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Scandal: Dostoevsky's Theater of Ideas

It is undeniable that scandal plays a central role in the works of Dostoevsky. Just what that role is, however, is highly debatable. In this paper, I suggest that the purpose of scandal is to dramatize the ideological underpinnings of Dostoevsky's works; author, character and reader are united by their need to endure the inescapable discomfort of scandal. Through scandal scenes, Dostoevsky communicates ideas dramatically to his reader.

Mikhail Bakhtin has attracted critical attention to scandal scenes in Dostoevsky. As he noted, scandal scenes met with negative criticism from Dostoevsky's (as well as Bakhtin's) contemporaries. Bakhtin's contribution lies in posing the problem of the artistic logic of scandal—a mode that captures “the spirit and style of Dostoevsky's work” (146). In keeping with his famous main thesis, Bakhtin viewed scandal scenes as manifestation of the carnivalization in Dostoevsky's prose.¹

Many scholars have commented on scandal scenes in this and other contexts. Of recent Dostoevsky scholarship, Deborah Martinsen's work on shame comes closest to posing the problem of scandal anew, focusing on the emotional dynamics of Dostoevsky scandal scenes. While Martinsen examines the psychological and literary significance of lying and exposure in Dostoevsky's narrative, I examine how the reader comes to relate to Dostoevsky's ideas while reading scandal scenes. Through scandal scenes, Dostoevsky communicates ideas dramatically to his reader.

¹ Ibid., 146, 175 and passim.

“A Nasty Anecdote” («Скверный анекдот» 1862) is the perfect text to illustrate my thesis compactly, because in this story, scandal functions on a meta-level: by virtue of the title itself, the reader is made privy to the impending fiasco and encouraged to focus on how it will unfold. The story follows the blunders of a newly-appointed general who drops in, drunk and uninvited, on the wedding of one of his poverty-stricken subordinates. He eventually loses consciousness, and the wedding celebration disintegrates. He ends up sleeping, drunk, in the nuptial bed of the traumatized newlyweds, under the care of the groom’s dutiful mother.

The story divides in two: the housewarming party, where three generals sit in a well-furnished room discussing politics; and the wedding feast, a low-class gathering in a dilapidated home. These two incongruous settings are linked by the following philosophy, which the newly-appointed general articulates at the housewarming:

...я именно держусь и везде провожу идею, что гуманность, и именно гуманность с подчиненными [...] может послужить, так сказать, краеугольным камнем предстоящих реформ и вообще к обновлению вещей [...] Возьмите силлогизм: я гуманен, следовательно, меня любят. Меня любят, стало быть, чувствуют доверенность (V, 8-9).²

[And yet I precisely hold to and maintain everywhere the idea that humaneness, and precisely humaneness with subordinates...as the cornerstone of the forthcoming reform and generally toward the renewal

² Throughout the text, the volume number and page reference are to the 30-volume edition of Dostoevsky’s complete works *Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*.

of things... Take the following syllogism: I am humane, consequently they love me. They love me, therefore they feel trust. (8)]³

At the wedding feast this philosophy is implemented with hilarious and devastating results.

Dostoevsky has warned readers of the future crisis with his provocative title, but this does not mean that things are easy for readers. The host's life of accomplishment resembles a house of cards, ready to topple at the slightest hint of scandal: «Все это было благоприобретенное сорокалетней, копотливой экономией, так что сердце на все это радовалось» (V, 6) [“All this had been duly acquired by forty years of painstaking economy, and so his heart rejoiced over it all” (5).] The scandal does not immediately come about. The reader's anticipation of it however, leads to an acute awareness of comfort during this half, which informs the discomfort within the second half.

The second section probes the general's, the reader's, and the guests' threshold of discomfort. On the whole, the discomfort stems from the disgrace of a revered figure, the general, and the failure of a ritual, the wedding feast. The reader knows early on that a test of endurance is to take place. Upon leaving the housewarming, the general learns that his coachman has abandoned him and decides to walk home. The general ruminates over the evening's conversation with his colleagues, one of whom, after hearing his elaborate philosophy, stated reflectively: «Не выдержим» (V, 9) [“We won't hold out” (9).] «Ненавижу я этого Семена Иваныча,» the general mutters of the host while walking home, «препротивная рожа. Это он надо мной давеча хихикал, когда я сказал:

³ All English translations supplied by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky as found in the Bantam Classics edition of “The Eternal Husband and Other Stories” (2000).

