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Rivka Feldhay_ Literary Knowledge between Translation and Migration. The Case of Dostoevsky in Israel

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Introduction: Knowledge between Nature and Culture

In a particularly brilliant essay on the Enlightenment, one of her favorite fields of research, Lorraine Daston points out how, in a process of historical evolution, facts were established as the most eminent way of “parsing experience” in the Western tradition.¹ Experience has always been with us, Daston claims, but facts are a particular way of purifying experience from theory, from interpretation, ultimately from the chimeras of human imagination. Thus facts as the foundation of true knowledge—especially knowledge of nature—have a history. Daston charts this history starting from seventeenth-century techniques of fact-production, through the anxiety about their fragility in the eighteenth century, and up to the modern concept of objectivity.

My aim in this short essay is to join the conversation about the “fragility” and “reality” of facts as context-bound and community-dependent. However, I wish to do so by focusing on the perspective of culture rather than nature, turning the gaze from European science to the nineteenth-century Russian realistic novel, particularly in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). Dostoevsky was a radical critic of Western-European scientism and utilitarianism, who at the same time recognized their allure and meaning for the Russian intelligentsia. His insights into the basic, universal dilemmas permeating the intellect and psyche of human beings across various social ideologies were embedded in a constructed dichotomy between “Europe” and “Russia,” a dichotomy which in turn grounds a series of conflictual polarities that define human life: intellect/emotion, mind/heart, rationality/faith. And yet, in a letter to his lifelong friend, the poet Apollon Maikov, Dostoevsky writes that “Europe and her mission will be realized by Russia”²—thereby seemingly overcoming the dichotomy between the two in favor of a universal message, although still under the aegis of Russia. In transforming local facts into universal meanings,

¹ L. Daston, “Enlightenment Fears: Fears of Enlightenment,” in *What's Left of Enlightenment*, K. M. Baker, and P. H. Reil (eds.), (Volume 4: Eighteenth Century Science) Stanford, California: Stanford University Press (2001):115-128.

² Quoted in J. Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010, p. 243, n. 2.

Dostoevsky's literature echoes the scientific quest to parse experience in terms of facts that constitute an objective worldview.

In the first part of my essay I shall point out how the form of the realistic novel in its Russian version became a laboratory for experimenting with visible facts about people's lives, in order to present deeper, "invisible", universal truths about human beings and society. In the second part I shall trace two different routes by which Dostoevsky's legacy migrated to Israel/Palestine. The epistemic and political lessons suggested by this plural literary migration point to a new kind of knowledge that emerged in parallel to nineteenth-century science: literary knowledge consisting of facts and meanings bonded through various political agendas, forming a new kind of cultural resource for identity-construction in a global reality.

I. The Russian Realistic Novel as a Site of Knowledge

In an "Avant Propos" to his *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac articulates his intention to study human beings in the same way that a Zoologist studies the animal species. In a similar way, the great Russian critic of the 1840's, Vissarion Belinsky, wrote of Pushkin that his *Onegin* is an encyclopedia of Russian life. Exploring the possibilities of realism as a new literary genre, nineteenth-century novelists articulated their distinction from the eighteenth-century abstract discourse on human nature and virtue, by striving to deal with concrete men and women.

Dostoevsky's novels consist of a broad spectrum of characters from all strata of Russian society. He takes care to subtly portray them through their different dialects and forms of speech, providing vivid access into the rigid class distinctions that petrified Russian society, while doing so in a natural, non-edifying, non-didactic tone. His long dialogues allow the characters to express the various worldviews and ideologies current at the time, and it was largely through this device that the social, religious, and existential problems that haunted the author and his age gained way into his readers' consciousness: The existence of a beneficial and providential God versus the poverty and suffering pervading His world, the split within the human psyche between good and evil, the dialectical nature of free will, the worth of human life against money, fame

and power. Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* testifies to the life-materials he drew upon while planning his books. An avid newspaper reader, some of his plots appear to be based on cases published in the press. At the same time, as his characters well demonstrate, phantasy, revelation, and mystical beliefs were for him inseparable from the tissue of experience and reality.

