

FACING TRADITION: DOSTOEVSKY'S *POOR FOLK* AS A STATEMENT OF ARTISTIC INDIVIDUALITY

GABRIEL-ANDREI STAN*

Abstract The present paper advances a new understanding of Fyodor Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846), - as a parody of literary patterns promoted by Natural School's ideology. Dostoevsky builds his text on an underlying network of literary conventions, artistic devices, and intertextual references, used in a parodic manner. In addition, the novel makes use of a complex narratological strategy, in which the two characters play several roles simultaneously. All this turns the text into a literary experiment, intended by the young Dostoevsky to define his original contribution to the Russian literary tradition, in an overt dialogue with Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolay Gogol. More specifically, it is the revival of the epistolary genre that allows Dostoevsky to engage in a dialog with his two predecessors. Therefore, Dostoevsky's debut novel should not be seen as a simple literary exercise, but, rather, as the assertion of its author's artistic individuality in the context of the literary tradition.

Keywords Parody, intertextuality, Dostoevsky, literary tradition, Natural School, epistolary genre, sentimentalism.

1. Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky published his first novel *Poor Folk* on 15 January 1846 in the anthology *Peterburgskij sbornik* (Petersburg Collection), edited by the poet Nikolay Nekrasov. *Poor Folk* enjoyed tremendous success on the Russian literary stage. It was greeted with enthusiasm by critics of the Natural School, whose leading figure was Vissarion Belinsky.¹ Dostoevsky

* *University of Bucharest. gabriel-andrei.stan@iis.unibuc.ro.*

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¹ In the 1830s, Russian culture is under the strong influence of German Romanticism and Idealism. In this context, Russian writers abandon social issues and show interest in metaphysics, the poetics of the Absolute and transcendence. However, the ideas of Hegel and Bakunin, which encouraged non-involvement in social issues or triviality of everyday life, moved Belinsky towards a passive acceptance of reality. According to this attitude, which came to the fore in the late 1830s, art was considered a higher

describes in *The Diary Of A Writer* the strong emotional reaction that the novel's manuscript aroused in Nekrasov and Grigorovich, who burst into the writer's home at four in the morning to congratulate him: "Suddenly I heard the bell ring. This surprised me very much. Presently Grigorovich and Nekrasov rushed upon me and in a perfect transport started embracing me, and both were almost crying."² In turn, Belinsky, with his characteristic exaltation, greeted the young writer with praise and predicted for him a bright future as a writer:

"But do you, yourself, understand"—he repeated to me several times, screaming, as was his habit,—"what you have written!" He always screamed when he spoke in a state of great agitation. "You may have written, guided by immediate instinct, as an artist, but did you yourself rationalize all this dreadful truth which you have pointed out to us? It is impossible that at your age of twenty you could have understood it. [...] You have touched upon the very essence of the matter; by one stroke you have indicated the main thing. We, publicists and critics, we merely deliberate; we try to explain this with words, but you, an artist, with one trait, with one stroke, in an image, you set forth the very gist, so that one can feel it with one's own hand, so as to enable the least reasoning reader to grasp everything at once! This is the mystery of art! This is the truth of art! This is the artist's service to truth! To you, as an artist, truth is revealed and declared; it came to you as a gift. Treasure, then, your gift, be faithful to it, and you will become a great writer!"³

The truth evoked by Belinsky refers to the revelation of the humble condition of the two characters in the novel. Makar Devushkin is a petty civil servant, a copyist at a state department, living in poverty. He is corresponding with a distant relative, Varvara Dobroselova, a young woman who leads an equally miserable life. In exchange for Varvara's attention Makar does anything in his power to offer her material help, despite his precarious financial situation. However, at the end of the novel, Varvara decides to improve her social standing by marrying

field, separate from reality, an end in itself. However, in the early 1840s, Russian culture shifted its attention to French Social Romanticism and the ideas promoted by utopian socialists. Belinsky quickly abandoned his old beliefs and enthusiastically embraced the new ideas coming from France. The texts of Victor Hugo, George Sand, Pierre Leroux, Louis Blanc and Charles Fourier were immediately read and then translated into Russian. In addition, 1842 sees the publication of Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* and short story *The Overcoat*. In Belinsky's ideological reading, these works were an example to be followed by young writers, who were meant to embrace a more social-minded approach. It is not surprising that Dostoevsky's literary debut marked, for the followers of the Natural School, the appearance of the first social novel in Russian literature. See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: a writer in his time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 61-75.

