

THE MESSIANIC TIME “GLIMMERS” IN THE TEXT FRAMEWORK
(ON THE CONSTELLATION DOSTOEVSKY-BENJAMIN-BAKHTIN)

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The image presented in the opening quotation may seem bold and even inappropriate in the context of the literary analysis. Nonetheless, it perfectly renders the life experience of Fyodor Dostoevsky in front of the firing squad when “all the time condensed”. This experience, I will argue, profoundly impacted his writing style and his worldview, which led to the crystallization of what can be defined as the “messianic” dimension in his work.¹

In the letter to his brother Mikhail dated December 22, 1849, Dostoevsky writes:

Today, December 22, we were taken to the Semyonov Square. There, the death sentence was read to all of us; we were allowed to kiss the cross, our swords were broken over our heads, and they performed our final toilette (the white shirts). Then three men were placed at the post for execution. I was sixth, they called them up in threes, which meant I was in the second group and had no more than a minute to live [...]

¹ The specific temporal dimension characteristic of Dostoevsky’s artistic universe has repeatedly attracted scholarly attention. Beyond Mikhail Bakhtin’s foundational studies, a number of researchers have examined the extent to which Dostoevsky’s personal existential experiences (the scaffold episode, epilepsy) shape temporal structures in his prose. Jacques Catteau analyses the rhythms of Dostoevsky’s narrative time and the phenomenon of its compression (“le temps raccourci”; cf. J. Catteau, *La création littéraire chez Dostoïevski*, Paris, Institut d’Études Salves, 1978); Robert L. Jackson repeatedly addresses the problem of “the instant” – the seconds before a seizure or before death – which assume the status of an experience transcending ordinary chronological flow (Robert L. Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993). In V.N. Toporov’s work on mythopoetic space and time, the contrast between linear, rational time (associated with Western cultural models) and cyclical, mythological time, which emerges in Dostoevsky’s poetics, is explored (В.Н. Топоров, *Миф, ритуал, символ, образ*, Москва, Прогресс, 1995, pp. 193-258). However, to my knowledge, no scholar has specifically examined the presence of the messianic dimension in Dostoevsky’s prose – “messianic” understood not solely in a strictly religious sense, but also in light of the broader philosophical connotations that the term has acquired throughout history.

Brother, I have not despaired and have not lost heart. Life is everywhere life, life is in ourselves, not in what is outside. There will be people near me, and to be a person among people, to remain so forever, in whatever misfortunes, not to despair and not to fall – that is what life is, what its task is.²

Dostoevsky stands on the scaffold, a step away from death, fully aware that he is doomed. It is the living through the “last minute of life”, which, as he himself attests, radically changed his consciousness afterwards: “Life is a gift, life is happiness. *Every minute could be a century of happiness*. Now, in changing my life, I am being reborn into a new form”.³ This was a present without a future, which overwhelmed the consciousness, when one whole eternity is concentrated in every fraction of a second. This time, I’d like to emphasize, is structurally akin to what is known as messianic time in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The instant in which Dostoevsky found himself before the firing squad, or facing the flash of an epileptic seizure, coincides with a “time out of time” – a moment that contains and annuls all other times. It was that instantaneous flash in the face of the danger of the end, “there will no more time”,⁴ as Prince Myshkin declares with extraordinary ambiguity. We can speak about that very “moment of danger” (according to Walter Benjamin’s formula)⁵ in the light of which all of life’s material, all of existence, is, as it were, illuminated by a single profound comprehension, acquiring mean-

² All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. “Сегодня 22 декабря нас отвезли на Семеновский плац. Там всем нам прочли смертный приговор, дали приложиться к кресту, переломили над головою шпаги и устроили наш предсмертный туалет (белые рубахи). Затем троих поставили к столбу для исполнения казни. Я стоял шестым, вызывали по трое, следовательно, я был во второй очереди и жить мне оставалось не более минуты. [...] Брат! я не уныл и не упал духом. Жизнь везде жизнь, жизнь в нас самих, а не во внешнем. Подле меня будут люди, и быть человеком между людьми и остаться им навсегда, в каких бы то ни было несчастьях, не уныть и не пасть - вот в чем жизнь, в чем задача ее (ПСС 281, 161-162). This imagined, yet so tangibly experienced, “death” meant a true rebirth for him: “Та голова, которая создавала, жила вышею жизнью искусства, которая создала и свыклась с возвышенными потребностями духа, та голова уже срезана с плеч моих. Осталась память и образы, созданные и еще не воплощенные мной. [...] Никогда еще таких обильных и здоровых запасов духовной жизни не кипело во мне, как теперь” (ПСС 281, 162-163).

³ “Жизнь – дар, жизнь – счастье. Каждая минута могла быть веком счастья. Теперь, переменя жизнь, перерождаюсь в новую форму” (ПСС 281, 164; emphasis added).

⁴ “В этот момент мне как-то становится понятно необычайное слово о том, что времени больше не будет” (ПСС 8; 189).