обнимутся нравственно. Ну и обнимутся, а тебе что за дело?» (V, 11) [I hate this Semyon Ivanych; a most disgusting mug. He sniggered at me tonight when I said they'd embrace each other morally. So they will, and what do you care?" (12).] Eager to actively implement his philosophy, when the general hears that the wedding celebration of one of his subordinates is underway, he decides to drop in: «...это вы, люди старые, люди паралича и косности, а я выдержу! Я обращу последний день Помпеи в сладчайший день для моего подчиненного, и поступок дикий - в нормальный, патриархальный, высокий и нравственный» (V, 13). ["...that's you old people, people of paralysis and stagnation, but I will hold out! I'll turn the last day of Pompeii into the sweetest day for my subordinate, and a wild act into a normal, patriarchal, lofty and ethical one." (15).] He leaves the plank sidewalk and heads for the old house: «А вот и посмотрим, как не выдержим!» (V, 15) ["And now let's see how we won't hold out!" (17).] The challenge has been uttered, and the scandal is set up in terms of endurance: «выдержать».

In "A Nasty Anecdote" characters are not human beings, but rather reductive images of human beings. The narrator reduces them to functions (husband and wife) or types (student, general, or doctor), which are reinforced by reciprocal social awareness. Put another way, the characters are aware of their respective roles or functions: they know the social comportment required of a general, and are likewise aware of the deference one shows a general. All the characters of this story are types, an unusual circumstance that is explained by the rules of the genre signaled by the title, "A Nasty Anecdote": within the genre of the anecdote there is no room for details that may foster reader sympathy.

This simplified world of types is in flux during the second section, the wedding feast. The general's appearance at the wedding is not taken well:

Все глаза, все лица начали быстро оборачиваться к вошедшему гостю. Затем все тотчас же стали понемногу отступать и пятиться. Незамечавших дергали за платье и образумливали. Они оглядывались и тотчас же пятились вместе с прочими [...] [подчиненный] подвигался вперед, согнувшись и смотря на неожиданного гостя совершенно с таким же точно видом, с каким собака смотрит на своего хозяина, зовущего ее, чтоб дать ей пинка (V, 16).

[All eyes, all faces quickly began to turn to the newly entered guest. Then at once everyone started slowly retreating...Those who had not noticed were pulled by the clothes and brought to reason. They would look around and at once start backing away along with the others... [The subordinate] moved forward, bending, and looked at the unexpected guest in exactly the same way as a dog looks at its master who has called it in order to give it a kick (19).]

The general senses trouble: «он терялся, он чувствовал, что ему неловко, ужасно неловко, что почва ускользает из-под его ног, что он куда-то зашел и не может выйти, точно в потемках» (V, 16) [...he was at a loss, felt that he was ill at ease, terribly ill at ease, that the ground was slipping from under his feet, that he had gotten somewhere and could not get out, as if in the dark” (25).] When a drink is offered to the general, he seizes upon it as his salvation, though he has already had several at the

housewarming. Drinks are continually poured for him. The consequences of the general's resultant drunkenness are made clear:

Не подозревал [генерал] и еще одного *капитальнейшего обстоятельства, имевшего влияние на все дальнейшие взаимные отношения гостей к его превосходительству*. Дело в том, что он хоть и дал с своей стороны приличное и даже подробное объяснение своего присутствия на свадьбе у своего подчиненного, но это объяснение в сущности никого не удовлетворило, и гости продолжали конфузиться. Но вдруг все переменялось, как волшебством; все успокоились и готовы были веселиться, хохотать, визжать и плясать, точно так же, как если бы неожиданного гостя совсем не было в комнате. Причиной тому был [...] слух, шепот, известие, что гость-то, кажется, того... под шефе. (V, 24; emphasis added).

[The general did not] yet suspect another *capital circumstance, which had an influence on all further mutual relations of the guests with His Excellency*. The thing was that, though for his part he had given a decent and even detailed explanation of his presence at his subordinate's wedding, this explanation had not in fact satisfied everyone, and the guests went on being embarrassed. But suddenly everything changed, as if by magic; they all calmed down and were ready to make merry, guffaw, squeal, and dance just as if the unexpected guest were not in the room at

all. The reason for it was the rumor, the whisper [...] that the guest seemed to be...under the influence (30).]

