

AN ICONIC TEXT RETRANSLATED AND RECONSIDERED

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On the Matters of *The Plastic People of the Universe* and DG 307¹

Dostoevsky once wrote a short story² in which a single man from our sinful world – a land of pain, anxiety, and struggle – is transported onto an analogous satellite of the star Alpha Centauri where sinless and blessed human beings live. There, he infects the entire planet and brings it to the state that ruled on Earth when he left it.

Perhaps one could also write a story with a reversed plot: a small group of people transported in a similarly utopian, futuristic, or magical way to a different planet (say, in a different galaxy) encounters the inhabitants of a large cosmic body on which a struggle currently rages for the exclusive rule over it. The society which has more or less prevailed over the others was never too healthy, let alone without sin, thus leading another one, far more malicious than the first, to rise up against it. This had given an opportunity to a third society, which had until then just suffered and hadn't had opportunities to sin, to stand up against both, to use their bad conscience, and in the name of the future happiness of all to commit so much evil among its own people, as well as among others, that this evil had long remained hidden due to its sheer incredibility. And so that it remains hidden, this society has renamed good to evil and evil to good, freedom to slavery and enslavement to freedom, and has undertaken thousands of similar changes in language so that no one may understand that which *is*, so that everyone has to imbibe deception together with the universal mother's milk that is language. People then sacrifice themselves and others to some *bonum* (*malum?*) *futurum*, whether with the best, worse, or completely bad conscience, and not just by individuals or by dozens, but by the millions, by the tens of millions. These are not always obviously bloody sacrifices; where struggle has become routine, blood may no longer flow visibly, but everything people can live for has been taken away from them as the price for the petty things that are allowed to them. So they cheat themselves and each other out of their lives without anyone knowing about it at all.

¹ Published in Czechs in the edition of Jan Patočka's *Collected Works (Sebrané spisy, vol. 12, Oikomenh: Praha, 2006, 425–427)*.

² "Son smeshnogo cheloveka" ("The Dream of a Ridiculous Man"), a short story by Fyodor Dostoevsky written in 1877 and published in his diary *Dnevnik pisatelya* (2 vol., published 1877 and 1881).

In the midst of this turmoil, this chaos, this cheating of others as well as of oneself, a group of cosmonauts now lands with no clue about this situation and without instructions from any side. They have their two good hands, healthy hearts and lungs, and they conduct themselves with a good dose of what a great spirit once said is best distributed among men. (*Discours de la méthode*: "Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée".) And maybe for this reason – but maybe also for some other, deeper reason – they are no simpletons, no *Candides* who can be fooled into thinking that they are the citizens of the best of all possible worlds; rather, they can hear that which speaks without words within the human being.

How will these people behave in a situation in which the entire world around them, in its confusion, will try to win them over to its side by threats, promises, by the necessity to work for one's daily bread, for one's future, and maybe also for one's loved ones and others? So far, they are guiltless human beings – except for that universally human guilt of finitude, of the necessity to take a position and vouch for it. A reversed situation to that of Dostoevsky's story – a group of innocents whom the entire world, the entire planet is trying to draw into its malevolent and often even criminal confusion. What will they do? I believe they will try not to fall into that confusion, they themselves won't attempt to play that game – the game for the planet, for the cosmic body – not even in their thoughts. They will take care of their own life, for which, for the content of which, for the "leading" of which everyone has an inalienable responsibility, a responsibility which is felt increasingly as the external pressure grows sharper. Each of them will fill their soul, discovered in this contrast, with that which gives them joy in the simplicity of their spirit without causing any harm or pain to others. That these people will be loud in doing this, in order not to hear the external confusion, is a necessary part of the thing and no boasting; "although I come from a different part of the universe", they will say, "I am a human being, even all-too-human, and I like to remind myself of this, as well as those among the others who lure us with an apparent mess of pottage cooked from the leftovers of ideals."

How will it end? Again, a plot for Dostoevsky – I myself admit that I don't know. Only this much is certain: the external world has *appearance*, slander, the making of images among its most powerful means; it can present these people as the very opposite of what they are; it will cover them with a layer of filth so that they will appear as the world wishes; they will become disseminators of moral contagions for it; they will become morbid phenomena. Such people are then to be taken away, to the court, to jail, and to the prison, and then Hades' cap of invisibility will be put on them – the world will surround them with silence, ignore their existence, and forbid even the mention of their names.

Despite all this, could the outcome be the reverse of the outcome of Dostoevsky's story? What magic could accomplish it? But the human being may be directed at such mag-

ic somewhere in his depths and still not cease to believe in it. For the only real help and care for the other comes when I step forward and do what I have to do, whether in hiding or out in the open, whether anyone knows about it or not, and perchance let my awakened conscience awaken the conscience of others.

But what else is youth, after all, if not a guest that comes from the unknown to begin life anew? The story of our cosmonauts can happen anytime and anywhere – we don't want to give the impression that they are exceptional. To begin anew means in the first place to reject, to reject partially or almost completely (to reject *completely* does not seem to be possible for anyone). What is the true approach to this grace, given to us from who knows where, namely that life always begins anew? That we, older people, mired in our already habitual and worn-out routines and perspectives, have the possibility and even the necessity to revise ourselves, test ourselves – in a word, to renew ourselves – not by slavish imitation, nor by flattery, but by coming to an understanding with something that we do not produce ourselves. And what is a greater joy than to see that there is always and again the time to struggle against relief, against comfort, leveling, dishonesty to oneself and to others, against talking oneself into untruth and confusion?

We don't want to give only praise to the young cosmonauts, we also want to warn them – not against the world and the others, but against themselves. Their strength and their weakness lie solely in themselves. They themselves will write, will finish writing, the anti-story to Dostoevsky's story. May it be worthy of the story!

Translated from Czechs by Jozef Majernik³

³ I would like to thank Paul Cato, Mat Messerschmidt, and Daniel Watling for their helpful comments to earlier drafts of this translation – J.M.