² F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary Of A Writer*, transl. by Boris Brasol (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1979), 585.

³ *Ibid.*, 587.

the landlord Bykov, while at the same time giving up on her epistolary relationship with Makar, who is emotionally destroyed by the girl's departure.

The social critique is only one aspect of the novel. Dostoevsky builds his text on an underlying network of literary conventions, artistic devices, and intertextual references, used in a parodic manner. In addition, the novel makes use of a complex narratological strategy, in which the two characters play several roles simultaneously. All this turns the text into a literary experiment,⁴ intended by the young Dostoyevsky to define his original contribution to the Russian literary tradition, in an overt dialogue with Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolay Gogol. More specifically, it is the revival of the epistolary genre that allows Dostoevsky to engage in a dialog with his two predecessors. Therefore, Dostoevsky's debut novel should not be seen as a simple literary exercise, but, rather, as the assertion of its author's artistic individuality in the context of the literary tradition. The present paper advances a new understanding of the novel both in the context of Dostoevsky's entire oeuvre – as the beginning of his literary career, and in the Russian literary tradition – as a moment of overcoming outdated literary patterns and evolution towards artistic originality.

2. Russian literature in the 1840s

For a more accurate appreciation of the novel, it is necessary to better understand its place within the Russian literary tradition. The Soviet critic Viktor Vinogradov describes how in the late 1830s and early 1840s the interest in farce and trivial-comic short story waned, despite the fact that the two genres had been extremely popular among Gogol's epigones, collectively nicknamed "Gogol's orchestra"⁵ (Vinogradov 1976:162) because they imitated the latter's artistic language and comic-grotesque techniques of character construction. The figure of the petty civil servant was a mainstay of the literary magazines of the time. At the same time, the socialist ideas and Romantic literature with a social agenda coming from France⁶ prompted the members of the Natural School to call on young writers to humanize the petty civil servant. They sought to form a new literary model, in which the contrast between the stark environment (detailed depictions of poverty) and the emotional depth of the character were meant to play a central role. The publication of Gogol's *Overcoat* (1842) allowed them to find an embodiment of this model: in the melodramatic reading of the Natural School the famous

⁴ *Poor Folk* has also been perceived as a metaliterary experiment by Rebecca Epstein Matveyev, "Textuality and Intertextuality in Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39, no. 4, (1995): 535-551, <https://doi.org/10.2307/309105>. In my paper I further develop her interpretation, and emphasize that, in his novel, Dostoevsky initiates a conscious dialogue with the Russian literary tradition in order to gain his place in the canon by asserting his own artistic independence.

⁵ V. V. Vinogradov, "Shkola sentimental'nogo naturalizma (Roman Dostoevskogo «Bednye liudi» na fone literaturnoy evolyutsii 40-kh godov)," in *Poetika russkoy literatury. Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 162.

⁶ The novels of Victor Hugo and George Sand, as well as the philosophical works of Pierre Leroux, Louis Blanc, and Charles Fourier were popular among educated Russian society.

comic-grotesque hero Akaki Akakievich Bashmachkin became the epitome of the petty civil servant who tries to fight for his dignity despite the harassment from his peers and those at the top of the social hierarchy.⁷ Similar ideological reasons helped to construct a direct lineage between Dostoevsky's and Gogol's heroes. It was only later that Russian critics noticed the differences between them. If Akaki Akakievich behaves like a machine, has no passion for anything but copying documents, has no relationships with other human beings, and only nurtures feelings for inanimate objects, like the overcoat, Makar Devushkin is humanized by his love for Varvara, by his kindness, as well as his interest in literature.⁸ Unsurprisingly, many writers of the time adopted a sentimentalist recipe to better satisfy the requirements of dramatic writing and provide the ideational content, the leaders of the Natural School had insisted upon:

