

The communist censorship and the reception of Dostoevsky in the Romanian literary consciousness

Mihai VACARIU¹

Abstract. *During the communist regime, the process of translating, publishing and interpreting Dostoevsky's works has been heterogeneously: decades of being almost forbidden have alternated with moments when his novels have been widely published and promoted. However, particularly in the first two-three decades after the instauration of the communist regime, but later as well, we can notice a predominant paradigm of referring to and interpreting Dostoevsky's writings by the literary exegetes. Using the content analysis and the comparative Marxist approach of Dostoevsky's works in Romania. The interest is also to understand how communist censorship acted in different periods of time.*

Keywords: *Dostoevsky, communist regime, censorship, Marxist interpretation, content analysis.*

Introduction

The premise of the present analysis is that the reception and interpretation of the works of great Russian writer was partially distorted because of the communist censorship. Particularly in the first decades of the communist era, Dostoevsky's writings have been interpreted from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. Thus, it is necessary that the paradigm to be reported to its historical sources and motivations, which in turn, can be decoded and viewed as a preliminary horizons of comprehension².

The communist censorship acted directly or indirectly in all areas of information (newspapers, television, and radio) and also in the field of literature, music, art and even in science. The main require was that all the messages, ideas and concepts should not contradict in any way the communist ideology.

The things became more difficult with Dostoevsky's works, as his views and ideas were considered reactionary by the communist authorities. However, as he was hailed by the Western critics as one of the greatest writers of all times, his work could not be ignored

anymore, both in the Soviet Union and Romania. Consequently, after an initial period of silence, Dostoevsky's writings were reconsidered, but only from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. In Romania, during the first two decades after the instauration of the communist regime, there were published only few of his novels, and the critical texts which accompanied the novels were crowded with ideological references, many of which being actually translations of the Soviet critics. The year 1956 represented a turning point, with the commemoration of 75 years after the author's death when there were published many of his novels along with numerous exegetical texts. However, towards the end of the '70s, there was again a difficult period regarding the publication of Dostoevsky's novels. In some respect, the situation in Romania was similar with what happened in the Soviet Union:

„A Russia (Soviet) scholar looking back from the perspective of 1993 at the history of Dostoevsky's reception in Soviet Russia sums up the trends in Soviet Dostoevsky scholarship as follows: '[First] Dostoevsky was [seen as] a writer bound to the destinies of the Revolution... [then he was seen as] the creator of the counter-revolutionary Devils and an almost pro-fascist thinker ... then [came] the period when it was totally prohibited to even mention his name (during the dramatic years of 1949-1954) –

and [then came] the touching return to him, marked by a flood of monographs and articles about the difficult, controversial, but on the whole, "our" writer both during and after the anniversary year of 1956. [Finally, sometime in the middle of the 1960^s, Dostoevsky was almost completely rehabilitated..."]³.

Dostoevsky and the paradigmatic Marxist perspective

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea published the first serious text on Dostoevsky. However, as a well-known socialist, the Romanian author approaches Dostoevsky's work in a biased and subjective way, trying to emphasize those aspects in the life of the Russian author which would be ideologically convenient. In a paper published in *Românul*, in spite of the critic's respect for Dostoevsky's great oeuvre, he dismisses writer's political, religious and social ideas criticizing his conceptions about socialists expressed in the novel *The Demons*: "Dostoevsky's great novel devoted to Russian revolutionary movement called nihilism" is a "caricature written by a biased man against the revolutionaries"⁴. The author however remarks the humanistic aspects of Dostoevsky's work, particularly *Crime and punishment* comparing characters like Raskolnikov and Sonia to those

who “revel ah the great table of life”. This is precisely the vision of a socialist driven by revolutionary ideals.

Some of the elements present in Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s interpretation will be later present in the general Marxist-Leninist paradigm. For example, the preoccupation for the psychological side of the characters, highlighting their social status and repeatedly referring to the social context which influences human behavior. In only one paper, the author uses more than 20 times the word “suffering” and very of the words expressing the degradation of the impoverished and fallen society, for instance “disinherited”, “oppressed”, “humiliated”, “criminal”, and “convicted”. The religious ideas are vehemently rejected suggesting that the writer himself came to be “mystic, religious to madness” due to influences of “religious sectarian” in detention⁵.

