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Dostoevsky’s Egoism of Tyranny in Petrushevskaja’s “Our Circle”

Liudmila Petrushevskaja’s works exhibit one of the major tenets of postmodern literature in their use of intertextual citations. Petrushevskaja is evidently well-read in the Russian classics, but the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky in particular stands out in her prose. Petrushevskaja makes many allusions to Dostoevsky's works in her own literary efforts. Sometimes these allusions are as simple as using character names that reflect the works of Dostoevsky, but often it is more complex than this, and the reader is compelled to examine the entire work through a Dostoevskian lens. Petrushevskaja's “Svoi krug” (“Our Circle”) is a short story about a woman's plan to ensure that her son, Aliosha, will be taken care of after her death by a group of her friends. Several elements of the story call to mind Dostoevsky's Zapiski iz podpol’ia (Notes from the Underground). An investigation into the Dostoevskian subtexts of Petrushevskaja's narrative gives deeper meaning to her narrator’s motives, especially when framed by Dostoevsky's theory of the “egoism of suffering.”

"Svoi krug" opens with the lines, "I'm a hard, harsh person, always with a smile on my full rosy lips and a sneer for everyone"¹ (Petrushevskaja, 3). This closely resembles the Underground Man's claim of “I am a sick man... I am a wicked man”² (Dostoevsky, 3). From the outset, Petrushevskaja makes a clear connection between her first person narrator and the Underground Man, who also narrates his tale from the first person perspective. The parallel structure of “Ia chelovek”, or “I am... I am” followed by a negative statement about the narrator is an intentional reference by Petrushevskaja to the self-absorbed Underground Man. This focus

¹ “Я человек жесткий, жесткий всегда с улыбкой на полных, румяных губах, всегда ко всем с насмешкой.”
² “Я человек больной... Я злой человек.”
on the “I” makes it apparent that the narrator of “Svoi krug” and the Underground Man have at least one thing in common—their narcissism. This narcissistic point of view forewarns the reader against believing everything that the self-deluded narrators have to say, particularly their self-interest and inability to see beyond themselves. The first sentences of each story show that the narrators have no intention of focusing on anyone but themselves and their own points of view.

Another similarity is that both narrators suffer from an illness. The Underground Man claims that his “liver hurts,” although he refuses to get it treated because he enjoys his own suffering. The narrator of “Svoi krug” has inherited a disease from her mother which she claims causes “everything [. . .] muddled up in [her] memory as a result of recent events in [her] life, specifically the fact that [she has] started to go blind” (Petrushevskaia, 322). The narrator admits that she is not to be trusted as she cannot even see properly. Much like the Underground Man, Petrushevskaia’s narrator enjoys the attention she receives due to the fact that she is ill. Furthermore, the narrator’s blindness can be interpreted both literally and figuratively: she is losing her eyesight while simultaneously losing her perspective on reality. Her actions show that she is not in full possession of her mental faculties. This metaphorical blindness helps to alert the reader to the narrator’s inability to see beyond herself. The reader comes to understand that her plans for her friends to raise her son will likely not work out. As the narrator fears her eminent death, from her aforementioned illness, because she does not wish to leave her orphaned son, Aliosha, alone so she “slap[s] him in the face, so hard that […] start[s] bleeding and choking” in hopes that her friends will see and raise him (Petrushevskaia, 345). Petrushevskaia’s narrator claims that being ostracized by her group of friends is a “minimal

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3 “Я думаю, что у меня болит печень.”
4 “У меня все как-то перепуталось в памяти в связи с последними событиями в моей жизни, а именно в связи с тем, что я начала слепнуть.”
cost,” because in her warped mind their hatred of her will cause them to unite against a common enemy and raise her son (Petrushevskai, 348). While she may believe that she premeditated and predicted the actions of herself and others, she obviously is unable to foresee the future as she cannot even accurately see the present.

Another attribute both narrators share is their namelessness. This authorial decision on the part of both Dostoevsky and Petrushevskai makes it impossible for the reader to connect with their narrators on anything more than a superficial level. Without a name for the character it is nearly impossible to build a rapport with the reader. In this way, the narrators’ narcissism functions to isolate not only the fictional friends within the works, but also the very real reader. The namelessness of the narrators makes them unidentifiable as characters, making it even more difficult for the reader to sympathize with their actions or their logic. The reader is, in a sense, cut off from the narrators just as the narrators cut themselves off from their friends through their narcissism and tyrannical actions.