This peculiar mixture of life-materials, fictional facts and universal messages, coupled with a moral authority embodied in the writer's voice, is well exemplified in *Demons*. Published in the early 1870s, it portrays in minute detail the gentry-life in a provincial town in Tsarist Russia between the 1840s and 60s. The plot revolves around an abominable murder committed within a small, secret society of radical regime oppositionists. Group leader Peter Verkhovensky ruthlessly shoots his fellow Shatov, purportedly in order to test the loyalty of his friends and the cohesion of the group. Verkhovensky preaches a doctrine of violence and Machiavellian deceit as the only possible means of undermining the regime, in a spirit of nihilism fashionable among some of the young Russian intelligentsia of the time. His discourse is constructed around a set of dichotomies between literature and real life, the impotent literary intelligentsia versus real men of action. Behind the crime, however, is the main protagonist of the novel, the aristocratic Nicholas Stavrogin who had chosen Verkhovensky for his companion and brought him to town. Stavrogin's soul is empty of any ideal; a dead spirit detached from the roots of social life. His written "confession" reveal a series of cold experiments in child-abuse and murder, through which he had sought to find relief from his *ennui*, which he finally captures by the statement, "I neither know nor feel good and evil."³

Dostoevsky is here pushing the literary strategy of verisimilitude even closer to reality. The plot and characters of *Demons* along with its vivid dialogues constitute a fictional world very much like the picture of nineteenth-century Russia as it emerges from historical works on the period. The murder at the center of the story is based on the 1869 "Nechayev affair," which agitated public opinion: the murder of a member of Sergey Nechayev's conspiratory group by

³ Ibid., 646.

the name of Ivanov. Verkhovensky's nihilistic violence is now read by critics as a reflection of Nechayev's *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, written under the inspiration of Bakunin, while other protagonists of the novel were probably recognized by Dostoevsky's readers as key figures in contemporary Russian cultural life.⁴

It is through the peculiar temporality of the narrative that Dostoevsky's philosophy of life is articulated. The representation of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky (modeled on the figure of historian T. N. Gravorsky) as tutor to Stavrogin and father of murderer Peter Verkhovensky, is crucial for creating a "fathers and sons" narrative-structure. The seeds of evil sown by the liberal, Westernizing fathers are exposed in the actions of the nihilist sons. The story is told first in a non-direct way through the dense conversations of Stepan Trofimovich with the narrator. It is secondly told through the portrayal, sometimes caricaturistic, of a series of key cultural figures of the time, such as Karmazinov (Turgenev) and Pichorin (Lermontov), authors of "socialist novels" who attempted to re-shape Russian society, but instead brought about the destructive rage of their "sons." Against this background Dostoevsky places the series of protagonists of the 1860 generation, who echo the entire gamut of socio-cultural currents active at the time: Shatov—the socialist with Slavophile hues; Kyrillov—the atheist humanist; the couple von Lembeke—pseudo-liberals serving the regime; and the cold nihilists Stavrogin and Verkhovensky. While the plot of the novel is set in the 1860's, its inner logic is rooted back in the 40's, the "father's" generation. Dostoevsky had a personal stake in this fathers and sons presentation. The fathers, for him, had to be the generation of Westernizing liberals, such as Belinsky, under whose impact Dostoevsky himself, in his late twenties, joined a conspiracy group. After its members were arrested and underwent mock execution, Dostoevsky was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labor in Siberia for four years. His conversion back to the Orthodox faith, his turn to the history of suffering and sacrifice of the Russian people, his preaching for compassion and empathy for the other and his hope for personal redemption,

⁴ Ibid., 630.

and finally, his belief in Russia as the future carrier of a true universal enlightenment purified of egotistic, utilitarian European elements—this message is delivered through the convoluted plot-line of *Demons*. The temporal structure of the novel thus undergirds its conceptual framework. The narrative succession functions as a causal explanation of the cultural history of nineteenth-century Russia, while the centerpiece murder is read by some as a prophetic premonition of the future violence of the coming revolution.