⁵ W. Benjamin, *Sul concetto di storia*, ed. by G. Bonola, M. Ranchetti, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 55.

ing. In my article, I will argue that the specific temporality in Dostoevsky’s work is not only in some way related to this experience, but it approximates the structure of messianic time. It is a non-linear temporality which gives way to multi-temporality or, in terms of the subsequent philosophical thought, a time which ‘underlies’ and ‘saturates chronological time’.

Dostoevsky was 28 years old when he was sentenced to death for his participation in the Petrashevsky Circle, a clandestine socialist society that opposed the tsar’s regime and aimed to end serfdom. Witnesses recount that, despite being nervous and exhausted from several months of imprisonment, Dostoevsky maintained his calm and dignity.⁶

Dostoevsky remained profoundly marked by this experience on the border between life and death. Almost all major scholars of Dostoevsky’s work, regardless of critical school, write about the presence and comprehension of this experience in his novels. We shall cite only a few of the many examples. Nicolai Berdyaev examines the episode of the mock execution as a catalyst for mystical and spiritual insight, which subsequently became the foundation of Dostoevsky’s ideas on Freedom and Evil.⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes the dialogic nature of his narrative, asserting that the experience of the “final word”⁸ (death) shapes a unique polyphonic voice in which there is no concluding judgement from the author. René Girard, in *Dostoevsky: From Double to Unity*, posits this experience as a catharsis which permitted Dostoevsky to surmount the pattern of “doubling” and “mimetic desire” and transition to genuine being and faith.⁹ Joseph Frank asserts:

The mock execution was thus converted into a religious and moral experience of the most profound kind, a veritable spiritual and ideological rebirth – and the moment of its occurrence was always cherished by Dostoevsky as the most important in his life.¹⁰

Dostoevsky’s life from that moment on is therefore “saved time”. He personally experienced and treasured what literature had already foreshadowed. In the Preface to *The meek one*, he explicitly cites Victor Hugo’s novel *The*

⁶ Cf. E. Schuyler, *Feodor Dostoevsky, The Russian novelist*, “The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine”, 22 (1881), 4.

⁷ Cf. N. Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky. An Interpretation* (or. ed. *Мирозерцание Достоевского*, 1923), transl. by D. Attwater, London, Sheed & Ward, 1934.

⁸ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (or. ed. 1963), ed. and transl. by C. Emerson, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 70.

⁹ Cf. R. Girard, *Dostoïevski: du double à l’unité*, Paris, Plon, 1963.

¹⁰ J. Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849*, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 364-365.

Last Day of a Condemned Man (text which probably implicitly impacted Dostoevsky's way of describing the last minutes before the presumed execution in his letter to Mikhail),¹¹ speaking of the fantastic nature of directly recording the impressions of a man condemned to death, thus giving us a clue on his own *modus operandi*:

I have seen a similar device used more than once in art. Victor Hugo, for instance, in his masterpiece *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, did not simply use this device, nor did he put down a stenographer, but he made a huge allowance, assuming that a man condemned to death can keep notes not only until his last day, or even his last hour, but literally until his last minute.¹²

This “device” is a paradoxical example of how art gives space to what is not conceivable in rational “spatial” terms, by introducing “time outside of time”. In Dostoevsky's fictional work – specifically in *The Idiot* – this theme finds particular expression; the last minutes of life for the man sentenced to death appear as a moment most saturated with meaning:

those five minutes seemed to him to be an immeasurable period, an enormous wealth of time; it seemed to him that in those five minutes he would live so many lives that there was no need as yet to think of that last moment...¹³

Dostoevsky's extreme experience was to have a decisive impact on his way of thinking about the world and on his own creativity. But he was already familiar with the temporality where “all times converge”, at least on the level of the illusion produced by a disease; a kind of “messianic time”, the time of the expectation of the end: the epileptic seizure. Perhaps this very element is a distinctive trait of Dostoevsky's poetics: the particular temporality, which reflects the contradictoriness and the impossible *coincidentia oppositorum*, co-existence of opposites, which characterize his narrative. It is not the *space* but

¹¹ Cf. “Maintenant je suis captif. Mon corps est aux fers dans un cachot, mon esprit est en prison dans une idée. Une horrible, une sanglante, une implacable idée! Je n'ai plus qu'une pensée, qu'une conviction, qu'une certitude: condamné à mort!” (V. Hugo, *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné*, chap. I, Paris, Gallimard, 2017).

¹² “Но отчасти подобное уже не раз допускалось в искусстве: Виктор Гюго, например, в своём шедевре “Последний день приговорённого к смертной казни” употребил почти такой же приём и хоть и не вывел стенографа, но допустил ещё большую неправдоподобность, предположив, что приговорённый к казни может (и имеет время) вести записки не только в последний день свой, но даже в последний час и буквально в последнюю минуту” (ПСС 24; 6), V. Hugo, *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné*, cit., chap. I.