Nevertheless, the Marxist or socialist paradigm of interpreting Dostoevsky’s works was not very popular before the communist era. The novelist political and religious ideas have generated numerous controversies, but most of the critics would defend these conceptions, particularly between the two World Wars. Thus, literary and cultural personalities such as Nichifor Crainic, Lucian Blaga, G.M. Ivanov, Paul Zarifopol, and Mihai Ralea praised his vision and the prophetic character of the novels.

Among the most outspoken against socialism and Bolshevism were Crainic and Ivanov, not incidentally avid promoters of Orthodoxy and religious values, adherents of the theory that the solution to social problems is Orthodox Christianity. Both authors are very critical vis-à-vis socialism, Ivanov, for example, claiming that in the “Soviet Russia, the proletarianization came to have the proportions of an inferno” and they are working after Marx⁶, while Crainic regards Dostoevsky as a true prophet of the Russian revolution, in the novel *The Demons* encompasses the essence of the Bolshevik doctrine: “here is how, starting from the proclamation of the principle of infinite freedom [...] it reaches the boundless tyranny, the actual essence of the actual communism”⁷. Crainic concludes that the Dostoevsky’s great merit was that he foresaw the consequences of socialism, other contemporaries not being able to have such an insight.

The religious perspective was probably the most important in the pre-communist era, but in the immediate years after the instauration of the communist regime, the religious perspective either almost disappeared from the exegetical texts or the religious themes were fiercely criticized. As it happened in the Soviet Union, in the communist Romania there were periods of fluctuation in respect to the reception of Dostoevsky’s works, the periods of total absence of

translations or exegetical texts being followed by intervals with a more relaxed censorship, when most of the novels were published, accompanied by critical studies.

As a general characteristic, the first decade was characterized by "silence", only very few interpretative articles and book translations from Dostoevsky being published, while in 1956, the commemorative year of 75 years from writer's death, many of his novels have been translated into Romanian. However, in that period, the beginning of the communist regime, the censorship was aggressive, the literary texts being extremely ideological. In spite of recognizing his literary value, Dostoevsky was still regarded as a reactionary writer, his views being considered dangerous by the communist officials and ideologues. Consequently, the recommendations explicitly expressed in the texts were that the process of reconsidering and recuperating the work of great Russian writer has to be done compulsory from the positions of Marxist-Leninist paradigm. The argument itself, as most of the arguments present in these interpretative texts, was the result of the censorship pressure and it is "borrowed" from the texts of the Soviet literary critics. It was one necessary way of legitimating the entire process of publishing and promoting Dostoevsky's literary work.

The content analysis and comparative analysis revealed that in

these texts there are present some common elements, particular in the more ideological critical studies published particularly in the first three decades. These constitutive elements of the Marxist paradigm of approaching and interpreting Dostoevsky's creation are, in general, the result of the ideological pressure of that time, having themselves an insistent ideological character. The most common elements are analyzed below accompanied by relevant examples from the texts of Marxist literary critics.

The central element of such an interpretation, was the Marxist dialectical method used by critics, both Soviet and Romanian, in order to emphasize the so-called "contradictions" present in the work and life of the writer. It is a typical process by which they seek to legitimize approach and reconsideration of Dostoevsky's work in the communist regime, but also an attempt to undermine certain dostoevskian theses, ideologically sensitive, and therefore to manipulate in one way or another how the reception of the text by the reader. It is arguable the effectiveness of such a method and it does not represent the subject of this study, but the method has been widely used by officials and Communist ideology in other areas, not only literary but also historical, political, economic, religious, etc.

The soviet Critic V. Ermilov, for example, indicates that the main elements of his study, namely, the

contradictions of Dostoevsky's work, on the duality which tortured permanently the great Russian novelist being in the impossibility to escape from the torments caused by it. Both life and his oeuvre, believes the author, represents a tragedy, an example of trying to "suppress and mutilation of the human soul by a hostile reality genius, freedom, art, beauty"⁸. It thus emphasized the contradiction between the realist aspirations of his work and the metaphysical tendency of solving the social themes through mystification and subjectivism. In this context, the author concludes that the socio-psychological duality it is not metaphysical, the source of evil should not be found in man's soul, because it has social causes. Other soviet literary critics B. Riurikov⁹, or G. M. Friedlander positioned themselves within the same perspective, which was followed by the Romanian critics as well.

