Darwin's Plots, Malthus's Mighty Feast, Lamennais's Motherless Fledglings, and Dostoevsky's Lost Sheep

Liza Knapp

Dostoevsky and Darwin

Against the background of work by Gillian Beer, George Levine, and others on Darwin's plots and evolutionary narrative in the English novel, what follows explores the relationship of Darwin's plots to Dostoevsky's.¹ The concern is not with how Dostoevsky responded to Darwin *as a scientist*, for, in fact, as others have documented, Dostoevsky was receptive to Darwin's science.² Evolution as such was not a stumbling block. As Dostoevsky saw it, all that mattered was the breath of God—whether we come from a lump of clay, Adam's rib, or monkeys was immaterial. What mattered was the freedom and responsibility instilled with that breath, given the possibility that, in Dostoevsky's words, "through his sins,

1 Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

2 B. E. Lewis, "Darwin and Dostoevsky," *Melbourne Slavonic Studies* 11 (1976): 23–32; Michael Katz, "Dostoevsky and Natural Science," *Dostoevsky Studies* 9 (1988): 63–76; Irene Zohrab, "Darwin in the Pages of *The Citizen* during Dostoevsky's Editorship and Echoes of Darwinian Fortuitousness in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *Dostoevsky Journal: An Independent Review* 10–11 (2009–10): 83–103.

man could again turn into a beast,”³ as seems to threaten those gathered in Skotoprigonevsk. The plural “sins” reminds us that Dostoevsky was not thinking of original sin but rather the sins that we ourselves commit.⁴

Dostoevsky took exception to what could be subsumed under the label of “Social Darwinism,” the application of the “struggle for survival” that rules the animal kingdom to human society. His journal *Time* (Время/*Vremia*) published a review of George Henry Lewes’s *Physiology of Common Life*, and it praised Lewes for warning against using the laws of natural science to explain or model human life.⁵ Dostoevsky believed that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God and thus should not just do what comes naturally, either in accordance with the laws of nature or in imitation of beasts. Views among interpreters of Darwin varied: at one end of the spectrum were those who believed that his discoveries only confirmed suspicions that the natural world was “red in tooth and claw” and, at the other end, those who believed that they suggested that cooperation and mutual aid were vital to survival and natural behavior. But for Dostoevsky, whether doing what comes naturally amounts to what one of his heroes calls the way of the tigers and the crocodiles (*Idiot*, pt. 2, ch. 10; PSS 8:245) or whether it means extending mutual aid was beside the point. What mattered was not “natural” behavior but imitation of the divine. Thus, as Dostoevsky was fond of reminding his readers, often graphically, mutual aid that is not given in the name of God or mutual aid that is offered out of self-interest or in expectation of a “reward” or “honorarium” is on shaky foundation and can lead to cold-blooded murder or

3 Dostoevsky’s works and letters are cited from F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90); hereafter cited as PSS by volume (and book number, when relevant) and page.

4 Letter of June 7, 1876, to V. A. Alekseev, #619, PSS 29(2):85. Below is the Russian original: “Кстати: вспомните о нынешних теориях Дарвина и других о происхождении человека от обезьяны. Не вдаваясь ни в какие теории, Христос прямо объявляет о том, что в человеке, кроме мира животного, есть и духовный. Ну и что же—пусть откуда угодно произошел человек (в Библии вовсе не объяснено, как Бог лепил его из глины, взял от земли), но зато Бог **вдунул в него дыхание жизни** (но скверно, что грехами человек может обратиться опять в скота).”

5 “‘Fiziologīia obydennoi zhizni.’ Soch. G. G. Liuisa. Perv. S. A. Rachinskogo i Ia. A. Borzenkova, vol. 1, 1861,” *Vremia* 11 (1861): 50–63. V. S. Nechaeva, author of monographs on the journals of the Dostoevsky brothers, could not determine the author of this unsigned review. V. S. Nechaeva, *Zhurnal M. M. i F. M. Dostoevskikh “Vremia” (1861–1863)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 181.

worse (*Idiot*, pt. 3, ch. 4; PSS 8:312; notebook entry on "Socialism and Christianity" of 1864, PSS 20:190–91).

"Bad Omens" or, the Gospel of Darwin according to Mlle Clémence-Auguste Royer

Dostoevsky was exposed to the practice of using Darwin's discoveries as prescriptions about how human society should work and how human beings should treat each other in the introduction to the French translation of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* by Clémence-Auguste Royer.⁶ Royer's introduction was the subject of Nikolai Strakhov's article "Bad Omens" in *Time* in 1862 (no. 11). Declaring Darwin's theory of evolution to be "a huge step in the development of the natural sciences," Strakhov railed against the rabid views expressed by Royer in her introduction, especially her advocacy of what would come to be known as Social Darwinism—Royer was taken with how, in her view, Darwin's discoveries ratified what she called the "law of Malthus." In his "Essay on the Principle of Population" (1798), Thomas Robert Malthus argued that as population grows (exponentially, if unchecked), it is inevitable that some will suffer and perish. As Malthus put it (in figurative language that would resonate in Dostoevsky's novelistic imagination), "nature's mighty feast" has only a limited number of places. According to Malthus, efforts on the part of "compassionate guests" (those fortunate enough to have a place at the feast) to make room for desperate unfortunates would only wreak havoc and bring misery for all; Mother Nature thus acted "humanely" in refusing "to admit fresh comers when her table was already full."⁷ In his *Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote that "as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life."⁸ He concluded: "It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the