Dostoevsky bestowed upon posterity the insight that writing on particular, concrete, human beings entails their representation as individuals that are in dialectical bonds with their community—be it an organic social body, a social class, a thought-collective, or an intellectual or political current. No conversation among individuals makes sense if isolated from its social whole. The individual as an atom of society has no place in Dostoevsky's vision. Instead his protagonists are met with a series of challenges within their social, political, and cultural contexts. His literary strategy thus functions as a scientific experiment set under specific constraints of fictive yet verisimilar facts in the representation of which Dostoevsky invested endless effort. And yet the truth of a novel does not spring from verisimilitude. A letter he wrote to Turgenev testifies that Dostoevsky was critical of the idea of “copying/mimicking real facts” as the main task of a realist author.⁵ In a later correspondence with his intimate friend, the poet Apollon Maikov, he writes:

I have a completely different notion of reality and realism than the one shared by our realists and our critics... my idealism is more real than their [realism]... with their kind of realism you will not be able to explain the one hundredth part of the facts that actually happened. And we, with our idealism, we have been able to foresee facts.⁶

For Dostoevsky, the ability to identify a universal truth about human and social reality through the veil of one's own prejudice requires experimental toil over

⁵ F.M. Dostoevsky to I.S. Turgenev, December, 23, 1863, Peterburg (Russian): <http://rvb.ru/dostoevski/tocvol15.htm>

⁶ 23.12.1868, 318 Goldberg p. 148.

minute details of literary representation. Yet truth is not identical with sheer representation. It is rather encapsulated in a moment of realization by an acutely attentive mind “wandering all over reality”, hunting for that one moment of revelation to which Dostoevsky refers as a “miracle”: a moment of discovery-through-representation, of an inner sense of recognition into an insight that embraces “the whole history of humanity.”

At the same time, for local experience to become knowledge carrying a universal message, the writer’s voice must be invested with authority. It was not until the Pushkin Festival of June 1880—one year before his death—that Dostoevsky acquired such authority among the Russian intelligentsia. During the event, Dostoevsky was assigned the reading of Pushkin’s poem *The Prophet*. At this moment his figure was invested with the emblematic status that would become his literary voice. Through the reading of that poem Dostoevsky actually became a prophet, at least for many who were born in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution.

II. Literary Migration

First Episode: Dostoevsky’s Translation and the New State of Israel

Crucial for the transmission of Dostoevsky’s literary message to Israel was Yosef Haim Brenner’s translation of *Crime and Punishment* into Hebrew, begun around 1911 in Tel Aviv and published posthumously in 1924 in Warsaw.⁷ Brenner emigrated from Russia to then-Palestine Jaffa in 1909, where he gained popularity and admiration among the small community of Zionists, many of them of Russian origins. Brenner was the first Hebrew writer arriving from the diaspora to the old-new “homeland.” Like Dostoevsky, he was an engaged writer, who suffered poverty and loneliness. Having completely cut himself off from his family and the Jewish community of his past, he became melancholic, and experienced a crisis of faith, which left him critical of all ideologies and systems of faith—including Zionism. His best-known novel, *Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shchol Vekishalon*), deals with the failure of Zionism to fulfill the hopes it

⁷ The book was re-translated three additional times later on: in 1961, 1993, and 1995, and reworked as a Hebrew theatre piece in 1988.

aroused among diaspora Jews. Also like Dostoevsky, Brenner gained a unique, authoritative voice, coupled with ever-growing admiration that reached a climax after being tragically murdered, at the age of forty, in an unsolved crime believed to have been carried out by a group of nationalist Arabs.