Tamara Gane provides such a dialectical approach presenting the "contrary arguments", "pro and contra" which, in her view, are the very substance of Dostoevsky's work, considering that the writer has not understood the mechanism of solving the problems of the old society, the real and efficient solutions being found and applied by the communist society¹⁰. On his turn, Tudor Vianu claims that the Dostoevsky's entire misconception is rooted in the way he questions the origin of evil and pain, in glorifying

faith and suffering as source of man's moral regeneration¹¹.

Arguably, the most subtle analysis of Dostoevsky's contradictions belongs to the renowned dostoevskian exegete, Ion Ianoși who accuses the writer of "willfully confusing" bourgeoisie with the revolutionary spirit, mentioning the "serious confusion of addresses" from his later texts, particularly in the novel *The Demons*¹².

The "realism" of Dostoevsky's creation is also another element often mentioned by the Marxist critics in their studies. However, it has to be stated that this is the idea of realism in a Marxist sense, focused on highlighting the role of external reality in determining the behavior of the characters, while Dostoevsky himself accentuated the spiritual and psychological sides: "I am called a psychologist. Not true. I am only a realist in a higher sense"¹³. In this sense, Friedlander sustains that Dostoevsky was a realist who revealed the monstrous contradictions and social conflicts in the capitalist city and due to "their realistic veracity, the most vigorous pages of Dostoevsky's oeuvre deny the reactionary conceptions of the author"¹⁴.

The Romanian socialist realist critic Mihai Novicov mentions those aspects of the writer's texts convenient ideologically, considering that his oeuvre save itself due to the "consistent realism of the author" and because in the "conflict between the reactionary ideologue

and the realist writer, the victory was won by the latter"¹⁵.

Another common aspect of Marxist texts both in Romania and the Soviet Union was the express motivation of the need for a reconsideration of Dostoevsky's work from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, the authors arguing that this is necessary because the readers should thus be able to assimilate the "positive" aspects of his work and reject the "negative" ones. Also, these critics stressed the less optimistic views of the Russian writer in respect to the West and capitalist society, but usually, Dostoevsky's remarks were taken out of the context and exaggerated.

Riurikov, Ermilov, Friedlander and also most of the Romanian critics, from the early period stressed the importance of re-evaluating Dostoevsky through the Marxist-Leninist lens: this sort of analysis would allow the choice of "the wheat from the chaff" and the repudiation of the "hostile theory" of humility and reconciliation among classes and, in the end, the appreciation of what is realistic in his work. Radu Popescu, for example, Radu Popescu draws the attention to who should be interpreted and received the work of Dostoevsky and he signals the danger of reactionary theses. Nevertheless, with the help of the scientific aesthetics we are able to discover in Dostoevsky his healthy, positive side: "we should carefully cleave, with severity and also piety,

the wheat from the chaff"¹⁶. Similar remarks are present in the works of other literary critics such as Mihai Novicov¹⁷ or Nicolae Zega¹⁸.

Another common element of these approaches has been strongly presentation of certain details of the writer's life, especially related to its socialist past and sentencing policy: the participation in the Petrashevski circle, the conviction and the exile. Most of the authors mention these ideologically convenient details about Dostoevsky's life as an argument for reconsidering and recuperating Dostoevsky within the new political and social context. Within the same context, it can be noted the numerous references to the Marxist theoreticians, Marx, Engels, Lenin or socialist cultural personalities, Gorki and Dobrogeanu-Gherea. V. Ermilov, for example, starts his study quoting Gorki and Lenin, both of them criticizing Dostoevsky, the later one claiming that the writer represented the sick consciousness of the Russian people¹⁹. In a similar context, B. Riurikov reiterates the same charges of the same personalities, mentioning the words of Gorki who considers that Dostoevsky painted man "helpless in the chaos of the dark forces"²⁰. In the analysis of *Notes from the underground*, Rozemblum quotes Gorki's opinion that in this text "there is in germ the main ideas of all of his later works"²¹.

The critique of the novel *The Demons* is present in many of the exegetical texts about Dostoevsky's

work, the author being accused of misleading the readers by having models for his revolutionary characters anarchists such as Naceae and Bakunin, who were in fact pseudo-revolutionaries. Thus, B. Riurikov, for example, accuses Dostoevsky that through his text *The Demons* he offered the possibility to political reactionary to “splash with mud the Revolution and the revolutionaries”, Russian revolutionaries being portrayed as “bad people, selfish tyrant, deprived by higher moral sentiments which deny the divine and human laws”²². On the same line, the essayist and literary critic Alfred Heinrich recalls in his study, *Realism with romantic elements*, the opinion of the revolutionary writer P. Tcaciov who considers the novel *The Demons*, as an “abstract nonsense lacking any real element” the characters being “sick people”²³.