“This return to sentimental forms was not an accidental refuge of the “natural” school from the farce and crudely comic novel of the mid-thirties and early forties. It was due to extremely complex reasons, among which, perhaps one of the main ones was the overcoming of the comic canon of Gogol's “epigons”. The search for new literary forms led to the ideological “load” of the novel, to the switching of philosophical, sociological and other “non-literary” material into the plan of artistic creativity.”⁹

In the context of new literary trends, Varvara's story updates a very popular narrative scheme. Vinogradov offers a suggestive example of this sentimental formula, referring to the subject of the story *Vstrecha na Nevskom prospekte* (A Meeting on Nevsky Boulevard) by A. Villamov, published in Volume VII of the magazine *Finskij vestnik* (Finnish Herald 1845) which tells

the story of a poor orphan Caroline, who, after the ruin and death of her parents, trusted one benefactress - Mrs. B. and was sold by her to an imaginary relative - a man of about 50, with an unpleasant, repulsive physiognomy. The fallen girl, with the help of Mr. V., manages to rise from the bottom, finds a job as a governess and, finally, as the happy wife of the court counselor, meets her savior on Nevsky Prospekt.¹⁰

⁷ The formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum rejects the melodramatic reading of Gogol's text in the article *How Gogol's Overcoat Was Made*: “The above-outlined pattern of a purely anecdotal *skaz*, interwoven with a melodramatic and solemn declamation, determines the entire structure of “The Overcoat” as a grotesque.” See Boris Eichenbaum, “How Gogol's “Overcoat” is Made,” trans. John Fred Beebe and Elizabeth W. Trahan, in *Gogol's Overcoat: An Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. Elizabeth Trahan (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), 32.

⁸ The first to notice the different treatment of the petty civil servant in the works of the two writers was the Russian critic N. N. Strakhov, *Biografiia, pis'ma i zametki iz zapisnoi knizhki F M. Dostoevskogo* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia A. S. Suvorina, 1883).

⁹ Vinogradov, “Shkola sentimental'nogo naturalizma”..., 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

3. Reading, interpreting, writing, and... parodying

Conceived in the epistolary tradition, Dostoevsky's novel updates the sentimentalist literary formula.¹¹ Not only does the title of the novel (*Poor Folk*) remind one of Karamzin's story (*Poor Liza*), but the way the two heroes communicate in writing, full of emphasis and emotion, is also reminiscent of the style employed by Karamzin's narrator. In addition, in the diary fragment Varvara sends to Makar, she fashions herself into a sentimental heroine: the young woman has a happy childhood that she spends in the country, in an idyllic setting. Moving to the city marks the beginning of a life full of unhappiness. At the boarding school, Varvara suffers from loneliness and ridicule from her peers. The death of the father puts the girl and her mother in a desperate situation caused by extreme poverty. Having no other option, Varvara's mother accepts the offer of Anna Fyodorovna, a distant relative, to live in her house. Here, they have to crochet to provide themselves with the bare minimum. Reaching adolescence, Varvara falls in love with Pokrovsky, the student and neighbour who helps her continue with her studies. Soon, however, he falls ill and dies, and a few weeks later the girl's mother dies too. A number of allusions in Varvara's diary as well as in her letters to Makar suggest that she had been the victim of sexual abuse by the landlord Bykov, which also casts a shadow on her honour and good name.