A clue to the popularity Dostoevsky's oeuvre won among Hebrew speakers of the next generation might lie in Brenner's linguistic choices, the most conspicuous of which are biblical and Talmudic expressions used in rendering the protagonists' thoughts and conversations.⁸ One extreme example is Raskolnikov's mother's letter, which is suffused with Aramaic expressions. An atmosphere of "sacredness" envelops the lives of the protagonists, whose character is subtly colored with Jewish hues. The translation intensified the emotional tone of the novel, privileged the figurative over the literal, and heightened the status of ordinary facts. Many of these features are captured in the choice of title—preserved in all subsequent Hebrew translations—which transformed the original "Crime and Punishment" into "The Sin and its Punishment" (*Hachet Veonsho*). Perhaps unconsciously, Brenner gave vent to his own kind of Russian humanistic beliefs common to Dostoevsky and himself, which are well-echoed in his translation of Raskolnikov's ideological discourse, adorned with verses from the *Book of Job*. While Brenner effectively disguised Dostoevsky's specifically Christian, sometimes anti-Jewish message, he refused suggestions by contemporaries to censure the text, claiming that one must translate everything, even against the wishes or needs of the translator. When his linguistic choices were criticized, he responded that "the main task is to try and find how Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov would have written had they written in Hebrew."

After the establishment of the state of Israel, however, the reception of Dostoevsky (until 1961 through Brenner's translation) should be seen against the background of the socio-cultural and political needs of the young society in the 1950s and 60s. *Crime and Punishment* was taught in high-schools as a major text in the curriculum of world literature. One of Israel's most influential literary

⁸ R. Lapidus, "Dostoevsky in Quasi-Jewish Grab: 'Crime and Punishment' as Translated by Y. H. Brenner," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature*, 14, 1993.

critics, Baruch Kurzweil, wrote that it “represents the reaction to a general cultural crisis, the disintegration of traditional religious institutions and the exposition of human nature in all its complexity.”⁹ This reading drew an analogy between the identity-problem of the young Israeli-Jewish nation, recently emerging from the ashes of the Holocaust, and Russian society caught between an old dying empire and revolutionary transformation. The novel’s popularity relied on the double message it seemed to convey. On the one hand, compassion and empathy towards human beings whoever they might be: good or bad, rich or poor, religious or secular, Arabs or Jews—read as a message of social justice. On the other hand, Dostoevsky’s messianic ideas about the “sacredness” of the Russian people and its world-mission were transferred into an Israeli national message that did not, however, necessarily preclude universalistic elements. Both messages conformed with the basic tenets of Israel’s *Declaration of Independence* of May 15, 1947—a document that gained quasi-constitutional status in a state with no constitution, and whose Jewish identity was perceived as compatible with equality and justice for all inhabitants, regardless of differences of religion, race or gender.

Second Episode: Migration without Translation

The State of Israel experienced two waves of Jewish migration from the former Soviet Union: in the 1970s, in response to Zionist awakening among Jews suffering from discrimination, and in the 1990s, following the dismantling of the USSR. The transformations underwent by Dostoevsky’s literary heritage in Israel seem to testify to the changing political and cultural imagination of his Israeli readers. This was exemplified in a debate, which escalated into somewhat of a cultural scandal, between two renowned female writers: Russian-language essayist and public intellectual Maya Kaganskaya, and admired Hebrew poet and liberal-left activist Dahlia Rabikovitz (former student of the abovementioned Kurzweil).¹⁰ The immediate political context of the debate was the national

⁹ *Haaretz* 29.9.2005, Shmuel Avneri on Kurzweil and Rabikovitz: *Tehom el Tehom*.

¹⁰ I owe the information about this debate to the M.A. dissertation of my ex-student and colleague, Irina Tachtarowa. Her main conclusions were published in: "Would Dostoevsky have Said this? The Debate between Dalya Rabikovitz and Maya Kaganskaya

elections campaign of February 2001, in the midst of the second Palestinian Intifada, which pushed the labor party out of power in favor of a rightist coalition led by Ariel Sharon. The media was extremely interested to find out the political orientation of the very large group of former-USSR immigrants—comprising over one million out of a total population of seven million Israelis—whose socialist, secular background raised hopes among the Israeli left.