¹³ “Эти пять минут казались ему бесконечным сроком, огромным богатством; ему казалось, что в эти пять минут он проживет столько жизней, что еще сейчас нечего и думать о последнем мгновении...” (ПСС 8; 52).

the *time* which is the protagonist in his work. The “I” of the personages is constructed through the meticulous and quite complicated construction of the time pattern which can’t be determined in terms of *chronos*: as if Dostoevsky’s personage always tried to catch a passing moment or a coming one (with all the contradictions it implies), thus calling in question the same possibility of continuity of time. The following extraordinary passage merits close attention:

In those moments, the perception of life and of self-awareness almost quadrupled. The mind and the heart were illuminated by an extraordinary light; all their anxieties, all their doubts, all their turbulent feelings were resolved into a sort of superior tranquility, filled with a clear, harmonious joy and hope, full of reason and cause. But these moments, these flashes, were only the presentiment of that final second (it was never more than a second) in which the attack itself began. That second was, of course, unbearable. Afterwards, when he was in full health, reflecting on that moment, he often said to himself that all these flashes and glimpses of a higher self-awareness and consciousness, and therefore also of a “higher state of being”, were nothing but a disease, a violation of the normal state, and if that were the case, then it was not a “higher state of being” at all, but should be considered, on the contrary, the most base one. And yet, he ultimately came to an extraordinarily paradoxical conclusion: “But what does it matter that it’s a disease?” he decided at last. “What does it matter that the tension is abnormal, if the result – that is, the minute of sensation remembered and analyzed when one is well again – turns out to be maximally harmonious, beautiful, and allows one to experience an unheard-of sense of fullness, of balance, of reconciliation, and of a sacred and static fusion with the highest synthesis of existence?”...

If in that moment, that is, in the very last moment of consciousness before the attack, he managed to tell himself clearly and consciously: “Yes, for this moment one could give one’s whole life!”, then indeed that moment, by itself, was worth the whole life. Besides, he was not able to argue that conclusion on a dialectical level: the stunning, the mental obscuration, the idiocy were clearly, even to his eyes, a consequence of those “supreme minutes.” [...] How can one deny reality? Because it really happened to him: in that precise second, he would tell himself that it was a second which, by an immense stroke of luck, he perceived fully and which might have been worth a whole life. “In that moment” as he had once said to Rogozhin, during one of their Moscow meetings, “in that moment it was as if the amazing words *there shall be no more time* became clear to me”. And he added with a smile: “No doubt the epileptic Mahomet refers to that same moment when he says that he visited all the dwellings of Allah, in less time than was needed to empty his pitcher of water”.¹⁴

In this passage, it’s clear how time “contracts” within the narrative logic, and this is a typical procedure in Dostoevskian narration. “There shall be no time”: this is a quotation from *Revelation* 10:6. From the point of view of the utterance’s structure, it takes to an extreme what the French linguist Gustave

¹⁴ Cf. ICCC 8; 188-189 (emphasis in the original).

Guillaume defined as “operative time” and what, with Émile Benveniste, represents the temporality of the utterance that founds temporality *tout court*:

On pourrait croire que la temporalité est un cadre inné de la pensée. Elle est produite en réalité dans et par l'énonciation. De l'énonciation procède l'instauration de la catégorie du présent, et de la catégorie du présent naît la catégorie du temps. Le présent est proprement la source du temps. Il est cette présence au monde que l'acte de l'énonciation rend seul possible, car, qu'on veuille bien y réfléchir, l'homme ne dispose d'aucun autre moyen de vivre le “maintenant” et de le faire actuel que de le réaliser par l'insertion du discours dans le monde. On pourrait montrer par des analyses de systèmes temporels en diverses langues la position centrale du présent. Le présent formel ne fait qu'explicitier le présent inhérent à l'énonciation, qui se renouvelle avec chaque production de discours, et à partir de ce présent continu, coextensif à notre présence propre, s'imprime dans la conscience le sentiment d'une continuité que nous appelons “temps”; continuité et temporalité s'engendrant dans le présent incessant de l'énonciation qui est le présent de l'être même, et délimitant, par référence interne, entre ce qui va devenir présent et ce qui vient de ne l'être plus.¹⁵

Dostoevsky calls into question the gap between a word's utterance and the moment its meaning is understood. He often manipulates the time it takes for a word to be spoken, then abruptly shifts perspective. In this way, he uncovers the contradictions of reality which a linear, sequential structure of discourse inevitably neutralizes. The argumentation involves a series of counterpoints, which immediately call into question whatever has just been affirmed. No sooner does one meaning crystallize than it is immediately replaced by its opposite (in the *Notes from underground* it even becomes the main narrative technique). Thus, paradox becomes the basis of his poetics – at the rhetorical, structural, and philosophical levels.¹⁶

The ‘coincidence of opposites’ is expressed in Dostoevsky's novels through the coexistence of “unmerged voices” – a key discovery by Mikhail Bakhtin. These voices are often opposed to one another and are irreducible to a harmonic unity. This corresponds to the polyphonic principle. In Dostoevsky's creative thinking, this strategy takes the shape of “bifurcation”, as Bakhtin argues:

¹⁵ E. Benveniste, *L'appareil formel de l'énonciation* (1970), in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 2, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, pp. 83-84

¹⁶ Cf. *Ф.М. Достоевский: Юмор, парадоксальность, демонтаж*, под ред. Д. Фарфоновой, Л. Сальмон, С. Аллоэ, Firenze University Press, 2023. In application to Dostoevsky's *œuvre*, Laura Salmon, *inter alia*, examines paradox as a vital tool for activating the psycho-cognitive potential of the text, “able to bypass the “censorship” of logic and create a mental state of illumination” (Л. Сальмон, *Парадоксальность как специфика художественного творчества Ф.М. Достоевского: приемы, стилимы, воздействие*, в: *Достоевский: Юмор, парадоксальность, демонтаж*, cit., pp. 13-34).