6 "Préface du traducteur," *De l'Origine des espèces ou des lois du progrès chez les êtres organisés*, par Ch. Darwin, traduit en français sur la troisième Édition avec l'autorisation de l'Auteur par Mlle Clémence-Auguste Royer, avec un préface et des notes du traducteur (Paris: Guillaumin, 1862), <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.5324240904;view=1up;seq=9>.

7 T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population*, ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 249.

8 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), ch. 3, 63.

whole animal and vegetable kingdoms.”⁹ Royer, however, was not really interested in what Darwin’s discoveries meant to the animal and vegetable kingdoms; rather, her praise was for the “humanistic/humanitarian” and “moral” implications and applications of Darwin’s theory: “It is above all in its humanitarian consequences, in its moral consequences, that Mr. Darwin’s theory is fruitful” (“Préface,” lxii). As she understood it, Darwin’s discoveries showed that the exclusion of the unfortunate from nature’s mighty feast was proof of benign providence at work in the universe. Strakhov writes of the spin that Royer puts on Darwin’s appropriation of Malthus:

Indeed, what amazing discoveries! What science means! When a family has many children and there is nothing to eat, Malthus simple-heartedly took this to be a misfortune, whereas now we see that the more children, the better, for the beneficial law of natural selection is able to operate even more forcefully. The weak perish and only the naturally selected, the best and most privileged members survive the struggle and, as a result, progress is achieved: the betterment of the whole race.¹⁰

To put this in terms that would haunt Dostoevsky’s work, Royer uses Darwin to justify building the health and happiness of the human race on the blood of innocent children.

Royer greets Darwin as the author of a new covenant that, in her view, put an end to an era of compassion and pity in the name of Christ or in the name of other dreamy creeds of brotherhood and equality. In accordance with Darwin’s teachings (as [mis]understood by Royer), we should stop trying to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, or comfort the sick. Royer writes,

The law of natural selection, when applied to humanity, shows, surprisingly, to what extent up until now our political and social laws have been false—as has been our religious ethic. It will suffice to expose here one of the minor vices, namely, the exaggeration of that pity, that charity, that brotherhood, in which our Christian era has always placed the ideal of social virtue; it is the exaggeration of self-sacrifice, which consists of always and in all sacrificing what is strong to what is weak, the good to the bad, the beings that are well endowed in mind and body to beings that are defective and weak. And what results from this exclusive and unintelligent protection provided to the weak, the infirm, the incurables, even the wicked,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nikolai Strakhov, “Durnye priznaki,” *Vremia* 11 (1862): 169.

to all those disgraced by nature? The result is that the afflictions with which they are tainted tend to be perpetuated and multiplied indefinitely; it is that evil increases instead of diminishing and that it grows at the expense of the good. How many of these beings exist that are incapable of living on their own, that burden with all their weight those with able arms, and that in the society in which they languish, at great cost to themselves and others, take up for each of themselves three times as much space under the sun as a healthy individual! ... Has no one seriously thought about this? (Royer, "Préface," lvi)

For the record, Darwin himself complained that Royer had bastardized his views.¹¹ Dostoevsky makes clear in his fiction that Royer's attitudes were anathema to him, perhaps nowhere more profoundly than in *The Idiot*, a novel that shows at work the kind of Christ-like compassion that Darwin, as Royer presents it, had done away with.

If Royer in her attack on Christianity strikes us as Nietzschean *avant la lettre*, we might trace the genealogy as follows: (1) Myshkin, Dostoevsky's Christ-like hero, was his answer to (as Lebedev would say) not just social Darwinism but, if you will, the whole tendency, of which Mlle Royer is, so to speak, a perfect representative; (2) even as Nietzsche repudiated Christian values in *Der Antichrist* (1895), he, in the words of Walter Kaufman, "conceived of Jesus in the image of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*."¹² At this point, when Nietzsche wanted to know why Christian love had not succeeded in making the world a better place and when he proposed tougher love as a solution, we might see Nietzsche as Royer's ideological godson. Although Nietzsche disagreed on various points with Darwin and Spencer, his solutions were a far cry from the radical form of compassion, tender mercy, and self-sacrifice embodied by Myshkin, qualities often regarded as atavism or anathema in the age of Darwin (as heralded by Clémence-Auguste Royer).