Petrushevskai uses Dostoevsky's theory of the “egoism of suffering” to frame her narrator in the same respect as the Underground Man (Dostoevsky, 267). This particular type of self-interest applies to both narrators, though it is slightly different in Petrushevskai’s text. The theory implies that certain individuals enjoy having the center of attention focused on them, particularly their suffering, and, more importantly, that the attention given to them because of their self-inflicted suffering brings them great pleasure. As Gary Cox, author of Tyrant and Victim in Dostoevsky, explains, these are “characters who delight in tormenting others or subjecting themselves to torment” (Cox, 12). Both narrators make it clear that their texts are about them, not only as the narrators, but as the focal point of the sympathy derived from their utter depravity.
The Underground Man makes his search to justify his own being through others’ attention and sympathy abundantly clear when he states "a decent man [can] speak about [himself] with the most pleasure”5 (Dostoevsky, 6). The pleasure garnered from telling his depraved acts and seeking the sympathy of others becomes apparent as the Underground Man goes on to convey the hardships he has gone through during his life, such as his relationship with a prostitute named Liza. The Underground Man realizes that she is morally superior to him despite the fact that he is of a higher social class. As a result he acts tyrannically towards her through insults, and sadly acknowledges that “the roles were now finally reversed”6 (Dostoevsky, 124). Rather than relying on Liza’s sympathy, the narrator wishes to evoke sympathy from the reader of his story. Using the theory of the “egoism of suffering,” we see that the narrator’s tale of his own torment and guilt for insulting a prostitute affords him the pleasure of knowing that the reader will gawk at his depravity and superfluity as he rejects his natural place in society and instead goes “underground” to relish in this.

Petrushevskia’s narrator mirrors the Underground Man in her depravity and egoism of suffering. Though it may not bring her immediate pleasure, she knows that her depravity and her sacrificing herself for her son brings her attention from her friends. The narrator fears imminent death from her illness because she does not wish to leave her orphaned son, Aliosha, alone. She plans a party for her friends and sends Aliosha away, assuming he will come back and crash the party. Upon his arrival she “slap[s] him in the face, so hard that […] start[s] bleeding and choking”7 (Petrushevskia, 348) in hopes that her friends will take him away from such a horrible mother. Petrushevskia’s narrator claims that being ostracized by her group of friends is

5 “А впрочем: о чем может говорить порядочный человек с наибольшим удовольствием? Ответ: о себе.”
6 “…что героиня теперь она.”
7 “…ударила по лицу, так что у ребенка полилась кровь, и он, еще не проснувшись, стал захлебываться.”
of little consequence because their hatred of her will cause them to unite against a common
enemy and raise her son in order to ensure that she has no further contact with him. The narrator
thus takes pleasure in her self-sacrifice. In this slightly deviated version of the “egoism of
suffering,” the narrator of “Svoi krug” purposely cultivates her depravity because the attention
that it draws allows her son to have (in her clouded opinion) a better life. In this instance,
Petrushevskaia’s narrator wants the readers of her story to find heroism in her corrupt deeds,
despite the fact that her unreliability makes it difficult for them to believe the validity of her
plans. In this way Petrushevskaia has cleverly reworked the classic Dostoevskian “egoism of
suffering” to include both her tormenting of Aliosha and her friends tormenting her. While the
Underground Man has no regard for anyone other than himself, Petrushevskaia’s narrator seems
to care for her son in that she is willing to sacrifice herself for him, although this too gives her
pleasure.

The Russian title "Svoi krug" has two different meanings in English. The first is the
literal "Our Circle" and the second is the more metaphorical "Our Crowd," The story has been
translated both ways, for example, Sally Laird uses "Our Circle" in her translation of
Petrushevskaia's work "Immortal Love," while Helena Goscilo uses "Our Crowd". The word svoi
in Russian translates loosely into "one's own", and krug means circle. Perhaps the most literal
translation would thus be "one's own circle". The Russian title reflects the self-centered nature of
the narration. While the circle still implies the narrator's circle of friends, or crowd,
Petrushevskaia makes it clear by using the possessive svoi that this story is not to be interpreted
as an unbiased representation of this group. Moreover, the irony of the title is suggested by the
role of the narrator as a tyrant who purports herself to be the “owner” of the group. Since the
narrator functions as a Dostoevskian tyrant, it is logical that she would view the circle as her
possession. This notion, however, is not conveyed by denotative English titles, which imply a sense of community from the word “our” rather than the ownership and oppression conveyed by the Russian title. The title of the story itself reinforces the themes of tyranny, narcissism and ownership that are found within the text. Because the narrator functions as a Dostoevskian tyrant towards her friends, and son, it is logical that she would view the circle as her own possession, a feeling that the English title cannot bare. The Russian title conveys a notion of ownership and oppression that is characteristic of the narrator’s nature as she treats her peers as though they are merely children who she can easily manipulate.

Through the egotism of suffering and their narrative, each narrator attempts, as the Underground Man puts it, to "repent[... for] something [...] by asking [the reader's] forgiveness for something" (Dostoevsky, 5). While the Underground Man’s words must be taken sarcastically, Petrushevskaia’s narrator is misguided in that she truly believes she will be forgiven by her son as she states “he’ll forgive me” (Petrushevskaia, 348). While Dostoevsky may have written the story of the Underground Man, Petrushevskaia has created her own “Underground Woman” who has a different set of problems, but acts with tyranny and egoism in much the same way as her male predecessor.

Works Cited


8 "Уж не кажется ли вам, господа, что я теперь в чем-то перед вами раскаиваюсь, что я в чем-то у вас прощения прошу?"
9 «он меня простит.»