The tendentious and biased commentaries of Marxist critics have not remained only at a theoretical and abstract level, that is, have not referred only to the general political, philosophical, social, religious or aesthetic concepts and ideas expressed in Dostoevsky's work. The mystifications and exaggerated interpretations targeted also the main characters of his novels, which, in their struggle against communism, some of the western critics transformed them in true ideological symbols. Ordinov, the main character in *Notes from Underground*, Prince Myshkin, from

The idiot, Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, Ivan, Aliosha, father Zosima from *Karamazov Brothers*, Ippolit and Stavroghin from *The Demons*, all have become within this perspective the exponents of religious and political reactionary movements which would contradict flagrantly the communist ideology. Characters, dialogues, narrative elements, descriptions and so on have been interpreted in various ways, often just for serving ideological purposes or for discrediting a certain conception.

Riurikov, for example, claims that the novel *Borther Karamazov* actually reveals the “general view of degeneration and collapse of a noble family: Dmitri, the “selfish dominated by despicable vices”, Smerdiakov, the “lecherous villain”, Zosima, “a dead and fleshless face”, while the whole interpretation of *Crime and Punishment* reside in reflecting dostoevskian realism, at the expense of the religious, psychological and political themes which constitute the substrate of the novel. From a similar paradoxically perspective, the renowned Romanian literary critic, G. Călinescu, suggests that the old pawnbroker woman is a symbol of capitalist society and even if Raskolnikov suppressed her, he did not abolish the evil that resides in the “class difference”: “A new pawnbroker took the place of the killed one”. Raskolnikov, the critic notes, should “suppress the exploiting class”, something that is possible not through assassinate, but

by revolution or by “systematic fight of the proletariat”. Raskolnikov would have put himself in the service of organized struggle to overthrow the feudal-bourgeois order, “he would have been a hero of the working class”²⁴.

Conclusion

The entire process of reception of Dostoevsky’s work had a non-linear evolution, sinusoidal, with fluctuating periods, his novels being either published extensively or periods of “silence” when his works were almost forbidden. More specifically, in spite of the fact that for example in the late ‘60s almost all of his novels have been translated, the numerous commentaries and critical studies were extremely biased and ideological, positioned within a Marxist-Leninist perspective. On the other hand, in the ‘80s, for example, only few interpretative texts were published and, notably, they are less ideological and have a higher qualitative literary value, the censorship being somehow more relaxed in respect to the process of interpreting the oeuvre of the Russian novelist. A similar situation occurs regarding the themes and topics addressed by the authors: while in the first decades the focus was on highlighting the aspects which was possible to bring them in a relative accord with communist ideology, in the latest period, there were more

nuanced interpretations, sensible and controversial themes being approach, including the religious ones. This was possible because his works were not regarded as dangerous anymore by the communist officials, the “fight with Dostoevsky” being characteristic in the ‘50s.

In the Soviet Union, as in Romania as well, the turning point in terms of reception of Dostoevsky’s works was immediately after Khrushchev came into power, when the Ministry of Culture in 1955 officially reconsidered the way in which the authors were able to relate to the oeuvre of the writer. In the following year, with the occasion of commemorating 75 years from his death, Dostoevsky’s novels have been published accompanied by numerous studies and exegetical texts.

The religious dimension of Dostoevsky’s oeuvre is fundamental for comprehending and understanding it. Before and after the communist period, this was the defining perspective of approach, while during the communism, only rarely was possible to address religious themes and mostly from an atheistic Marxist perspective. Even after the relaxation of censorship, when the “fight against Dostoevsky” ended, the religious perspective continued be regarded as problematic by the communist officials. Religious words, expressions and themes were actually most often

included in the censorship's catalogues.

The overall radiography of the process of Dostoevsky's reception during the communist period, we can note two distinct trends: the Marxist perspective, dominant over time, excepting the last two decades, and when only few studies were published. A second perspective, a more theoretical or technical, focused on various literary or psychological themes which much less ideological, such as the studies of Valeriu Cristea²⁵, Friedrich

Heinrich²⁶, Albert Kovacs or the exceptional study of Ileana Mălăncioiu *Vina tragică*²⁷.