11 Of Royer, Darwin wrote to Asa Gray that she "is [an] ardent Deist & hates Christianity, & declares that natural selection & the struggle for life will explain all morality, nature of man, politicks &c &c!!!" (June 10–20, 1862; <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-3595>). In a letter to J. D. Hooker, Darwin complained, "Almost everywhere in Origin, when I express great doubt, she appends a note explaining the difficulty or saying that there is none whatever!!" (September 11, 1862; <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-3721>).

12 Walter Kaufman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1968), 339.

Darwin's Plot on the Island of England and on Russian Novelistic Sod

Dostoevsky processed Darwin's *plots* differently from English novelists. Many novels of Dostoevsky's Victorian counterparts were ruled by a genealogical imperative, whereby the thrust of the plot is to reveal how everyone is related.¹³ As Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argue in *Practicing New Historicism*, this is true of Dickens at least up until *Great Expectations* (1861). Plots often turned on discovering "genealogical identity," unraveling a mystery of origins, and reclaiming rightful inheritance.¹⁴ The question "What connection can there be?" was seldom left rhetorical. Thus, as George Levine writes, for Dickens, Darwin made "literal" "the metaphorical, Christian view that we are all one [family] and deny our brotherhood at our peril."¹⁵ Dickens, according to Levine, often "strains his plotlines" to prove this point.

The elaborately constructed multiplot novels of Dostoevsky's English counterparts have often been presented as entangled banks, the novelistic equivalent of Darwin's vision in the finale of the *Origin of Species*.¹⁶ Beer has

13 Gillian Beer (in *Darwin's Plots*) argues that Darwin's scientific works reflect the hopes and fears of his age—as he wrote, he was inspired by and drew from the narratives in play in his cultural milieu, ideas that were already in the air, and novelistic plots already in print. (Thus, for example, he was an attentive reader of Dickens.) This aspect of Darwin's work helps explain why, to post-Darwinian readers, English plots that predate the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 often feel "Darwinian."

14 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 178. Novels such as *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist* are about unraveling a mystery of origins.

15 Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 149.

16 Darwin writes (*Origin of Species*, ch. 14, 489–90), "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

suggested a form of cross-fertilization such that Darwin's reading of Dickens and others fed his scientific imagination. Thus, these novels exhibit traits such as variation, relatedness, and diversity.¹⁷ But the fact that critics often refer to these novels as being “overpopulated” should give us pause. They suggest that, in fact, Malthus casts a shadow over English multiplot novels. Criticism of these English novels often presents characters or plotlines vying—competing—for their place at the feast of the narrative where, as it turns out, space is limited so that only certain select plots matter and certain select characters achieve the status of novelistic heroes.¹⁸

These “overpopulated” narratives keep reminding us that everyone has “an equivalent center of self” and has a right to narrative “franchise.” Thus, in *Middlemarch*, when asking, “But why always Dorothea?,” George Eliot's narrator intercedes to “protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble” and to browbeat readers into recognizing that Casaubon has rights, too (ch. 29; 278).¹⁹ But even as the narrator reminds us of Casaubon's “intense consciousness,” the plot thrust of *Middlemarch* is still to have him die off so that Dorothea can marry Ladislav and multiply.²⁰ After all, it is rumored in *Middlemarch* that Casaubon's blood, examined “under a magnifying glass,” was revealed to be “all semicolons and parentheses” (ch. 8, 71). In contrast, Will Ladislav is red-blooded and offers genetic diversity.

The novels of George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and others have often given the impression to readers and critics that their characters vie for the narrator's attention or that plotlines compete for space that is limited. It would seem that “the doctrine of Malthus has been applied” here, too, “with manifold force.”²¹ According to this model, it is assumed that only a limited number of characters

17 See Beer, *Darwin's Plots*.

18 On characters “compete[ing] for attention in the narrative web” of *Middlemarch* and other novels, see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 31 et passim. Although Woloch does not discuss Darwin directly, his descriptions of plotlines vying for attention, and of heroes competing for a limited number of “major” roles, evoke Darwin's plots.

19 The edition I use is George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994).

20 Darwin warns that “the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” while others die.

21 These phrases belong to Darwin in *Origin of Species*, ch. 3.

will emerge as “major,” with others relegated to being “minor.” The specter of competition looms in George Eliot’s multiplot novels, even if she modifies Darwin’s plots to fit the version of Darwinism that she shared with George Lewes. According to them, Darwinism did not mean what Dostoevsky called “the way of the tiger and the crocodile,” or what Tolstoy called “monkey sex,”²² but rather a belief that more evolved creatures conquered the sex instinct and behaved altruistically, thus contributing to a reduction in misery for all. Eliot’s work is imbued with what Gallagher calls “moral-restraint Malthusianism.”²³ Thus, for all its apparent compassion for the down and out—for those who, according to Malthus, should be denied a place at nature’s mighty feast—Eliot’s world bears the traces of this English belief in progress and poetic justice.²⁴ And this is played out in her plots.