Dostoevsky revitalizes a sentimentalist plot, which he then skilfully parodies. But before analyzing Dostoevsky's strategy, we will try to briefly define parody and its function in the evolution of literary forms. The Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky considers that "parody always assumes another literary work (or a whole group of literary works) as a background, which is constituted in a system of references."¹² For the Russian formalists, parody involves the technique of *baring the device*, which involves renewing an outdated artistic device by endowing it with a new function. Thus, parody is not a simple imitation of a literary text, but "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."¹³ And it is precisely this critical distance that makes the parody "a consciousness-raising device, preventing the acceptance of the narrow, doctrinaire, dogmatic views of any

¹¹ Russian sentimentalism developed at the end of the 18th century under the pen of Nikolai Karamzin, whose best-known work is *Poor Liza*, published in 1792. Despite its conventional subject, the story impresses the reader with the emotional discourse of the narrator and a highly sentimental plot: a poor girl is forced to work hard to support her sick mother after the death of her father. Liza leaves the idyllic setting of her home to go to Moscow to sell flowers and crocheted socks. Here she meets the nobleman Erast. The two fall for each other and live an idealized love story. Erast quickly gets bored of the relationship with the naive Liza, whom he abandons to marry a rich widow and restore his financial situation. Seduced and abandoned, the young woman decides to end her days, throwing herself into a lake. After learning of the girl's tragic end, Erast regrets his decision for the rest of his life.

¹² B. Tomashevsky, *Teoria literaturii. Poetica*, translation, preface and notes by Leonida Teodorescu (Bucharest: Univers, 1973), 284.

¹³ Linda Hutcheon, *A theory of parody: the teachings of twentieth-century art forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 6.

particular ideological group.”¹⁴ From the perspective of literary history, parody contributes to the evolution of literary forms usually by “ridiculing an adverse literary school, abolishing its creative system, ‘unmasking’ it.”¹⁵ Returning to Dostoevsky’s strategy, he parodies the civic-minded Sentimentalism of the Natural School by subtly exploiting a *substitution technique*: on the one hand, in his novel he reverses the traditional gender roles and, on the other, he reverses the relationship between reality and fiction in the way his heroes perceive the world. Let’s take a closer look at how he does it.

R. E. Matveyev observes that, throughout the novel, Varvara uses two different voices.¹⁶ Indeed, Varvara fashions for herself a sentimentalist persona in the diary under the influence of the books Pokrovsky prompts her read. On the other hand, as Makar’s correspondent, Varvara shows a marked interest in the material aspects of her humble life. Her dreamy nature from the diary disappears and, instead, to light comes a pragmatic dimension of her personality, well anchored in the material reality. Although she makes a big deal about accepting Makar’s small signs of attention, she does not hesitate to turn to him, despite his poverty, with much more taxing requests: she asks him to borrow a large sum of money, no matter how high the interest, so that she can rent a new place to stay. Furthermore, the ending of the novel dismantles her status as sentimentalist heroine¹⁷ when she chooses to marry her aggressor for money and status, giving up both the epistolary relationship with Makar, as well as literature:¹⁸

“Now you will have to get used to being without me. How will you do, left alone here? To whom am I leaving you my kind, precious, only friend! I leave you the book, the embroidery frame, the unfinished letter; when you look at those first words, you must read in your thoughts all that you would like to hear or read from me, all that I should have written to you; and what I could not write now!

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Tomashevsky, *Teoria literaturii. Poetica*, 285.

¹⁶ Matveyev, “Textuality and Intertextuality,” 534-540. About the voices of the characters in Dostoevsky’s fiction, Camelia Dinu notes that “every voice is valid, and the complexity of the discourse arises from the author’s vision, which is unsystematic, pluralist, inconsistent and non-transparent.” See Camelia Dinu, “Taking off the Masks: Dostoevsky Sketches Life into Fiction,” *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities*, XXVI, no. 2 (2021): 152, <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2021.26.2.01>.

¹⁷ On the desentimentalization of the heroine, see Gary Rosenshield, “Varen’ka Dobroselova: An Experiment in the Desentimentalization of the Sentimental Heroine in Dostoevskii’s Poor Folk,” *Slavic Review* 45, no. 3 (1986): 525-533, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2499055>.

