verisimilitude' in 'The Overcoat,' though it attests to an acute awareness of his own inner human image, is nonetheless deceptive: ... it points with terrible truthfulness to an objective condition of despair and degradation, to a self-alienation that borders almost on a pathological ambivalence. Devushkin does not recognize himself. The truth is so terrible that the individual...refuses to recognize his own negation, his objective alienation from his own self-image" (*Dialogues*, 202).
- 56 Zhiliakova examines Dostoevsky's response to the Sentimental tradition, not Varvara's response to any specific text (see especially 60-72 and 82-93); Fridlender comments on Makar, but not Varvara, as a reader (68); the same can be said of Frank (*Between Religion*, 13-15).
- 57 In some ways, Makar resembles Maksim Maksimych, the old soldier whose friendship is rejected by the main protagonist in Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* [*Герой нашего времени*, 1840]. Dostoevsky's combination of the conventions of the Sentimental, Romantic, and Natural Schools recalls that novel too. See Eagle, 209-315.
- 58 Dostoevsky, *ИИСС*, 1:101; 120.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 1:102-3; 122-23.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 1:106; 126.
- 61 As Jackson argues, like many a later Dostoevskian hero, Makar must now rail against that fate, or revolt against that God, and if not, then submit to chaos and nullity (*Dialogues*, 202).

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