[His capacity for seeing everything in contradiction and in interaction] sharpened, and to an extreme degree, his perception in the cross-section of a given moment, and permitted him to see many and varied things where others saw one and the same thing. Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multistructured. *In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression.*¹⁷

One must certainly distinguish between the life of the author and the way he re-meditates, in literary form, on biographical moments in his own work. At the same time, we should keep in mind that living through the “extreme moments” of existence was experienced by Dostoevsky in various forms. The central focus of this analysis, however, is the expression of this experience within his art: “a moment that could be worth an entire life”, or “a single second that’s worth a billion years”. A threshold, a stumbling block, an instantaneous experience of profound complexity – what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the polyphony of being – is the moment where all contradictions meet and seem to be resolved in a superior vision, albeit one provided by the morbidity of a disease. This context may partially account for the inherent plurivocality in the world model Dostoevsky creates and into which the reader is immersed. All of this led to a particular creative sensibility, within which opposing states intersect, coexist, all linearity bursts apart, and a space of total relativity prevails. As Bakhtin says:

Dostoevsky almost never uses in his works historical and biographical time, which is relatively continuous, that is, strictly epic time; he “jumps” beyond it, concentrating the actions at points of crisis, ruptures, and catastrophes, when the instant, because of its intimate significance, is equal to a “billion years”. He, in essence, also jumps beyond space and concentrates the action only in two “points”: on the threshold (at the door, at the entrance, on the stairs, in the corridor, and so on), where the crisis and rupture occur, or in the square, usually replaced by the living room (hall, dining room), where the catastrophe and scandal take place. This is precisely his artistic conception of time and space. He often also jumps beyond elementary and empirical plausibility and superficial intellectual logic.¹⁸

So, time in Dostoevsky is never linear; rather, the space of his prose is an aggregate of condensations of meaning, each with a different temporal direction. It’s no coincidence that the profusion of “suddenly”, “all of a sud-

¹⁷ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 30 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 175 (the translation has been modified).

den”,¹⁹ these abrupt interruptions of the imagined temporal linearity, the digressions into the past and shifts into the future, so profoundly mark his prose. In this way, the turmoil of the heroes reveals a “detonated”, shattered time – a multitude of fragments united by consciousness in a “moment of danger”.

In Dostoevsky, everything takes place on the threshold, on the passage, on the point of entry and exit, almost a messianic concentration of temporality and spatiality. It is a place where many voices and many, even conflicting, points of view meet. Narration introduces a non-linear temporality: a psychological time, as Dostoevsky defines it, is opposed to the “objective” one. The author continuously defeats the illusion that an experience can be narrated exactly as it was lived. This is shown by the very structure of the word itself, and by the gap between the utterance (*factum loquendi*) and its coming to have meaning. This lack of coincidence is underscored by the exuberance of temporal elements in the narrative. Temporal adjectives and adverbs become markers of a rupture, a passage, and a deactivation of what was previously affirmed. They designate the irruption of a specific, complex, paradoxical temporality. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the tragic Aristotelian catharsis is not applicable to Dostoevsky’s novels because they are not built on a resolution of opposites to achieve purification, but rather explore complex, unresolved dialogues and the polyphonic nature of consciousness. They embody a fundamentally unfinished and open worldview, where the “last word about the world and its truths has not yet been spoken”.²⁰

Notes from Underground launches a decisive tradition for 20th-century literature and philosophical thought. It involves the selection of confined, almost invisible spaces of the Interstice, in which an infinity of opposing states and movements is discovered, much like Blaise Pascal’s *raccourci d’atome*. It’s an infinitely small, an “Augustinian non-place” (*locus qui non est locus*), that encompasses the infinitely large. Here, the abyss of the unconscious is already being foreshadowed.

This tradition can be traced from Dostoevsky to Kafka, Pessoa (*Livro do desassossego*), Javier Marías and other authors of contemporaneity. The

¹⁹ A profound stylistic and semantic analysis of the adverb “vrug” in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works, chiefly in the novels of the “great pentalogy”, is the subject of Ivan Verč’s study. Cf. I. Verč, *Vdrug. L’improvviso in Dostoevskij*, Trieste, Editoriale Stampa Triestina, 1997.