¹⁸ There is also another distinction between Varvara’s two voices, based on her attitude towards literature: in her diary she reads sentimental texts under Pokrovsky’s influence and acts accordingly, but as Makar’s correspondent she is colder and pragmatic (one may also see her departure as a renunciation of literature too). See Matveyev, “Textuality and Intertextuality,” 539-540.

Think of your poor Varinka who loves you so truly. All your letters are at Fedora's in the top drawer of a chest."¹⁹

Makar Devushkin's humanity marks a significant departure from the typical petty civil servant in the Gogolian tradition: the psycho-emotional traits of Dostoevsky's hero are much better outlined thanks to the epistolary form of the novel. Makar is a man "in flesh and blood," not a machine like Akaki. The textual substance of the novel is composed of letters and diary fragments, which underlines the fact that reading is a topic of great importance, as noted by R. F. Miller: "Poor People's characters "read as if for life" and for them, the reading of words – not only the words of the *Bible*, but of a hodgepodge of other texts as well as their own written words prove to be as necessary to them in their dire poverty as bread."²⁰ Makar also shows a sincere interest in literature. Unfortunately, he lacks a critical conscience and ends up making interpretative errors on several levels. From the very beginning, Dostoevsky's character looks at reality through the distorted filter of fiction. Sentimental readings shape his view of the world:

"I have a book, Varinka, and there is the same thought in it, all very exactly described. I write this, my darling, because one has all sorts of dreams, you know. And now it's spring time, so one's thoughts are always so pleasant; witty, amusing, and tender dreams visit one; everything is in a rosy light. That is why I have written all this; though, indeed, I took it all out of the book."²¹

Here is another example of the fact that Makar misinterprets reality and, implicitly, his relationship with Varvara. Makar writes to her:

"For once in your life, you obstinate person, you obeyed me. [...] So you understood what I wanted, what was my heart's desire! I saw a tiny corner of your window-curtain twitched back and caught against the pot of balsams, just exactly as I hinted that day. Then I fancied I caught a glimpse of your little face at the window, that you were looking at me from your little room, that you were thinking of me. And how vexed I was, my darling, that I could not make out your charming little face distinctly!"²²

Varvara's crude answer dismantles Makar's fantasies and confirms his sentimental mindset:

¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Poor Folk," in *The House Of The Dead And Poor Folk*, translated by Constance Garnett, introduction by Joseph Frank, notes by Elena Yuffa (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 421.

²⁰ Robin Feuer Miller, "Dostoevsky's Poor People: Reading as if for Life," in *Reading in Russia: Practices of Reading and Literary Communication, 1760-1930*, eds. Rebecchini Damiano, and Rafaella Vassena (Milano: Ledizioni, 2014), 145-146, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ledizioni.260>.

²¹ Dostoevsky, "Poor Folk," 308.

²² *Ibid.*, 307.

“Now, why those sweets? Upon my word, I guessed at once from your letter that there was something amiss with you - nature and spring and the sweet scents and the birds chirping. “What's this,” I thought, “isn't it poetry?” Yes, indeed, your letter ought to have been in verse, that was all that was wanting, Makar Alexyevitch! There are the tender sentiments and dreams in roseate hues-everything in it! As for the curtain, I never thought of it; I suppose it got hitched up of itself when I moved the flower-pots, so there!”²³

After Varvara's reaction, Makar apologizes, stating that he has nothing but fatherly feelings towards the young woman, that he is her only close relative and, on top of that, that he is also her protector. At least as a statement, Makar assumes from this moment a fatherly role towards Varvara. The ending of the novel also emphasizes a symbolic reversal of the roles in the sentimental plot: Makar is moving into Varvara's former apartment. Contrary to his expectations, he is the one seduced and abandoned. Dostoevsky strengthens the ridiculous effect of parody, using the technique of symbolic names ironically: the surname of the male character, Devushkin, comes from the noun “devushka” (girl), while that of the heroine, Dobroselova, is composed of “dobro” (good) and “selo” (village), which refers to a virtuous person, in whom “the good dwells”. Despite the meaning of her name, the young woman's materialistic choices are to the detriment of her relationship with Makar proves otherwise.