How do Dostoevsky’s novelistic worlds differ? To English readers like Virginia Woolf, Dostoevsky’s novels felt generically different from their English counterparts. Woolf believed that the distinctiveness of Russian novels had something to do with the novelistic sod from which they sprang.²⁵ In “The

22 Dostoevsky’s Lebedev refers to the “way of the tiger and the crocodile” in *The Idiot* (pt. 2, ch.10; PSS 8:245). Tolstoy uses this term in reference to the Parisians in “Kreutzer Sonata” (ch. 11).

23 Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy in the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 174

24 Although George Eliot does not figure obviously in the rich pantheon of Dostoevsky’s influences among contemporary novelists, her work was so popular in literary circles in Russia that it is reasonable to presume that he knew Eliot’s work. Dostoevsky’s Skotoprigonevsk is a far cry from Middlemarch, but it is possible to see *Middlemarch* as a novel that hovered in the reaches of Dostoevsky’s novelistic imagination as he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*. The episode involving Alyosha’s visit to the Snegiryov hut can be read as a Dostoevskian appropriation and subversion of Brooke’s visit to the Dagley cottage after his son has stolen a leveret: both episodes involve a young boy transgressing against a “master” and the boy’s drunken father standing up to the “master,” who the father thinks has come to demand that his son be punished. Dostoevsky, like Eliot, uses the episode to show the humiliated and insulted struggling to maintain dignity.

25 In her attention to how environment affects the artifacts of culture, Virginia Woolf may be following in her father’s footsteps. Leslie Stephen (Woolf’s father) wrote that “history depends upon the relation between the organism & the environment.” This particular line from Leslie Stephen was recorded by Thomas Hardy in his notebook. Hardy wrestled with the hold of (Social) Darwinian and Malthusian thought in his fiction, most notably *Jude the Obscure* (1895). See Angelique Richardson, “Biology in the Victorian Novel,” in *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Francis O’Gorman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 203–4.

Russian Point of View," she famously contrasted novels produced in a culture ruled by the teapot (Victorian and Edwardian novels) to those by Dostoevsky and others that were produced in a culture ruled by the samovar. Whereas in the teapot-ruled English novels, "spaced is crowded" and "time limited" and "pressure" was greater to sort out the classes (and thereby privilege what Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway* calls "the ruling class"), the Russian novel and its plots seemed to Woolf to be more open and the Russian novelist more prone to compassion.²⁶ Thus, under the influence of the Russian point of view, Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* questions her culture: when the shell-shocked veteran of the Great War, Septimus Warren Smith, throws himself out of the window, Woolf invites us to see this act as somehow being related to his being denied a place at Mrs. Dalloway's party, which might be seen as a novelistic recreation of Malthus's "mighty feast" with its limited number of guests. As Woolf tells it, Septimus Warren Smith has been in some way forced out of the window by the "ruling class" so that their world, which he fought to preserve, could continue. Woolf thus rehearses but profoundly challenges the Malthusian-Darwinian plots that prevailed in her culture. By contrast, when the title character in Dostoevsky's "Meek One" jumps out of the window holding an icon of the Mother of God to her breast, we have a very different plot. Or, to cite one more searing illustration of the hold of Darwin's (and Malthus's) plots on the English novel: in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, when Jude's boy murders his siblings before hanging himself, he leaves a one-line suicide note, "Done because we are too menny [*sic*]." In Dostoevsky's world, by contrast, when a child commits suicide, she does it because she feels that she has "killed God"—this unspeakable despair results from being violated by Stavrogin (*PSS*, 11:18). Each child's rationale for suicide reflects the ultimate concerns of the novelist in question.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep on Russian Soil: Dostoevsky's Answer to Darwin's Plots

I take *The Idiot* to be Dostoevsky's ultimate answer to Darwin's plots as adapted by his English contemporaries: Dostoevsky takes his inspiration from the master plot of the lost sheep. In the original Gospel parable, we are asked what

26 Virginia Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 180.

man of us, having a hundred sheep and having lost one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until he finds it. Having found it, the man places it on his shoulders rejoicing and, coming home, calls to his neighbors and friends, asking them to rejoice with him because he has found his sheep that was lost. The parable ends with the assertion that there is more joy over this one sheep—or repentant sinner—than over the ninety-nine sheep. This parable, evoked in a host of different ways in *The Idiot*, is remarkable for how it defies economic and Malthusian sense. It reminds us that these doctrines hold no sway in the kingdom of God. Why would the shepherd abandon in the wilderness ninety-nine good, upright, deserving sheep to go after a stray, whose wayward ways possibly signal that this lost sheep has a penchant for vice? Wouldn't it be common sense (an English construct!) for the shepherd just to let this one go? As Royer (who, in the words of Darwin, "hates Christianity") argues, wasting resources on lost causes—who each already take up "three times as much space under the sun" as one fit (upright) person—does a disservice to all (Royer, "Préface," lvi).