²⁰ Cf. “The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky’s novels might be-of course inadequately and somewhat rationalistically-expressed in this way: nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 166).

confined nature of these spaces – which are first and foremost mental – and their transient, interstitial, and intermedial character (Pessoa called it “the being between” – *intraessere*), in fact, fosters a proliferation of phantoms and images destined to give rise to possible worlds.²¹

Once more, this spatiality implies a particular, almost messianic temporality: the Messiah enters (according to the Pauline formula) “like a thief at night” (St. Paul, 1 Thessalonians 5:2), filtering into the interstices of the spirit, at night, when one least expects it.²² In her posthumous book, *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil dedicated a series of seminal considerations to the theme of “fissures”, of the inner fault line, which one must leave open without letting it be “closed off by the imagination” (*boucler par l’imagination*), because it is through this ontological fracture that “grace could pass through”, the time of messianic liberation. According to Weil, it is necessary to suspend “en soi-même le travail de l’imagination combleuse de vides”: “L’imagination travaille continuellement à boucher toutes les fissures par où passerait la grâce”.²³ In his prose, Dostoevsky likewise explores the devastating consequences of the inner life’s ascendancy – namely, fantasy and imagination – over the “sense of reality” (as particularly evidenced by *White Nights* and *Notes from Underground*), a point he unequivocally conveys in a letter to his brother Mikhail:

The external must be balanced with the internal. Otherwise, with the absence of external phenomena, the internal will take on an overly perilous dominance. Nerves and fantasy will occupy too much space in a being. Every external phenomenon, from lack of habit, seems colossal and somehow frightens one. You start to dread life.²⁴

²¹ In Russian, *podpol’ye* (подполье: *underground*) also denotes a physical space where clandestine activity takes place and a location for concealment. Dostoevsky plays on the semantic duality in the word “*podpol’ye*” (*underground*), uncovering both the metaphysical and the subconscious substrate of this image.

²² From a philosophical perspective, the problem of messianism and especially its Pauline substratum is thoroughly investigated by Giorgio Agamben in *The Time That Remains. A commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, where he argues that Benjamin’s philosophy of history constitutes a repetition and appropriation of Paul’s concept of “remaining time”. Cf. G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (or. ed. 2000), transl. by P. Dailey, Stanford (California), Stanford University Press, 2005.

²³ S. Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (1948), collection 10/18 dell’Union Générale d’Editions, Paris, 1962, p. 26.

²⁴ “Вне должно быть уравновешено с внутренним. Иначе, с отсутствием внешних явлений, внутреннее возьмет слишком опасный верх. Нервы и фантазия займут очень много места в существе. Всякое внешнее явление с непривычки кажется колоссальным и пугает как-то. Начинаешь бояться жизни” (ПСС 28; 137-138; emphasis in the original).

Reason and imagination tend to impart an appearance of coherence and clarity to what is, in reality, disjointed and inconsistent. Dostoevsky's narrative calls into question every idea of logical linearity and coherence, undermining the imaginative faculty's drive to find the world unambiguous and organized. There is not a monolithic narrative flow like in Tolstoy: there is a collection of fractures, passages, and inconsistencies. The narrative's salient moments are often tied to the dimension of extreme danger, where the profound meaning of both the present and the past is revealed in a flash (such as in the episodes dedicated to the epileptic seizure).

This strikingly conforms to the figure which Walter Benjamin established as the basis for his reflection on the crisis of history and cognition: a dialectical image, which flashes in the extreme moment, the moment of danger.²⁵ "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize a hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger".²⁶

For example, Dostoevsky reveals the mental state that constitutes the threshold of Myshkin's epileptic seizure as a momentary access to a truth that is not graspable by means of reason. This truth condenses within itself all potentialities and all temporality (or at least it seems so). This is in accordance with Benjamin's brilliant formula: "a truth so charged with time as to explode" (*Passagenwerk*, sect. N, *Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*, n. 3, 1). In that state, as Myshkin contends, one arrives at an understanding of the time in which "there will be no more time", which is precisely the messianic time. Hence, there is a continuous recourse to a lexicon related to the field of effulgence, immediate vision, and glimmering. Bakhtin's analysis strikingly conforms to Benjamin's idea of different temporal layers converging in a single, complex vision within the moment of danger: "Dostoevsky always represents a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of *crisis*, at an unfinalizable – and undeterminable – turning point for their soul".²⁷

In contrast to Goethe, Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages [of a certain unified development] in their *simultaneity*, to *juxtapose* and *counterpose* them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to understand

²⁵ Ultimately, the dialectical image is Benjamin's method for putting his messianic philosophy into practice. It's the moment when the force of messianism intervenes in history, allowing a 'fleeting glimpse of truth' and offering a chance for political and historical redemption.

²⁶ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (or. ed. *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* 1942), New York, Harcourt Brace & World Schocken Books, 1968.