In a television interview, Kaganskaya, whom the media crowned queen of Israel's "Russian intelligentsia," was asked about the political orientation of her group. Her answers were clear and unambiguous. She declared herself to belong to the extreme right, not ready for any territorial compromise with the Palestinians, believing they have no national rights whatsoever in the space between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, and showing complete indifference to their personal or national fate. When asked by the shocked moderator whether she was really blind to their suffering, she answered: "I have not come here [to Israel] to take care of the Palestinians' problems. Had I been interested in other people's problems, I would have stayed in Russia."

The blunt answer infuriated Rabikovitz, who a week later was asked to express her opinion. Her interview opened with complaints about Kaganskaya's general disdain towards Israel's allegedly-inferior culture, which she saw as an expression of arrogance and blind refusal to read Israeli literature, and an attitude typical of the entire group of former-USSR immigrants or "Russians" in Israel. "True," she said, they all play musical instruments, but on the other hand they went through seventy years of Communism that destroyed and distorted their culture, and they produced mostly bad literature." Here the moderator intervened by saying: "That means you are drawing a distinction between the great Russian culture of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky which, I assume, you know very well..." Not letting him finish his idea, Rabikovitz replied, "Of course I know this literature," and went on to describe the brutality of the new Russian immigrants towards the Palestinians, concluding with the following remark: "I think that a

and the Ethics of the Intelligentsia", in *Russians in Israel: The Pragmatics of Culture in Migration*, ed. by Lerner, Julia and Rivka Feldhay, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Hakkibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Tel Aviv 2012.

person who appreciates the works and values of the Russian classics could never say that any group of human beings is of no interest to him. Dostoevsky would have never said so.” But the last word in the debate belonged to Kaganskaya, who explained what she took to be the root misunderstandings, indeed ignorance: “They [Hebrew-speaking intellectuals] do not understand this: I am what I am [namely extreme-rightist] not in spite of, but because of Dostoevsky—especially because of his novel *Demons*. If the ‘natives’ [Israelis] do not understand that, they’d better re-read it.”

Let me say a few words about the political-cultural background to Kaganskaya's words. The radical turn of former-Soviet Union Israeli citizens to extremely rightist positions has been pointed out by political scientist Michael Philippov.¹¹ Philippov examined this public's voting patterns in the national elections of 1992, 1996, and 2006, comparing them with those of the rest of Israeli population. He demonstrated that, while in 1996 their vote was decisive for the electoral victory of the labor party and the resulting appointment of Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister, in 2006, by which time they composed 16% of the electorate responsible for 19 parliament seats out of 120, most followed the leadership of Avigdor Liberman's rightist party *Israel Beiteinu*. Liberman, himself a former-USSR Jew who immigrated to Israel in the 1970s, ran a political platform marked by unprecedented possessiveness towards territory and a highly aggressive attitude towards Palestinians, including the Arab-Israeli minority. In fact, his party tends to present itself as carrying a crucial national mission no longer able to be fulfilled by more “veteran” Israelis. Whereas Philippov tends to emphasize the “ethnic enclave” conditions of Israeli-Russians—e.g., 75% of them have mainly Russian friends; 82% read newspapers written in Russian and only 2%-3% read Hebrew newspapers—these voting patterns and political tendencies reflect a deeper historical background and

¹¹ M. Philippov, “1990s Immigrants from the FSU in Israeli Elections 2006: The Fulfillment of the Political Dreams of Post-Soviet Man?”, in A. Arian and M. Shamir (eds.), *The Elections in Israel 2006* (New Brunswick: Transaction), 135-158.

intellectual roots, which were well analyzed by yet another researcher, Dimitry Shumsky.¹²

