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CRITICAL REVIEW

George Pattison, *Conversations with Dostoevsky: On God, Russia, Literature, and Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 256. ISBN 9780198887416.

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George Pattison's *Conversations with Dostoevsky: On God, Russia, Literature, and Life* (2024) is conceived at a historical moment of profound geopolitical instability and a necessary revision of the Russian literary canon in the West. Published by Oxford University Press, it proposes a reading that is simultaneously reflective and dialogical, while Fyodor Dostoevsky's theological, literary, and existential dilemmas and meditations on the mystery of human existence are questioned to further interrogate the contemporary anxieties underpinning the twenty-first-century crisis of identity. As Pattison notes in the Introduction, across modern Russian studies, it is "more than ever before… important to be conscious not just of what Dostoevsky wrote but of how we are reading him" (p. 3). For scholars across the humanities, this volume provides a highly fertile epistemological ground from which to re-examine the disciplinary boundaries of the human sciences, crossing literary criticism, philosophy of religion, and cultural memory studies through a distinctly interdisciplinary lens.

To fully grasp the meaning of Pattison's conversations, it is theoretically productive to cross-reference his interrogations on Dostoevsky's work with Astrid Erll's conceptual framework on the explicit and implicit dimensions of cultural memory. Erll argues that cultural memory does not reside solely in its explicit dimension, figured by monuments, official commemorations, or institutionalised political discourses. Rather, it also circulates silently, almost invisibly, through the subtle mediation of literary texts, polyphonic narrative structures, stark aesthetic devices, and affective reflections on identity that unconsciously shape our contemporary reception of the historical past (Erll, 2022). Pattison creatively articulates this implicit dimension of cultural memory from the outset, stating from the very

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beginning that "the voice we hear in the novels is not just a voice from the past; it is a voice that speaks to our present, often in ways that we do not fully understand or control" (p. 5). By structuring his book around "conversations" rather than rigid historical data collection and factually articulated biography, Pattison demonstrates that to dialogue with the Russian writer is "to engage with a living memory that disrupts our contemporary certainties" (p. 5). These two references perfectly support Erll's view that the literary text functions not as a static monument to be remembered *explicitly*, but as a dynamic mnemonic content that is capable of shaping our present *implicitly* (my italics).

Pattison's book provides an excellent example of the intersection of two dimensions of cultural memory as demonstrated by Erll. On the one hand, the book seeks to shatter the boundaries of *explicit* cultural memory that has been consolidated around Dostoevsky across Western readers — who is frequently portrayed either as a faithful prophet of the *Russian World* (*Russkiy Mir*) or as the universalised existentialist and deep psychologist coined by Western Modernism. Pattison confronts these static appropriations by critically looking at Dostoevsky's journalistic texts, his intimate correspondence, and major novels (*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Demons*) to expose the author's inherent aesthetic contradictions and natural human ambiguity.

On the other hand, the deeper worth of Pattison's work lies in its capacity to trace the (con)textual signs of the *implicit* cultural memory. By structuring the book around the metaphor of "conversations", Pattison demonstrates how Dostoevsky's questions regarding innocent suffering, the collapse of utilitarian rationalism, the search for the divine, and the authenticity of nature continue to implicitly inhabit the contemporary Russian imagination, and are also welcomed within Western culture. Dostoevsky is not treated as a cultural archive of remembrance, but as an active mnemonic force whose reflections on humanity continue to interrogate the current traumas and ethical dilemmas of contemporaneity. This capacity to acknowledge implicit memory dimensions concealed beyond the explicit discursive surface is articulated through several epiphanic moments registered in Pattison's conversations with Dostoevsky. First, in his approach to the human condition of innocent suffering, Pattison demonstrates how contemporary readers, while experiencing existential despair over modern systemic injustices, are implicitly revisiting Ivan Karamazov's psychological rebellion, thus acknowledging that Dostoevsky's theological reflections still reverberate in the moral behaviour of the West. Second, Pattison reenacts the polemic from *Notes from Underground*, illustrating that the historical critique of the 19th-century Crystal Palace continues to circulate implicitly within the contemporary European imagination as an unconsciously driven, almost systemic anxiety toward dominant ideologies and political discourses. Pattison's questions, hypothetically directed to the Russian Classic, show that Dostoevsky's meditations on the complexities of human existence cannot be restricted to the historical archive, but live in discourses constituting the contemporary cultural psyche.

The primary critical challenge of Pattison's work lies in the historical detachment. He aims at establishing a hermeneutic proximity to a writer deeply rooted in nineteenth-century Russian culture and ideology. How can one dialogue with an author whose political thought was frequently reactionary, Slavophile, antisemitic, and theoretically dense, without falling into incoherence, self-conscious distance, or a *memoir*?

Pattison addresses this challenge by adapting a dialogical pattern of meaning within a Bakhtinian theory. The author treats historical distance not as an obstacle but as a condition for genuine discursive ambiguity. Rather than confining the text to traditional contextual parameters, Pattison notes that "instead of going back to Dostoevsky's world, the Conversations bring Dostoevsky into ours" (p. 4). By interrogating Dostoevsky's work from the contemporary historical context — marked by the climate crisis, disillusionment with technology, and ongoing geopolitical anxieties in Eastern Europe — Pattison offers readers an unexpected psychological proximity to the representation of universal human suffering. Because "a conversation may have many voices and there may be no final harmony" (p. 6), the Dostoevsky that emerges from these pages is not an archival philosopher whose dogmatic answers we must accept, but a sensitive interlocutor whose sudden (con)textual provocations destabilise various taken-for-granted ideas of Western contemporary society. Thus, modern readers must confront their own historical biases: "Listen… You have to think about why you are asking me these things" (p. 45), demonstrating that the text serves less as a dogmatic manifesto and more as an active, work-in-progress register of universal existential doubts.