²⁷ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 61 (translation slightly modified).

the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to *guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment*. [...] One could say, that out from every contradiction within a single person Dostoevsky tries to create two persons, in order to dramatize the contradiction and develop it extensively. This trait finds its external expression in Dostoevsky’s passion for mass scenes, his impulse to concentrate, often at the expense of credibility, as many persons and themes as possible in one place at one time, that is, his impulse to concentrate in a single moment the greatest possible qualitative diversity. [...] And hence, the catastrophic swiftness of action, the “whirlwind motion”, the dynamics of Dostoevsky. Dynamics and speed here [...] are not a triumph of time but its overcoming, for speed is the only way to overcome time within time.²⁸

Perhaps the figure who most vividly embodies the “messianic” interruption of chronological time in Dostoevsky’s work is Prince Myshkin. And the picture of the dead Christ by Hans Holbein, exposed in Basel’s Museum, which appears three times at crucial moments in the novel, symbolizes the ambiguity that permeates the entire narrative and, especially, the image of its protagonist. Depending on the point of view, this image can be seen as a depiction of a dead person whose body has already begun to decay – or of a God who is about to resurrect. Mikhail Ossorgin proposes “that the painting is a form of visual polyphony in which a dialogism of images unfolds. The details of the image within the painting exhibit the small-scale permeation of competing perspectives that characterizes Dostoevsky’s word in the polyphonic novel”.²⁹ The ambiguity arises immediately, from the very identification of the subject of the painting:

The subject is unquestionably Christ-like, but the painting withholds final judgement. It conveys different stories depending on how one frames it – both deepening the faith of believers and corroborating the scepticism of non-believers. It is simultaneously reverent and blasphemous.³⁰

Every time that the image appears in the narrative it designs a point of catastrophe. At these points of catastrophe, a radical metamorphosis occurs, an unexpected broadening of perspective – a decisive moment in which (Bakhtin says) “the forbidden limit is crossed, one is renewed or one dies”³¹. The encounter with the Holbein painting therefore represents a moment of glimmering: it is the Benjaminian *Augenblick* (*Passagenwerk*, sect. N, *Theo-*

²⁸ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 28-29 (emphasis in the original).

²⁹ M.M. Ossorgin *Holbein’s visually polyphonic Dead Christ reveals contrasting perspectives in Dostoevsky’s The Idiot*, “Dostoevsky Studies”, 21 (2017), pp. 1-20; p. 5.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 4.

³¹ M. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics and Stylistics*, cit., p. 222.

ry of Knowledge, *Theory of Progress*, n. 3, 1)³² whose flash establishes a new relationship between the present and the past, encompassing them in a kind of constellation: “It’s not that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past, but image is that in which what has been unites with the *now* in a constellation”.³³

The Holbein painting appears first in Myshkin’s story about his time in Switzerland, then during his visit to Rogozhin’s house, and finally in the long and complex speech of the young anarchist Ippolit Terentiev on the brink of suicide. Like an icon, with its “visual polyphony”, it not only reveals, but also triggers and authorizes a crisis, a moment of truth, in which otherwise incompatible perspectives converge, creating a constellation and revealing the profound truth of Dostoevsky’s design. In Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Dostoevsky sees the meeting of opposites, which crystallizes in a single, lightning-fast moment a dialectical image that is a constellation of times and spaces.

As you look at that painting, nature appears to you as some enormous, implacable, and mute beast, or, to put it more correctly, however strange it may seem, as a huge machine of the most modern construction, which has senselessly seized, cut up, and swallowed, blindly and indifferently, a great and priceless being – a being who alone was worth all of nature and its laws, all the earth, perhaps created for the sake of the appearance of that being alone! That picture expresses, as it were, just that conception, that dark, insolent, and senselessly eternal force, to which everything is subordinated, and it is transmitted to you involuntarily (...) “*Can something that has no image be contained in an image?*” (ICC 8; 338-339).

According to Benjamin’s perspective, the “thunder”³⁴ produced by this vision continues to resonate for a long time throughout the entire text, always marking a departure from chronological time. This ranges from Myshkin’s first and second encounters with the painting – in both cases followed by an epileptic seizure – to the sinking of his consciousness into the darkness of madness upon seeing the corpse of Nastasya Filippovna in Rogozhin’s house, a clear allusion to the image of the dead Christ (her very surname, Barashkova, from *барашек*, “lambkin”, points to the idea of a sacrificial victim).

The Idiot most vividly manifests the chronotope of the “last time”, a concept generally vital to Dostoevsky’s literary corpus:

³² W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. by H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2002, p. 576.

³³ W. Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* (1982); it. transl. by E. Ganni, *I “passages” di Parigi*, in Id., *Opere complete*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, vol. IX; p. 518 (my translation; emphasis added).

³⁴ Ivi, n. 1, 1, p. 510.

All decisive encounters of man with man, consciousness with consciousness, always take place in Dostoevsky’s novels “in infinity” and “for the last time” (in the ultimate moments of crisis), that is, they take place in carnival-mystery play space and time.³⁵

Here, Bakhtin unexpectedly links the singularity of the final moment with the carnival chronotope. These moments of encounter “in infinity” and “on the threshold” are torn from linear, biographical time and situated in a special, crisis time. Furthermore, the carnival-mystery play chronotope renders the moment free from mundane laws and utterly frank, making it a convergence point for mutually exclusive perspectives, which is precisely what enables the “final” dialogue between consciousnesses.