In Dostoevsky's novels, in contrast to the Gospel parable, not all lost sheep are found. As criticism of *The Idiot* attests, readers have asked Royeresque and Nietzschean questions in the face of Nastasya Filippovna's corpse or Myshkin's apparent idiocy at the very end. Was anything gained by his compassion? Was Myshkin a failure? Or should he simply have recognized that there are only a certain number of places at "the mighty feast"? Was Myshkin wasting resources on those who, in Royer's view, take up far more than their share of space under the sun? Did his attempt to restore Nastasya Filippovna result in misery for all? To be sure, we all want good to prevail in life and poetic justice in novels. And we wish that Myshkin's efforts to restore the lost sheep Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova had saved her life and restored her to the community. Perhaps we even wanted a double wedding at the end, with Aglaya married to Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna to Rogozhin.

Does the fact that our desires for a happy ending are not satisfied (or the fact that there is no poetic justice) still mean that the compassion of Myshkin has been for naught? We may think of what will become of Kolya Ivolgin, who draws close to his mother and "may perhaps become a truly good human being" (*Idiot*, pt. 4, ch. 12; PSS 8:508). And, also, as Myshkin shows compassion for the murderer Rogozhin and strokes his cheek, the narrator dismisses him as an

idiot, or worse, and remarks critically that there was nothing more that Myshkin could do. And many readers and critics have agreed that Myshkin fails here. But I see it differently. After all, in Dostoevsky's samovar-ruled world, we are challenged to look beyond the bottom line. At the very least, we must extend that bottom line beyond the boundaries of the plot. Thus, we are left to ask whether Myshkin's compassion for the murderer Rogozhin does not, in fact, have an effect on Rogozhin. Myshkin is sowing in Rogozhin's heart seeds of his future repentance, which could bear fruit for Rogozhin in prison camp in Siberia. This is the pattern Dostoevsky set up in *Crime and Punishment*, where it appears that the boundless compassion of Sonya Marmeladov—or the act of charity of the mother and daughter who give Raskolnikov a coin in the name of Christ only to have him throw it into the Neva—enters the murderer Raskolnikov's heart and prepares it for the “gradual rebirth” that he will undergo in Siberia (PSS 6:422).

Dostoevsky and Darwin's Plots: Excluding Malthus from the Feast of the Мать-сыра земля (“Moist Mother Earth”)

Dostoevsky's faith—or the choice of Christ over economic, scientific, and other forms of truth that he expressed in his letter to Fonvizina after prison camp in Siberia—might explain why he responded so differently to Darwin's plots, preferring the master plot of the parable of the lost sheep, at least until *Brothers Karamazov*. As a child of his century, Dostoevsky had to reckon with Darwin like everybody else. But he did so in an intellectual, cultural, and literary milieu that had declared itself hostile to Malthus. As Daniel Todes has argued, whereas “for Darwin and other leading British evolutionists, the expression ‘struggle for existence’ appealed to common sense, and its Malthusian associations posed no problem,” this was not true for Russian evolutionists, who wanted their Darwin without Malthus and, further, substituted “mutual aid” for “struggle for existence.”²⁷ Todes invites us to consider that the spin that these Russian evolutionists put on Darwin—their emphasis on mutual aid rather than struggle—stemmed from what they, as young naturalists, observed in

27 Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3. See further (inspired by Todes's work) Stephen Jay Gould, “Kropotkin Was No Crackpot,” in *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1991), 325–39.

their more sparsely populated expanses of the Russian Empire—in Siberia and elsewhere. By contrast, as Todes explains, Darwin and other Darwinists did their scientific work in the tropics, crowded with species, but they also had as their social point of reference the relatively more overpopulated British Isles.

Dostoevsky's response to Darwin is thus quintessentially Russian (according to Todes's scheme) insofar as Dostoevsky rails against the Malthusian line and the metaphor of competition. The work of Peter Kropotkin and other Russian evolutionists promoting "mutual aid" was published after Dostoevsky's time, and Dostoevsky did not live to read his fellow member of the Petrashevsky circle Danilevsky's 1885 exposé of Social Darwinism (and Darwinism). But, as Todes has argued, already in his 1869 *Russia and Europe*, Danilevsky rehearses the argument of this later work when he presents Darwinism as the natural expression in scientific form of Englishness. To support this view, Danilevsky notes that individualism, struggle, and competition are bred into the English, whether in debate societies or boxing matches.²⁸ Dostoevsky had similar intuitions about the English, which he had expressed most dramatically in the description of London in his 1863 *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, when he writes of "the millions of people, abandoned and chased from the human feast, jostling and throttling each other in the underground darkness, into which they have been thrust by their older brothers, groping their way and knocking at gates and seeking outlet, so as not to smother in a dark basement"—this is Dostoevsky's vision of the English incarnation of Darwin's "entangled bank" crossed with Malthus's "mighty feast" that excludes the poor and downtrodden.