Shumsky focuses his essay on a group who tends to identify itself as the "Jewish intelligentsia." His examination of their writings has exposed their desire to invent a uniting myth for Jewish national existence in Israel/Palestine, and the way the latter is inspired by various canonical Russian writers. One of his prominent protagonists is Alexander Voronel, professor of physics at Tel Aviv University who, together with his wife, a Russian-language author and play writer, established the journal *Twenty Two*, where Voronel regularly writes on Jewish philosophy, history and contemporary Jewish affairs. For Shumsky, he represents the new leadership of Russian immigrants in Israel. Shumsky's reading of Voronel indicates how he and others have invoked Solzhenitsyn's "myth of the land," tracing it back to the Dostoesvsky brothers' journal and ultimately to the spirit of the Slavophile movement. According to Voronel, Zionists went wrong in having criticized and eventually eliminated the "common superstitions" of the Jewish people – which are precisely the necessary materials from which a new group, responsible for the nation, should build its vision. According to Voronel, Russian Jews have wisely borrowed from Russians the deep, informal understanding of religion, the striving for absolute truth and the gift for philosophical reflection. Using their unique Jewish creativity, they were able to transform their borrowings into a vision for their new community: one that is envisioned as having great spiritual strength, and whose Jewishness does not depend on rational sources, but flows directly from the heart. These are the people who will now lead the struggle against the disintegration of Israeli society.

Shumsky also contextualized the cultural vision of Voronel and his friends in terms of their former political experience in the USSR, which shaped their conception of the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship. Based on post-Soviet historiography, Shumsky draws our attention to the practices of ethnic

¹² D. Shumsky, "Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Perception of Russian Israelis," in D. Levy and Y. Weiss, *Challenging Ethnic Citizenship, German and Israeli Perspectives on Immigration* (New York : Berghahn Books, 2002).

engineering applied by the Soviets when dividing populations within their territories into ethnic nations, each bearing its primordial genealogy and constituting either a majority or a minority in a given territory.¹³ Within each territory, majority-nations had enjoyed superiority over minority-nations (*ethnikos*), expressed in a variety of privileges, such as access to education. In this context, Russian Jews, who had mostly lost their Jewish traditions and collective memories and acquired a kind of imposed identity, found themselves belonging to a minor-nation, and suffering various forms and degrees of discrimination. They could never hope to be full Russians, in spite of their Russian citizenship. Immigration to Israel meant a real belonging to a majority ethnic-nation. This is exactly where Dostoevsky's mythical views of land and people became vividly relevant for them.

This broader perspective sheds light on Kaganskaya's reading of Dostoevsky. Kaganskaya, who could never fully enjoy her "Russianness" in Russia, found herself in a conflictual relationship to Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism. Crossing the gates of Zion in the 1970s and settling in the West Bank offered an opportunity to re-adopt the latter's *Demons* in order to reconstruct her Jewish identity, vis-à-vis that of Palestinians, in the shadow of Dostoevsky's dichotomy between the superiority of Russia and the rest of the world, primarily Europe.

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In conclusion, allow me to rehearse the two theoretical insights suggested here. The first concerns the nature of literary "epistemic things." Against "scientific" tendencies to forge a dichotomy between knowledge-production in science versus the opinion and beliefs characterizing the humanities, the realistic novel offers a unique site that upsets such attempts. At this site, universal truths about individuals and communities, constituted through societal bonds, are distilled out of local experiences, as the example of Dostoevsky's *Demons* reveals.

¹³ V. Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union* (Oslo: International Peace Research, 1997); R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Moreover, such knowledge is capable of travelling across space and time, transforming and creating ever new meanings in different cultural and linguistic contexts, and in accordance with changing political agendas. The second insight has to do with the nexus of knowledge and identity, translation and migration, demonstrated by the different receptions of Dostoevsky in Israel. Brenner, Rabikovitz, and Kaganskaya each exemplify in a different manner how the crossing of boundaries by literary knowledge challenges peoples' self-perceptions, forcing them to re-create themselves in their new place by translating that knowledge into a new identity.

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