The sentimental filter through which Makar sees reality is also revealed by the hero's attitude towards Pushkin's text, *The Stationmaster*, which he reads at Varvara's suggestion. In his naive reading, Pushkin's story is a genuine reflection of his reality.²⁴ He identifies himself with the civil servant Samson Vyrin, who suffers for the departure of Dunya, his *lost sheep*, and ends up in a passion for alcohol. In fact, Pushkin's text is a parody of the sentimentalist canon. Samson Vyrin misinterprets the circumstances of his life, through the filter of the *Biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son*. He believes that his daughter, leaving him for an officer she falls in love with, will have the same tragic end as Karamzin's Liza: she will be dishonoured, seduced, and abandoned. But the end of the story shows Dunya at her father's grave, as a high society lady with three children and a dog, and a carefree material situation. Like Samson, Makar considers himself the protector of Varvara and projects on her the same tragic end of the seduced and abandoned girl:

²³ Ibid., 311.

²⁴ Victor Terras sees the novel as a *parodie sérieuse* in relation to Gogol's text. If Gogol parodies the sentimentalist canon through Akaki's relationship with an inanimate object, Dostoevsky creates a serious counterpart to Gogol's hero: Makar Devushkin has individuality and psychology. See Victor Terras, *The Young Dostoevsky (1846- 1849): a critical study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 15. But Terras does not notice that Dostoevsky exploits the same parodic effect as Pushkin does in the *The Stationmaster*. Devushkin misinterprets his relationship with Varvara as well as Samson Vyrin does with his relationship with Dunya. On how Pushkin's text was perceived in Russian criticism, see N. N. Petrunina, *Proza Pushkina (puti evolyutsii)* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1987), 114-121.

“That's the truth of the matter, my darling, and yet you want to go away from us; it's a sin, Varinka, it may be the end of me. You may be the ruin of yourself and me too, my own. Oh, my little dearie, for God's sake put out of your little head all these wilful ideas and don't torment me for nothing. How can you keep yourself, my weak little unfledged bird? How can you save yourself from ruin, protect yourself from villains? Give over, Varinka, think better of it; don't listen to nonsensical advice and persuasion, and read your book again, read it with attention; that will do you good.”²⁵

Although he claims a fatherly role in the young woman's life, in the end, he returns to the position of the lover (and the landlord Bykov is perceived as a rival):

“What is he to you, my darling, what is Bykov? How has he suddenly become so dear to you? Perhaps it's because he is always buying you frills and flounces. But what are frills and flounces? What good are frills and flounces? Why, it is nonsense, Varinka! Here it is a question of a man's life: and you know a frill's a rag; it's a rag, Varinka, a frill is; why, I shall buy you frills myself, that's all the reward I get.”²⁶

His last words betray the horror he feels when he understands that Varvara's departure breaks up his assumed role, but also his own literary identity. In the logic of the epistolary relationship, without his correspondent, Makar can no longer continue to write and, therefore, no longer exist:

“this will be the last letter and you know that this cannot be, this cannot be the last letter! Why, how can it be, so suddenly, actually the last? Oh no, I shall write and you will write... Besides, I am acquiring a literary style... Oh, my own, what does style matter, now? I don't know, now, what I am writing, I don't know at all, I don't know and I don't read it over and I don't improve the style. I write only to write, only to go on writing to you... my darling, my own, my Varinka...”²⁷

Makar's interest in literature reaches such a point that he becomes preoccupied with his own style. Dostoevsky writes a novel in which the petty civil servant no longer copies documents, but dreams of becoming a writer himself: “What if I were to write something, what would happen then? Suppose that, for instance, apropos of nothing, there came into the world a

²⁵ Dostoevsky, “Poor Folk,” 364.