Thus the general himself is the cause of the crowd's transformation: he ignores social protocol, which gives his subordinates the power to reevaluate the social equation. The narrator's treatment of his hero also grows freer: his above use of the formal address «ваше превосходительство» is extremely ironical, inviting readers to more openly despise the general with the crowd. By the time the general senses his error, it is too late: «...мало-помалу какое-то горькое сомнение начало закрадываться в его [генерала] душу: конечно, он очень любил развязность и непринужденность; он желал, он даже душевно звал ее, эту развязность, когда они все пятились, и вот теперь эта развязность уже *стала выходить из границ*» (V, 27; emphasis added) ["...gradually some bitter doubt began to creep into his soul: of course, he very much liked casualness and unconstraint...but now this casualness was *beginning to go beyond limits*"] (34).] The narrator, the guests, and the reader are linked by their scandalous inability to respect the protagonist, the general. This multi-layered disintegration of social protocol marks the Dostoevskian scandal: scandal relies on the breakdown of the notions of social reciprocity ingrained in characters and readers alike.

While we may not respect the general, our discomfort develops in parallel with his. Even the groom's embarrassment during his own wedding causes the reader to respond to the general with more intensity than to the unfortunate groom: «[Жених,] как нарочно, не выходил из столбняка и продолжал смотреть с совершенно дурацким видом. [Генерала] передернуло, он чувствовал, что еще одна такая минута, и произойдет невероятный сумбур» (V, 17) ["...as if on purpose, [the groom] would not

come out of his stupor and went on staring at [the general] with an utterly foolish look. [The general] cringed, he felt that another minute like this and an incredible bedlam would break out” (20).] Both the general and the reader reach their respective thresholds of discomfort simultaneously, when the inebriated general loses consciousness. The general’s limit finally manifests itself physically: «...он встал, очевидно желая уйти, покачнулся, запнулся за ножку стула, упал со всего размаха на пол и захрапел...» (V, 34) [“...he rose, as if wishing to leave, staggered, tripped against the leg of a chair, fell flat on the floor, and started snoring” (44).] Complete physical breakdown thus externalizes complete social breakdown. Immediately following this, the figure of the general is reinforced as a type: he is no longer a «генерал» (a general), but a «непьющий» (a non-drinker): «Это бывает с непьющими, когда они случайно напьются. До последней черты, до последнего мгновенья сохраняют они сознание и потом вдруг падают как подкошенные.» (V, 34) [“This is what happens to non-drinkers when they accidentally get drunk. To the last stroke they remain conscious, and then suddenly fall as if cut down” (45).]

The awkwardness of the general’s presence at the wedding, experienced by the guests all along, is only now fully accessible to the reader: for the first time, we experience the story’s action unmediated by the general’s consciousness. As if we are in the theater, the corporeal presence of the unconscious general commands the attention not only of the characters, but also of the audience-reader. No one knows what to do with the unconscious general.

As mentioned earlier, in contrast to other works, in “A Nasty Anecdote,” all characters interact as types, locked in reciprocal expectation of each other’s actions.

These expectations are what make the general's faux pas at first inexplicable to the guests. After the general's odd comportment is accounted for (so he's drunk!), the reciprocal expectations for the evening are rearranged accordingly. It is the general's turn to be dumbfounded: «Как же это? То пятились, а тут вдруг так скоро эманципировались! Кажись бы, и ничего, но как-то странен был этот переход: он что-то предвещал» (V, 27). [“How could it be? First they backed away, and then suddenly they got so quickly emancipated! It seemed like nothing, yet this transition was somehow strange: it foreboded something” (34).] What this transition forebodes is the moral to be gleaned from the story: the philosophy «гуманность с подчиненными» [“humaneness with subordinates”] will not work in the context of our general's lofty progressivism. The philosophy fails in two arenas. First, it fails within the framework of the story: the connection between the general's lofty philosophy and the resultant scandal is highlighted by the general's last words: «Не выдержал!» (V, 45) [“I didn't hold out!” (59)]. Second, it fails in the eyes of the reader: the philosophy appears ridiculous. An implicit truth, as opposed to a decisive truth, dominates the works of Dostoevsky. This is not merely because words place restrictions on the representation of human action; one sees an aversion toward linear discourse in Dostoevsky's works that is linked to his artistic pursuit of authenticity. This truth is most visible during the dramatic extremes of scandal.

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