It remains to be explored more deeply whether the polyphonic gaze on reality and the constellation of coexisting and contrasting points of view in Dostoevsky – a central theme of *The Idiot* and one highlighted by Bakhtin – may have also influenced Benjamin’s development of the category of the dialectical image. It seems to me that scholarly criticism has not yet adequately examined this constellation and these relationships, which deserve a more thorough study. It is no coincidence that Benjamin dedicated an essay to *The Idiot* in 1917 (published in 1921; though the echoes of the text would resonate for a long time in his subsequent work). A profound Dostoevskian spirit can be grasped in fragments of *The Arcades Project*, such as the following:

To thinking belong both the movement of thoughts and their arrest. Where thinking comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its place, of course, is not an arbitrary one. In a word, it is to be found where the tension between the opposites is greatest.³⁶

The phrase “constellation saturated with tensions” refers to a dialectical movement that, unlike in Hegelian idealism, is never resolved into a higher synthesis. In it, the contradiction is never overcome; but precisely for this reason, at the point where, in Benjamin’s sense, the “tension between the opposites” is at its maximum, it is capable of making legible the relationship between the instant of the present and the past, thereby revealing the truth itself in its historical becoming.

³⁵ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 177.

³⁶ W. Benjamin, *I “passages” di Parigi*, cit., vol. IX, p. 534. For Benjamin, historical understanding isn’t a continuous, linear process. Instead, it happens in a flash, in a “dialectical image” that appears when the flow of thought is suddenly arrested in a moment of extreme tension. This image captures the past and present in a constellation of meaning, revealing hidden truths about history.

If this proposal proves to be sustainable on a documentary level, we will have proof of how, in his work on this fundamental category of his thought, Benjamin philosophically re-examined the great classics of world literature; and foremost, alongside Dostoevsky, the Dante of the *Commedia*. In the French version of *On the concept of history* Benjamin writes:

L'image authentique du passé n'apparaît que dans un éclair. Image qui ne surgit que pour s'éclipser à jamais dès l'instant suivant. La vérité immobile qui ne fait qu'attendre le chercheur ne correspond nullement à ce concept de la vérité en matière d'histoire. Il s'appuie bien plutôt sur le vers du Dante qui dit: C'est une image unique, irremplaçable du passé qui s'évanouit avec chaque présent qui n'a pas su se reconnaître visé par elle.³⁷

Benjamin uses Dante to explain the essence of dialectical image in its being fugitive and changing, always creating new constellations with every present. We could even dare to think of a kind of polyphony, or pluriperspectivism, unfolded in history: every present moment creates "its own" meaning of the past, and every present, in its unique way, captures the truth.

According to Bakhtin, Dante was the greatest polyphonic author before Dostoevsky who possessed the ability to seize the multidimensional essence of being through a sequence of equally valid images,³⁸ which "could resemble a congealed event":

Each [Dostoevsky] novel presents an opposition, which is never canceled out dialectically, of many consciousnesses, and they do not merge in the unity of an evolving spirit, just as souls and spirits do not merge in the formally polyphonic world of Dante. At best each could form, as in Dante's world, a static figure, one that did not lose its individuality and that linked together rather than merged with other figures – but this static figure would resemble a congealed event. [...] Likewise the author's spirit does not develop or evolve within the limits of the novel itself, but, as in Dante's world, this spirit is either a spectator, or becomes one of the participants. Within the limits of the novel the heroes' worlds interact by means of the event, but these interrelationships, as we have said before, are the last thing that can be reduced to thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.³⁹

Dostoevsky's particular gift for hearing and understanding all voices immediately and simultaneously, a gift whose equal we find only in Dante, also permitted him to create the polyphonic novel.⁴⁰

³⁷ W. Benjamin, *Sur le concept d'histoire* (éd. or. 1942), in Id., *Sul concetto di storia*, ed. by G. Bonola, M. Ranchetti, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 65.

³⁸ D. Farafanova, "Diverse voci fanno dolci note". *La "polifonia creaturale" fra Dante e Dostoevskij*, "Strumenti critici", 37 (2022), 2, pp. 281-302.

³⁹ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., 26.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 30.

As Sigrid Weigel and Marco Maggi have persuasively suggested, “the flash in which the dialectical image flashes (*aufblitz*) in the theses *On the Concept of History* and in numerous other texts by Benjamin” can be compared “to the brilliance that, in the last verses of *Paradiso*, completes and at the same time annihilates the vision”.⁴¹

But let us turn our attention to the figure and concept of the Messiah within the framework of Benjamin’s thought. The figure of the Messiah, posited from the very beginning of the *Theologico-Political Fragment* 1920-1921, serves a purely rupturing function with “historical becoming”. “Messiah n’est pas un but, “il est un terme”⁴² (Messiah is not a goal, he is an end). This means that this term doesn’t come to perfect history, but to interrupt its course.