²⁶ Ibid., 423.

²⁷ Ibid., 423.

book with the title – *Poems by Makar Dyevushkin?*²⁸ Although his style undergoes some improvements until the end, Makar is ridiculous both as a reader and a writer. He makes an interpretive mistake again. This time, he takes fiction as reality, when, after reading Gogol's *Overcoat*, he identifies with Akaki Akakievich and is outraged by the author's intentions. Now Dostoevsky's hero (speaking on behalf of petty civil servants) is outraged and apostrophizes the author of the story, Gogol himself. Here is a telling example of intertextual play that Dostoevsky uses in his first novel:

“One hides oneself sometimes, one hides oneself, one tries to conceal one's weak points, one's afraid to show one's nose at times anywhere because one is afraid of tittle-tattle, because they can work up a tale against you about anything in the world-anything. And here now all one's private and public life is being dragged into literature, it is all printed, read, laughed and gossiped about! Why, it will be impossible to show oneself in the street. It's all so plainly told, you know, that one might be recognized in one's walk.”²⁹

Dissatisfied with Gogol's text, he proposes his own, better version:

“But it would have been better not to let him die, poor fellow, but to make the coat be found, to make Fyodor Fyodorovitch - what am I saying? I mean, make that general, finding out his good qualities, question him in his office, promote him in his office, and give him a good increase in his salary, for then, you see, wickedness would have been punished, and virtue would have been triumphant, and his fellow-clerks would have got nothing by it. I should have done that, for instance, but as it is, what is there special about it, what is there good in it?”³⁰

Later, Makar Devushkin is even going to play in his own rewriting of the Gogolian text. It is about the famous episode in which, after committing a mistake at work, he is called to his Excellency's office for explanations. If in Gogol's short story, the general treats Akaki Akakievich with contempt, Makar draws the attention of his superior by his ridiculous image: suddenly a button on his coat falls off, he bends down to retrieve it, and after drawing himself erect he tries, in a machine-like style, to fit the button to the coat as if it might hang on. The general, moved by Makar's miserable appearance, offers him a hundred rubles. The civil servant's reaction betrays, as Victor Terras observes, his abject traits because he has the instinctive intention to kiss the superior's hand,³¹ but the latter reacts faster and shakes hands cordially: “I don't know what happened to me, I tried to seize his hand to kiss it, but he flushed crimson,

²⁸ Ibid., 357.

²⁹ Ibid., 368.

³⁰ Ibid., 368-369.

³¹ Terras, *The Young Dostoevsky...*, 58.

my darling, and [...] he took my unworthy hand and shook it, just took it and shook it, as though I had been his equal, as though I had been just such a General as himself.”³²

The episode described above deeply impressed Belinsky, who takes the scene seriously because he sees his own ideas in Dostoevsky’s artistic expression. For him, the way Devushkin shows his gratitude to the general is a tragedy of human existence.³³ One should look at this scene in rather parodic terms because Makar’s actions remind of Gogol’s grotesque. Here one should find an example of parodic rewriting of the Gogolian text from Devushkin’s perspective: good comes out triumphant, and the director gives him a large sum of money. But this is not a parody of Gogol’s hero. Dostoevsky makes fun of the “humane” understanding of the civil servant at the time bringing to light the conventionality of the literary pattern claimed by the ideology of the Natural School.³⁴ And he is doing so by removing the necessary conflict between good and evil: in Makar rewriting of the text “virtue would have been triumphant.” So it is in this scene where evil elements no longer exist. Without contrast, the triumphing good loses all meaning and becomes absurd, as does Makar’s behaviour.