Malthus's Mighty Feast and Lamennais's Orphaned Fledglings in Dostoevsky's Plots

Whereas Victorian novelists—and scientists—had sucked in Malthus's doctrine with their mother's milk, Dostoevsky cut his teeth as a novelist in St. Petersburg in a milieu that was already very wary of Malthus. Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798) did not appear in full Russian translation until around the time of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, but its essence and key metaphors were certainly known to Dostoevsky in the 1840s.

28 Todes, *Darwin Without Malthus*, 41.

His fellow member of the Petrashevsky circle, Ivan-Ferdinand Iastrzhembsky, who taught political economy at the Technological Institute in Petersburg, spoke on this subject at Petrashevsky's Fridays on occasions when Dostoevsky was present. Iastrzhembsky is reported to have found Malthus's measures for keeping population down "inhuman."²⁹ Dostoevsky was also familiar with Vladimir Odoevsky's harangue in *Russian Nights* (1844) against "the absurd reasoning of the English economist" Malthus. Odoevsky drew attention to the fact that Malthus made revisions to his essay in attempt to appease "so-called moral people" with their illusions of "English decency." But, Odoevsky maintains, this did not really change much. Among Malthus's excisions was the infamous passage in which he declared that nature's mighty feast has a finite number of places and that it just does not make sense to give way to compassion and allow the poor to come to the table. Better to let them starve and keep down population. This notion of calculatingly denying segments of the population—the poor, the unfit—a place at the table so shocked Vasily Zhukovsky that in his translation of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon," he worked in a gratuitous reference to it: "Without a place at the earthly feast / I would be a superfluous guest at it" ("Без места на пиру земном / Я был бы лишний гость на нем").³⁰

Antipathy to Malthus's doctrine, made overt in Dostoevsky's later works, was palpable in his works from the start of his career (before Darwin had revealed that "the doctrine of Malthus" is "applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms" in his 1859 *Origin of Species*). The young Dostoevsky's very act of making "poor folk" his novelistic subject in 1846 can be seen, in the context of the acute awareness of Malthus among Russian intellectuals at the time, as an expression of defiance against Malthus's dismissal of poor folk from the mighty feast.

In *Netochka Nezvanova* (1849), which Dostoevsky hoped would be his first full-fledged novel, we see Dostoevsky writing in defiance of Malthus and, in the process, inoculating his plots against the ethos that would be associated with Darwin from the 1860s on. The heroine's evocative name—the nickname

29 My information on Dostoevsky's exposure to Malthus comes from the commentary on references to Malthus in *The Idiot* (PSS, 9:448–49, 452). Dostoevsky would also have been familiar with V. A. Miliutin, "Mal'tus i ego protivniki," *Sovremennik*, nos. 8 and 9 (1847) (PSS, 9:449).

30 This addition to Zhukovsky's translation of Byron is noted in the commentary (PSS, 9:432).

contains the Russian word for “no,” we never learn her patronymic, and her last name is the negative past passive participle of the verb meaning “to name, to call, or to invite”—designates her as one who is denied a place at the mighty feast. There are numerous of Russian proverbs about uninvited guests *not* having a place at the table, such as “На незваного гостя не припасена и ложка” (“For the uninvited guest, there is not even a spoon”); “Кто ходит незванный, редко уходит негнанный” (“He who arrives uninvited seldom leaves without being driven away”); “Незванный гость хуже татарина” (“The uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar”). After living in abject poverty in Petersburg with her mother and stepfather, Netochka Nezvanova was left in the gutter after her mother died of consumption and her stepfather abandoned her (and died). Yet this sickly and desperate child, denied a place at the mighty feast, survived because she was taken in by Prince Kh., who lived in a house with red velvet curtains that Netochka had admired and dreamed of. Prince Kh. intends to “bring her up with his children.”

The plot, at least at this turn, runs counter to scenarios envisioned by Malthus. Indeed, Prince Kh., identified by Dostoevsky scholars as a precursor to Prince Myshkin, is inspired by Christian charity and Marian compassion. Though Dostoevsky on some level was inspired by the Russian Orthodox piety of his childhood, the characterization of Prince Kh. was also influenced by strains of Christianity that Dostoevsky was attracted to during this period, specifically those associated with French Christian socialism that Konstantin Leont’ev would later denigrate by calling “rosy.” The plot motif of the adopted orphan appears in Félicité Lamennais’s *Paroles d’un croyant* (1834), which was among the works that Dostoevsky and others of the Palm-Durov circle wanted to print on the lithograph machine they had procured. (Whereas the larger Petrashevsky circle was engaged in talk, Dostoevsky and other members of this smaller group had started to take action in the hope of disseminating texts that would raise consciousness in Russia.) Dostoevsky’s friend Alexander Miliukov, who had translated this work of Lamennais, reported that Dostoevsky praised his translation. Lamennais’s *Paroles* was anticlerical and critical of the social order, but even so it was fervently Christian as it sought to inculcate an ideal of charity and fraternity that is as antithetical to Malthus’s doctrine and to Darwin’s law of natural selection (as understood by Royer). Lamennais includes the following episode: Two fathers each have many children and they worry about