Only the Messiah himself brings every historical happening to its conclusion, and precisely in the sense that he alone redeems, perfects, and produces the relationship between history and the messianic itself.⁴³

Benjamin’s messianic conception aims to disqualify the linear and continuous historicity bequeathed by the ideology of the Enlightenment.⁴⁴ History, for him, is “a time saturated with ‘a now’”.⁴⁵ This phrase refers to the concept of *Jetztzeit* (German for “now-time”), a key idea in Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. It describes a moment in time that is not just a fleeting instant, but a dense and condensed “now”, in which all of history is potentially contained and can be redeemed. This “now” is so full of meaning that it can really “explode”.⁴⁶

We can conclude that the specificity of temporality in Dostoevsky has a lot in common with the “messianic” time. His prose proceeds not in a linear

⁴¹ M. Maggi, *Walter Benjamin e Dante. Una costellazione nello spazio delle immagini*, Donzelli, Roma 2017, p. 70; cf. S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images. Walter Benjamin’s Image-Based Epistemology and its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, “Critical Inquiry”, 41 (2015), winter, pp. 348-349.

⁴² W. Benjamin, *Frammento teologico-politico*, in Id., *Opere complete*, cit., vol. I, p. 512.

⁴³ *Ivi*.

⁴⁴ Benjamin takes up Martin Buber’s critique of the liberal conception of historical time as progress (especially in his conference *Erneuerung des Judentums*, 1911; cf. M. Buber, *Judaïsme*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982).

⁴⁵ W. Benjamin, *Sul concetto di storia*, cit., pp. 45-47.

⁴⁶ Generally speaking in the first half of the 20th century intellectuals find themselves “turning to Jewish messianism because it thinks precisely from this horizon of historical catastrophe”. They seek to reinvest it with meaning “through the idea of a Redemption that can arise from within the very heart of the tragedy, not in the form of a dialectical reversal, but as the pure emergence of the event” (R. Klein, *Présences du messianisme juif. La lumière du messie*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2020, p. 238; my translation D.F.).

way, but through moments of crisis and catastrophe that burst apart the chronological order, which is revealed to be an illusion. As Bakhtin notes, every moment in Dostoevsky's narrative is saturated with the potential of the event:

A unified truth [...] requires a plurality of consciousnesses, it cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, it is by its very nature *full of event potential* [literally: truth by its nature is *eventual*] and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses.⁴⁷

Certain images in Dostoevsky's prose function as symbols of this convergence of different perspectives, enabling the grasp of a truth inaccessible through conventional means. This process aligns with the concept of the dialectical image, which establishes a constellation among these elements.

The particular temporality in Dostoevsky implies an acute sense of the atemporal potential of the poetic word, which opens messianically toward the beyond:

"Reality in its entirety", Dostoevsky himself wrote, "is not to be exhausted by what is immediately at hand, for an overwhelming part of this reality is contained in the form of a still latent, unuttered future Word".⁴⁸

The messianic-apocalyptic structure of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is here particularly evident. The poetic word bears the signs of the future, alluding to the finality of being while simultaneously surpassing the temporal arrangement of the entity: this, according to Jacob Taubes, constitutes the true task of art:

Only in the final moment of time – at its very end, when transience itself has passed – will eternity overcome time's mortal principle. *To seize the eternal instant within the temporal present: such is the task of magic, whose last descendant is art.*⁴⁹

In its poetic function, language allows us to transcend the pure factuality of the world, containing, in essence, the "time outside of time" that is perceived as "future" on the chronological-objective plane because it is saturated with potentiality.

Apocalypse, in the very sense of the word, means unveiling. Every apocalypse speaks of the calamity of eternity, and this very act of speaking (*Sagen*) is already a certain apprehension of the sign of eternity. In the first signs, the end is already embedded, and the foreseen is boldly expressed in the word, in order to allude – through a pre-emptive gesture – to that which has not yet been fulfilled.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 81.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Я. Таубес, *Западная эсхатология*, пер. с нем. А. Шурбелёва, СПб, "Владимир Даль", 2023, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 10.

Reflection on Dostoevsky’s creative legacy unites thinkers as seemingly distinct as Bakhtin and Benjamin, forming the foundation for their philosophical concepts, which exhibit deep affinities. Applied in conjunction, their methods of analysis yield new insights into Dostoevsky’s artistic universe: a tapestry of human contradictions and inconsistencies pulsing with messianic potential.

Abstract

The Messianic Time “Glimmers” in the Text Framework (on the Constellation Dostoevsky-Benjamin-Bakhtin)

The article explores the specific temporality in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work, arguing that its structure closely approximates the concept of “messianic time” in its Pauline sense, which found a deep elaboration in 20th-century theological and philosophical thought. The analysis is constructed around the potential conceptual “constellation” of Dostoevsky-Benjamin-Bakhtin. Central to the research are the extreme moments of existence (the mock execution, epileptic seizure) in Dostoevsky’s life and the way they were refracted in his art. These are the moments where “one whole eternity is concentrated in every fraction of a second”, establishing a non-linear temporality that characterizes Dostoevsky’s prose. Walter Benjamin’s formula of the “moment of danger” and the “dialectical image”, which “flashes up” in this critical instant, proves especially prolific when seen in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony and the chronotope of the “threshold” (points of crisis and catastrophe). The study demonstrates that Dostoevsky’s “detonated” non-linear temporal pattern and “condensations of meaning” embody *messianic interruption*, revealing “absolute” truth at the moment of maximum tension.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Benjamin, messianism, polyphony, non-linear temporality, crisis, dialectical image.