But what are the conditions that allow Dostoevsky to make his first novel a brilliant literary experiment? First, the epistolary genre offers narratological flexibility to the novel. As Matveyev observes, the epistolary genre allows the author to assign to the two characters several narratological roles that they fulfil simultaneously in the wider framework of the novel: “The novel’s epistolary correspondents serve as readers and writers, literary explicators, and author and addressee. Furthermore, their interpretations are implicitly counterposed against those of the reader and the author himself. The protagonists’ writings function both as self-contained texts and as the creation of an implied author.”³⁵ Within the flexible limits of this literary genre, Dostoevsky initiates a dialogue with the Russian literary tradition, asserting his artistic independence. Epistolary genre has fictional material disposed through dialogue between the two correspondents. Although there is no objective narrator that could give the reader a broader understanding of the fictional reality in the novel, “the author weaves a multi-layered text from the protagonists’ own writing, the voices of those whom they quote, the texts Devushkin reads, and his literary interpretations.”³⁶

Dostoevsky was not in the habit of explaining his literary texts in his diary or in the correspondence with others. However, Joseph Frank recalls a feuilleton that Dostoevsky published twenty years later, titled *Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose* in which, through a romantic alter ego, he evokes the artistic vision that laid the foundations of the novel:

³² Dostoevsky, “Poor Folk,” 405.

³³ Dostoevsky, *The Diary Of A Writer*, 587.

³⁴ Matveyev also finds in this scene a subtle irony directed by Dostoevsky to the “humane” readings of Gogol’s texts: “the author simultaneously managed both to reinscribe “The Overcoat” and its protagonist, and to mock straight readings in a way undetectable to the period’s leading literary critic.” See Matveyev, “Textuality and Intertextuality,” 543.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 546.

“He begins to see “some strange figures, entirely prosaic, . . . just titular councilors, and yet, at the same time, fantastic titular councilors.” Behind them there was someone “who made faces before me, concealed behind all that fantastic crowd, and pulled some kind of strings or springs and all these puppets moved and laughed and everybody laughed!” Then the narrator catches a glimpse of another story that was no laughing matter — “some titular heart, honorable and pure, moral and devoted to the authorities, and together with him some young girl, humiliated and sorrowing, and all their story tore deeply at my heart.”³⁷

Joseph Frank interprets the above-mentioned vision as Dostoevsky’s assertion of an independent position in the Russian literary tradition: the first discovery consists in understanding Gogol as the master puppeteer, who controls the absurd gestures of his characters; the second one can be traced in the sentimentalist formula taken from Pushkin (that “tears deeply at the heart”), thus Dostoevsky forming “his own style of sentimental Naturalism.”³⁸ However, Pushkin’s influence on Dostoevsky’s novel goes beyond the sentimental theme and style of *The Belkin Tales*. As can be seen from the narrative strategy and intertextual influences used in *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky seems, rather, to have learned the lesson of parody from Pushkin. Just as Pushkin uses Samson Vyrin to parody the sentimentalist canon, Dostoevsky also parodies, through Makar Devushkin, the narrative (and ideological) patterns of his time.

Another important factor that is worth to be taken into account is the major interest that the young Dostoevsky shows towards both European and Russian literature. It is known from the letters to his brother Mikhail, as well as from his own memories evoked in his diary, that Dostoevsky was a “brilliant reader” (as literary critic A.L. Bem calls him in a study published in 1931).³⁹

4. Conclusions

Just as Pushkin’s *Tales of Belkin* marks a moment of evolution towards original literary forms (overcoming the sentimental canon through parody), Dostoevsky’s first novel is a courageous literary experiment that manages to break out of the literary patterns of the time by parodying them. That is why the novel cannot be framed in a certain literary current: it is an original mixture of forms and recipes that belong to several artistic directions, used with parodic intent. With the novel *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky earns his place in the Russian literary tradition. Paradoxically, his first novel is perceived by the critics of the time as a social novel inspired by the ideological demands of the Natural School, but at the same time it is a parody of this ideology.

³⁷ Frank, *Dostoevsky: a writer in his time*, 74.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ A. L. Bem, “Dostoevskij – genial’nyj chitatel’,” in *O Dostoevskom: Sbornik Statej*, ed. A. L. Bem (Paris: Amga Editions, 1986).