what will become of their families should they die. One day the two fathers notice nests of birds in the shrubs, each with a mother bird tending to her young. Suddenly a bird of prey swoops down on one of the mother birds just as she is passing a worm into the mouth of one of her young. The two men assume that her now-orphaned young will die. However, they come back in a few days only to find that the orphaned baby birds have survived. How? To their surprise, the other mother is feeding them along with her own young and making "no distinction." At this point, one father says to the other: "You see, why should we worry? God never abandons his own. If I die before you, you will be the father of my children, and vice versa; and if we both die, they will have as father their Father in heaven."³¹ Elsewhere in Lamennais's *Paroles*, God counsels humankind: "Help each other, for there are among you some who are stronger and some who are weaker, some who are infirm and some who are hearty; and yet all must live. And if you do thus, all will live because I will reward the pity you have for your brothers and I will make your sweat fruitful."³²

Dostoevsky is likely to have taken Lamennais's tale of mutual aid among birds as a master plot that provides an alternative to those at work in Malthus's dog-eat-dog world. Lamennais's tale about orphaned fledglings being fed by another mother, coupled with his admonition to "help one another" (with emphasis on the fit helping the unfit), is a French Christian socialist variant of the "mutual aid" that Russian evolutionists like Peter Kropotkin later documented at work in the world of nature. And, certainly, intimations of this mutual aid had been reported earlier. Thus, as Kropotkin relates in *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1890–1906), back in 1827 Goethe had become excited when the Eckermann told him that "two little wren-fledglings, which had run away from him, were found by him next day in the nest of robin redbreasts, which fed the little ones together with their own youngsters." Goethe thought that "if it be true that this feeding of a stranger goes through all Nature ... as a general law," then it "confirmed his pantheistic views."³³ Dostoevsky was not a wannabe naturalist in the fashion of Goethe. In this respect, he was able to separate facts of

31 Félicité Lamennais, *Paroles d'un croyant* (Paris: Librairie de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 1897), 52–54.

32 Ibid., 24.

33 P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: McClure Phillips, 1904), xi.

science from faith. Thus, for him, any tales of orphaned fledglings being fed would remain parables to inspire human beings to prepare for the kingdom of God while still living on earth.

Dostoevsky's Novel of the Accidental Family and Darwin's Plots

Although it incorporates elements of rosy Christian plots, the “real world” depicted in *Netochka Nezvanova* also displays characteristics of Malthus's mighty feast. Whereas Prince Kh. acts on Christian charity, his wife operates according to different principles: all that matters to her is the preservation of members of her own family, whom she regards, in proto-Darwinian form, as “favored” “in the struggle for life.”³⁴ Her realm of privilege, of patrimony, and of tradition (all of which *Netochka* lacks) guarantees her and her progeny a place at the feast. This family life looks ahead to what Dostoevsky would refer to in the 1870s as the “genealogical family” and present Leo Tolstoy as its novelist par excellence. Dostoevsky contrasted the genealogical family with the accidental family, indirectly presenting himself as the novelist of a new form of family novel, one governed by its own rules. Whereas the genealogical gentry families depicted by Tolstoy managed to survive and flourish, protected and favored as they were, Dostoevsky saw his mission as novelist of the accidental family as becoming ever more important as more and more families were becoming “accidental.”³⁵ And this mission started to emerge even before Tolstoy's novels presented a metric for Dostoevsky to deviate from. This mission emerged as he wrote *Netochka Nezvanova*.

In *Netochka Nezvanova*, Princess Kh. is concerned first and foremost with the welfare and success of her own children. As far as Princess Kh. is concerned, her husband should have let *Netochka* die in the gutter in a fashion consistent with the Malthusian (and eventually Social Darwinian) scenario whereby those who are not “vigorous, healthy, and happy” die off, ceding the way to the select

34 The second part of Darwin's book title is . . . *the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

35 Irene Zohrab (“Darwin in the Pages of *The Citizen*,” 94) suggested that Dostoevsky “uses Darwinian terminology” in this vision in the 1870s of a family created by “accident” or “chance.” At the same time, the essence of Dostoevsky's vision of this accidental family—and of the *novel of the accidental family*—is found before Darwin in *Netochka Nezvanova*.

and fit.³⁶ One episode in particular shows the princess monomaniacally bent on the preservation of her biological offspring. We are told that the princess loved nobody except perhaps her own children—and a ferocious bulldog, which tyrannized the household and stole food from the orphan. Initially, however, the princess had no love in her heart for this dog, a sickly stray picked up on the street and brought home by her husband. On her order, the dog was kept outside. But one day this unfavored bulldog saved Sasha, the young heir, from drowning in the Neva. After doing so, the bulldog gained the princess's favor. She changed his name from "Friks" to "Falstaff," brought him into the house, and vowed to feed and keep him despite his nasty disposition. The princess honored and welcomed Falstaff because he played a role in the preservation of her species, whereas she wanted Netochka (another stray her husband brought home out of charity) banished.