As noted in the analysis, the whole process of translating, publishing, interpreting and promoting Dostoevsky's creation should be mainly regarded as a process of recuperating Dostoevsky in a specific political and social environment, repressive par excellence. The main merit of this process is that it offered to the general public the access at the work of the great novelist.

Note

- ¹ Mihai Vacariu benefited from a PhD scholarship at SNSPA, POSDRU/ 159/1.5/S/134650.
- ² Grigore Georgiu, *Comunicare interculturală*, București, Comunicare.ro, 2010.
- ³ M. R. Bloshteyn, *The Making of a Counter-culture Icon: Henry Miller's Dostoevsky*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007
- ⁴ Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, „Generația nouă” de Turgheniev, *Studii Critice*. București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1967.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, p.225.
- ⁶ G. M. Ivanov, „Lămuriri pentru un recenzet grăbit”, *Gindirea* (Ianuarie), 188-189, 1925.
- ⁷ Nichifor Crainic, *Dostoevski și creștinismul rus*, Constanța, Editura Sfinții Martiri Brâncoveni, 2013, p.81.
- ⁸ Vladimir Ermilov, „75 de ani de la moartea lui F. M. Dostoevski”, *Gazeta Literară*, Joi 9 februarie, 1956.
- ⁹ Boris Riurikov, „Postfață”, *Crimă și pedeapsă*, Dostoevski (S. V. Teodoreanu & I. Dumbravă, Trans.). București, Cartea rusă, 1957, #297; L. Rozenblum, Romanul lui F. M. Dostoevski „Umiliți și obidiți” (Prefață la Umiliți și obidiți). București, 1957.
- ¹⁰ Tamara Gane, *Prezentări și comentarii, Opere in 11vol*, vol. 1, București, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1966.
- ¹¹ Tudor Vianu, *Imaginația durerii. Secolul 20*, 100(4), 48-49, 1969.
- ¹² Ion Ianoși, „Prezentări și comentarii, Dostoevski”, *Opere*, vol. 3, București, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1967.
- ¹³ Peter Sekirin, *The Dostoevsky Archive*, Jefferson, McFarland, 1997.

- ¹⁴ G. M. Friedlander,, Prefață la romanul „Idiotul” (N. Gane, Trans.), în F. M. Dostoievski (Ed.), *Idiotul*, București, Cartea Rusă, 1959, p.8.
- ¹⁵ Mihai Novicov, “Polifonia și mesianismul la F. M. Dostoievski” în Mihai Novicov (Ed.), *Scriitori ruși*, Editura Univers, 1972, p. 239.
- ¹⁶ Radu Popescu, *75 de ani de la moartea lui Dostoievski Contemporanul*, Vineri 10 februarie 1,3, 1956.
- ¹⁷ Mihai Novicov, “Tineretul de azi în fața operei marelui scriitor rus”, *Scînteia Tineretului*, Joi 9 februarie, 3, 1956.
- ¹⁸ N. Zega, “F. M. Dostoievski”, *Gazeta Învățămîntului*, 17 februarie, 1956.
- ¹⁹ Vladimir Ermilov, “75 de ani de la moartea lui F. M. Dostoievski”, op.cit.
- ²⁰ Boris Riurikov, “Postfață”, *Crimă și pedeapsă*, op.cit.
- ²¹ L. Rozenblum, Romanul lui F. M. Dostoievski „Umiliți și obidiți” (Prefață la Umiliți și obidiți). București, 1957.
- ²² Boris Riurikov, “Postfață”, *Crimă și pedeapsă*, op.cit.
- ²³ Alfred Heinrich, *Tentația absolutului: personaj și compoziție în opera lui Dostoievski*, Timișoara, Facla, 1973.
- ²⁴ George Călinescu, *Realism și parabolă. Secolul 20*, 100(4), 1969, p.21.
- ²⁵ Valeriu Cristea, *Dicționarul personajelor lui Dostoievski*, Ed. Cartea Românească, 1983
- ²⁶ Alfred Heinrich, *Tentația absolutului: personaj și compoziție în opera lui Dostoievski*, op.cit.
- ²⁷ Ileana Mălăncioiu, *Vina tragică: tragici greci, Shakespeare, Dostoievski, Kafka*, București, Cartea Românească, 1978.

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