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"FEELING OF THOUGHT": NIETZSCHE'S AND DOSTOEVSKII'S EXPERIENCE WITH NIHILISM

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Abstract

Did the events of 9/11, 2001 reveal the danger of nihilism? André Glucksmann's book *Dostoïevski à Manhattan* (2002) elicited a discussion concerned with the diagnosis of nihilism and with the value of literary engagement with it. Are Dostoevskii's novels "just literature", lacking a rigorous philosophic analysis of nihilism? In my analysis of Nietzsche's *Notes* and Dostoevskii's *Demons*, I attempt to show that the framework of the "old quarrel" between philosophy and literature, in which this discussion has been situated, proves untenable in the face of nihilism. The recognition of the latter's ambiguity would be eventually not so much a matter of rigorous argumentation as of what Dostoevskii's heroes call "feeling of thought" ("chuvstvo mysli"), and what Nietzsche specifies in respect to nihilism as "feeling of valuelessness" ("das Gefühl der Wertlosigkeit"), which literature can best convey. However, this task of literature needs to be prepared by "a thought in which abstract powers have been humiliated" (Camus). Nietzsche points out the roots of nihilism in the excessive trust in "the categories of reason" ("die Vernunft-Kategorien"), and in their eventual collapse; Dostoevskii makes feel the danger of their "terrible abstractedness" ("strashnaia otvlechennost'") in the flesh.

Keywords: *Philosophy; Feeling; Nihilism; Dostoevsky; Nietzsche*

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> Nihilism is still developing, and it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about it.
>
> (Vattimo 1988: 19)

> Seule la littérature se permit d'affronter la crurauté nihiliste d'une société réelle.[1]
>
> (Glucksmann 2002: 266)

> Wie erlösend ist Dostoiewsky![2]
>
> (Nietzsche 1980, 13: 241)

"Nihilism is ambiguous", it has always been, and yet one has always tried to deny this ambiguity and render the notion univocal and "univalent". Perhaps the essence of nihilism lies in this self-mystification. There are two aspects of nihilism that are usually evoked: the one a "feeling of valuelessness" ("Gefühl der Wertlosigkeit") leading to an extreme passivity and the other an excessive belief in the "categories of reason" ("Vernunft-Kategorien"), and their domination over every domain of life. It is an open question whether these two aspects are essentially connected. The term "nihilism" was originally created in order to characterize a monism of a single principle for all beings. It was Jacobi who reacted to the thought of unity, of an abstract, universal system stemming from one source, which he called "nihilism" (Letter to Fichte' from 3 March 1799 [1994: 519; 1799: 39]; cf. Arendt 1970: 107).[3] A monism of one principle (ἀρχή) begins with the prohibition of crossing the boundaries (*fines*) of definition. The univocity of rigorously defined terms would be an ideal for a "nihilist" point of view. And yet, nihilism is ambiguous, as Nietzsche famously stated ("Nihilismus. Er ist *zweideutig*" [1980, 12: 350 f.; 2003: 146]; cf. Löwith 1995: 208).[4] In fact, this was "the only clear thing Nietzsche ever said about nihilism", according to Karen Carr. Otherwise, he characterized nihilism as "an historical process", "a psychological state", "a philosophical position", "a cultural condition", "a sign of weakness", "a sign of strength", "the danger of dangers", "a divine way of thinking" (1992: 27). Not all interpreters in the analytical tradition are as "clear" as Carr, but most of them would agree with her complaint that Nietzsche is "responsible for some of the conceptual confusion that attends most twentieth-century discussions of nihilism" (151, N. 2).[5] The principle of this condemnation, somewhat paradoxically, seems to be univocity – or at least, ordered polysemy – of concepts. A radical ambiguity characterizing nihilism would undermine this very principle (the Cartesian ideal of *notions claires et distinctes*); it would mark the limits of philosophical interpretation, and point toward literature. The phrase "feeling of thought" is also ambiguous. They belong to different categories of the mind: intellect and feeling, which are hardly compatible.

A certain kind of thought might prepare and free the way for literature, wrote the twentieth-century French writer-philosopher, Albert Camus. This