In keeping with her proto-Darwinian approach to life, Princess Kh. concludes that having Netochka is a threat to the preservation of her family: what Netochka refers to as a romance develops between her and Katya, the daughter of the prince and princess. The girls slip into each other's beds at night; during the day they kiss "at least a hundred times," according to Netochka's estimate. Katya seems to be moved by Netochka's plight: Katya calls Netochka her "little orphan" and her "lamb." However, this "happiness," as Netochka put it, was not destined to last long. Via the French governess, word of the romance between the two girls reaches Princess Kh. She acts quickly to banish Netochka. Why? Netochka is a threat to the princess's genealogical imperatives—to her daughter Katya's marriage prospects. That is to say, Katya's love for Netochka interferes with the process of natural selection. The two girls are separated when Princess Kh. takes her children to Moscow, which also happens to be better for the health of the son. Although it might seem that this proto-Darwinian plot prevails in part 2, it has been fractured in profound ways that anticipate Dostoevsky's later defiance of Darwin's plots. There are hints that Katya and Netochka will be reunited in the future. In the meanwhile, Prince Kh. places Netochka with Alexandra Mikhailovna, his stepdaughter. Alexandra Mikhailovna loves Netochka as her own, in a triumph over biology. When the work ends (abruptly, because of Dostoevsky's arrest), Alexandra

36 Darwin, *Origin of Species*, ch. 3, 79.

Mikhailovna, on her deathbed, entrusts her own children to Netochka rather than to her husband, thus suggesting a model of mutual aid that, like Netochka's rescue from the gutter by Prince Kh., defies Malthusian-Darwinian scenarios.

Lamennais's parable of the motherless birds being fed was among Dostoevsky's sources, but in key moments Dostoevsky invokes Christian plots with a less rosy coloring. Netochka's plot unfolds in the zone of icons of the Mother of God. The master plot at the heart of *Netochka Nezvanova* also has a Marian aura and harks back to the Gospel of John 19:26–27: Jesus from the cross sees his mother and his beloved disciple and tells her to behold her son and tells the beloved disciple to behold his mother, with the denouement of this plot, in the last half of 19:27, that from this time on the disciple took her unto his own home.

From the early—anti-Malthusian, pre-Darwinian—stages of Dostoevsky's career as a novelist, Dostoevsky began the process of subverting Darwin's plots. As he novelized the struggle for Netochka Nezvanova, that uninvited guest, to be given a place at the mighty feast, he makes her the foremother of future heroes, including Myshkin and Ippolit. In *The Idiot*, written in a time of developing concern about Social Darwinism (and its apparent application “with manifold force” of “the doctrine of Malthus” to the human kingdom), Dostoevsky has both Ippolit and Myshkin depict themselves as unfortunates denied a place at nature's mighty feast.³⁷ In his “Necessary Explanation,” which he reads at Myshkin's birthday party, Ippolit refers to the “feast and chorus” of nature, at which everyone else has and knows his place, but he is a “stillborn fetus” (*Idiot*, pt. 3, ch. 7; PSS, 8:343). Then, as Myshkin awaits his dawn rendezvous with Aglaya on the green bench, he recalls what Ippolit had said about not having a place at the feast and acknowledges that he, too, had shared this feeling of being denied a place and of feeling like a “stillborn fetus” (*Idiot*, pt. 3, ch. 7; PSS, 8:351). (The epileptic Myshkin, like the consumptive Ippolit, is handicapped in the struggle for survival, for, as Darwin pronounced, “the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply,” and others die.) In fact, one might suggest that, had it not been for Ippolit's plight taking over Myshkin's consciousness at this pivotal moment and had his heart not been pierced by Nastasya Filippovna's suffering, the novel might have run a different course toward a happier ending, one more characteristic of the English novel. (Thus, Myshkin

37 A reference to Malthus, according to the commentary in PSS (9:452).

might have pursued his personal happiness with Aglaya; together they might have survived and multiplied.) According to Malthus-inspired Social Darwinian theory, the consumptive Ippolit should simply be written off, as should be that lost lamb Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova, not to mention the murderer Rogozhin. But Dostoevsky pierces Myshkin's heart with their suffering, which had as its consequence that he cannot marry, multiply, and survive. In *The Idiot*, the consumptive and the lost sheep perish and the epileptic ends as an idiot, but what distinguishes Dostoevsky's novel from most English variations on Darwin's plots is how it sustains its spirit of metaphysical rebellion.³⁸

38 Joseph Frank characterizes Ippolit as a "metaphysical rebel" in *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865–1871* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 331.