One of the most original and methodologically relevant aspects of the book is that its composition arises from a contemporary Anglophone framework. This specific geo-epistemic location introduces a productive discursive tension that Pattison addresses with rare creativity. Far from conducting the conversations in a romanticised, pre-revolutionary Russian context, the text grounds its narrative in a modern, Western landscape, presenting a series of "fictional conversations taking place between November 2018 and Spring 2019 in the narrator's Glasgow apartment and elsewhere in the city" (p. v).

By deliberately introducing a protagonist whose life is defined by "a moderately comfortable and moderately successful middle-class life" but who fundamentally "lacks perspective on his life or… has no coherent world view" (p. vi), Pattison emphasises the profound existential disconnection characterising contemporary Western culture. The dialogues expose the friction between Dostoevsky's religious thinking and the "inconsistently motivated pragmatism that keeps [the modern Anglophone subject] going from day to day" (p. vi). This transcultural placement serves as a critical lens; by forcing Dostoevsky out of his historical context and into the heart of a secular Scottish metropolis, Pattison uses the writer's voice to expose the rationalised spiritual emptiness of the globalised Anglophone world, suggesting that contemporary reception of Dostoevsky's work has come at the absolute cost of existential depth.

Historically, Anglophone cultures have tended to read Dostoevsky through an epistemologically restricted binary lens. On one hand, he was portrayed as a vessel of the deep "Russian soul" — a trope famously debated in Virginia Woolf's essays, such as "The Russian Point of View" (1925), where she critically reflects on a psychological depth that felt entirely foreign to the structured English novel. On the other hand, the Anglophone reception relied on the domesticated, universalising translations of Constance Garnett and her successors, which systematically diluted the predominantly Orthodox and synodal (*sobornost*) flavour of his vocabulary, thus encoding his unusual narrative into the familiar cadences of Victorian and Edwardian realism.

Pattison, anchored in a solid foundation of Western theological and philosophical tradition, refuses to "westernise" Dostoevsky, yet equally refuses to mystify him. He directly addresses this Anglophone anxiety of translation, noting that for the English-language reader, Dostoevsky often appears as "a figure who is always in danger of being lost in translation, or, conversely, over-translated into a generalised Western idiom" (p. 12). Rather than succumbing to Woolf's romanticised fascination with Dostoevsky's stream of consciousness or Garnett's stylistic smoothing, Pattison positions Dostoevsky's linguistic eccentricity as a deliberate challenge to Western cultural and literary traditions. He argues that Dostoevsky's work provides "a language that systematically resists the secularising, hyper-rationalised frameworks of the modern Western academy" (p. 14). As a result, the text successfully bridges the historical divide, moving beyond the modernists' exoticized fascination to engage with Dostoevsky as a rigorous intellectual contemporary.

In addition, the author exposes how Dostoevskian concepts such as "living life" (*zhivaya zhizn*) and his almost pantheistic love for creation offer a poignant critique of the possessive individualism and technocratic capitalism that dominate the current Anglophone societies. Pattison achieves this by explicitly mapping *zhivaya zhizn* against the technocratic structures of modern Britain. For instance, he breathes new life into Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century critique of London's Crystal Palace, demonstrating that our contemporary Anglophone obsession with data metrics, algorithmic efficiency, and market utility is merely the digital example of that same spiritually deadening rationalism.

Furthermore, Pattison juxtaposes the modern Western treatment of nature with the respectful "earth-mysticism" found in *The Brothers Karamazov*. By analysing Alyosha's ecstatic act of kissing the earth, Pattison confronts the Western public's sense of possessiveness, illustrating that Dostoevsky's theology offers an alternative ecological approach — one that replaces the blind mastery of nature with a profound, repentant communion with a living, sacred creation. The book transforms into a critical mirror, forcing the Western reader to recognise the limitations of their own secular, instrumental worldview.

Conversations with Dostoevsky constitutes a contemporary critical approach to memory and intellectual responsibility. By refusing both nationalist hagiography and

moralistic anachronism, George Pattison provides an indispensable work for both literary and cultural studies. The book demonstrates how nineteenth-century literature remains a living, dynamic dimension of cultural memory, capable of providing what Walter Benjamin termed "new constellations of meaning" when the past is questioned from the standpoint of the present (Benjamin, 1968).

Pattison explicitly articulates this hermeneutic level of meaning in his conclusion, asserting that "we do not honour the writers of the past by treating their texts as closed systems or static relics; we honour them by bringing our own deepest crises to meet theirs" (p. 28). Rather than excusing Dostoevsky from his historical prejudices or reducing his genius to contemporary ideological binaries, the monograph insists upon maintaining the Russian writer's absolute contextual density and discursive ambiguity. For Western readers, this volume serves as a powerful paradigm of how the Humanities can — and crucially *should* — intervene in the most pressing contemporary debates, rescuing the complexity of the past to illuminate the shadow lands of our own time.

Pattison's dialogical methodology reminds the modern reader that the ultimate value of the human sciences lies not merely in archival work but in functionality. As the text eloquently concludes, the true measure of a classic lies in its capacity to act as a critical mirror: "Dostoevsky's work does not offer us a safe refuge from the storm of contemporary history; rather, it forces us to look into the abyss of our own making, demanding that we answer for who we have become" (p. 291). Through this reflexive approach, Pattison successfully transforms a nineteenth-century Russian writer into an indispensable interlocutor for the twenty-first century Western reader, proving that the past ceases to be a foreign country and becomes the very fruitful ground upon which the present must be revised.