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## Chesterton, Dostoevsky, and Freedom

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English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920

ELT Press

Volume 43, Number 1, 2000

pp. 37-50

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Chesterton, Dostoevsky, and Freedom Mark Knight  
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IN THE 1970s, Cardinal Albino Luciani, who was later to become Pope John Paul I, penned a posthumous letter to G. K. Chesterton as part of a series of articles he was writing at the time. In this letter he illustrated one of the points that he was making about Chesterton with reference to Ivan Karamazov from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>1</sup> For many, the idea of connecting Chesterton with Dostoevsky is a strange one. While Chesterton is seen to have rejected the modernism of his contemporaries in favour of traditional values, Dostoevsky has been appropriated by some as a figurehead for the twentieth-century existential rebel. Although Gary Wills is willing to entertain the idea of linking the two authors, he concludes that such attempts will prove fruitless: "We look for 'modernity' and the popular pessimism even in the unlikeliest places and go away saddened when Raskolnikov is not found lurking in Flambeau (whose mere name should tell us how far these tales are in their intent from Dostoevski's)."<sup>2</sup> However, those who reject the possibility of a connection between Chesterton and Dostoevsky ignore the fact that Chesterton referred to the Russian novelist in glowing terms. This article will explore this further, beginning with an examination of the evidence that Chesterton

had read some of Dostoevsky's work, and then moving on to consider one particular theme that resonates through the writings of both authors. Chesterton made two direct references to Dostoevsky in his writing. The first is to be found in an article entitled "On the Unanimity of Opinion" in the Illustrated London News, 6 April 1912. The second is found twenty-two years later, in a review of Nicholas Berdyaev's study of Dostoevsky. At first we might be tempted to dismiss the two references. Chesterton wrote about a number of different writers and thinkers, many of whom he discussed at great length. Yet we cannot dismiss Chesterton's references to Dostoevsky so easily, for, in concluding his review (37 ELT 43: 12000) of Berdyaev's book, Chesterton made a dramatic claim concerning Dostoevsky's significance: "He was one of the two or three greatest novelists of the nineteenth century."<sup>3</sup> In contrast to France and Germany, Dostoevsky's reputation in England developed relatively late. One of the primary reasons for this was the time it took for his work to be translated into English. While many of his writings had been translated into French and German by 1890, the first complete set of English translations did not appear until Constance Garnett systematically translated and published Dostoevsky's work between 1912 and 1921. Although earlier English translations existed, they were not of a particularly high quality: "Vizately had issued translations of several of the novels by Frederick Whishaw in the 1880's, and two of them had gone into a third edition. But by the time Edward [Garnett] came to write about Dostoevsky in 1906 they were unprocurable and Dostoevsky almost forgotten. . . ."<sup>4</sup> The lack of an adequate English translation meant that Dostoevsky was largely restricted to those who could read his writings in another language. One of the people who encountered Dostoevsky in this manner was Robert Louis Stevenson. In 1886, after reading a French translation of *Crime and Punishment*, he wrote a letter to John Addington Symonds describing the impact that the novel had made upon him: "Raskolnikov is easily the greatest book I have read in ten years; I am glad you took to it. Many find it dull; Henry James could not finish it: all I can say is, it nearly finished me."<sup>5</sup> Helen Muchnic has argued that Dostoevsky's popularity flourished in the wake of Constance Garnett's translations. Although not everyone liked Dostoevsky's work, the level of enthusiasm was sufficiently high to establish his reputation in Britain: "On the whole, admiration of Dostoevsky was ardent not to say excessive; within four years after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov* [in 1912] it reached the proportion of a cult."<sup>6</sup> Colin Crowder elaborates: This Dostoevsky cult, which flourished between 1912 and 1921, was the product of a number of..

## Chesterton, Dostoevsky, and Freedom

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IN THE 1970s, Cardinal Albino Luciani, who was later to become Pope John Paul I, penned a posthumous letter to G. K. Chesterton as part of a series of articles he was writing at the time. In this letter he illustrated one of the points that he was making about Chesterton with reference to Ivan Karamazov from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>1</sup> For many, the idea of connecting Chesterton with Dostoevsky is a strange one. While Chesterton is seen to have rejected the modernism of his contemporaries in favour of traditional values, Dostoevsky has been appropriated by some as a figurehead for the twentieth-century existential rebel. Although Gary Wills is willing to entertain the idea of linking the two authors, he concludes that such attempts will prove fruitless: "We look for 'modernity' and the popular pessimism even in the unlikelyst places and go away saddened when *Kaskolnikov* is not found lurking in *Flambeau* (whose mere name should tell us how far these tales are in their intent from Dostoevski's)."<sup>2</sup> However, those who reject the possibility of a connection between Chesterton and Dostoevsky ignore the fact that Chesterton referred to the Russian novelist in glowing terms. This article will explore this further, beginning with an examination of the evidence that Chesterton had read some of Dostoevsky's work, and then moving on to consider one particular theme that resonates through the writings of both authors.

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