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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND DOSTOEVSKY'S «GREAT DIALOGUE»

READING *AN UNWRITTEN NOVEL* AS CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

LETIZIA DOLCINI – *Università di Trento*

Questo articolo propone una lettura del racconto *An Unwritten Novel* di Virginia Woolf come risposta sperimentale al suo incontro con uno dei più fertili espedienti narrativi di Fëdor Dostoevskij, denominato da Michail Bachtin dialogismo. L'obiettivo è quello di contribuire ad una comprensione più profonda dell'influenza, interazione e comunicazione interculturale tra due mondi così distanti da un punto di vista geografico e temporale. Basandosi sugli studi più recenti dei contatti culturali tra il modernismo britannico e la letteratura russa, non da ultimo il saggio *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture* (2012) edito da Anthony Cross e *Russomania* (2020) di Rebecca Beasley, questo articolo analizza la narrativa woolfiana come un'incorporazione dialogica di elementi russi all'interno della poetica modernista, realizzata appunto attraverso la lettura critica e la traduzione delle opere di Dostoevskij. Partendo dall'idea sostenuta da Bachtin che il dialogo sia la natura essenziale della narrativa dostoevskijana, si mostrerà come in *An Unwritten Novel* Virginia Woolf applichi il dialogismo di Dostoevskij alla sua stessa postura creativa, innescando un dialogo tra due coscienze indipendenti che si intersecano nel processo di scrittura. L'articolo illustrerà come l'approccio dialogico di Woolf alla lettura di Dostoevskij porti all'incorporazione della natura dialogica dell'opera dell'autore russo attraverso una narrazione basata interamente sul dialogo immaginario tra la narratrice, gli altri personaggi e i lettori. In questo modo, la mediazione narrativa costruita nel racconto diventa il banco di prova della scrittrice dove portare avanti la propria riscrittura dialogica della letteratura russa.

This paper presents a reading of *An Unwritten Novel* by Virginia Woolf as an experimental narrative answer to her encounter with what Mikhail Bakhtin has called Dostoevsky's dialogism. It thus contributes to a better understanding of cross-cultural influence, interaction and communication between geographically and temporally distant worlds. Building on recent studies on the cultural contacts between British Modernism and Russian literature such as *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture* (2012) edited by Anthony Cross and Rebecca Beasley's *Russomania* (2020), this paper analyses Woolf's narrative as a dialogic incorporation of Russian elements into her modernist poetics, achieved through the act of critical reading and translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works. Drawing on the Bakhtinian idea that dialogue is the essential nature of the Russian writer's narrative, I will show how in *An Unwritten Novel* Woolf applies Dostoevsky's dialogism to her own creative attitude, establishing a dialogue with the Russian writer as two independent writing consciousnesses. I will then show how this dialogic approach to her reading of Dostoevsky brings to the incorporation of the dialogical nature of Dostoevsky's work through a narration based entirely on the imaginary dialogue between the narrator and the other characters and between the narrator and the readers. In this way, I will argue, the narrative mediation constructed in the short story becomes Woolf's testing ground for her dialogic rewriting of Russian literature.

I INTRODUCTION

Since the development of her career as a writer, Virginia Woolf has given incredible importance to her reading and understanding of other authors, as

a way to fully embrace her writing potential. As many of her non-fictional contributions demonstrate, the dialogue between Russian literature and the modernist writer has its roots in her very first reading experiences. From these readings, Woolf moved on to a critical approach to Russian authors, studying their fiction, analysing their style and trying to grasp the significance of the very distant worlds and characters represented in these narrative accounts. This paper focuses on one particular case study, the short story *An Unwritten Novel*, to show how Woolf's narrative works as a dialogic incorporation of Russian elements into her modernist poetics, achieved through the act of critical reading and translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's works.

The first part of the article presents Woolf's relation with reading and writing, underlining its dialogical nature. The basic theoretical premise of this analysis is that Woolf's attitude towards creation can be defined as dialogic in a Bakhtinian sense, as the analysis of her approach to texts as a critical reader in relation to Dostoevsky's dialogism will enlighten in the article. In order to address the process of incorporation of Russian elements implemented by Woolf in her narrative, *An Unwritten Novel* will be used as a case study. The article will illustrate different formal devices and address various thematic aspects that Woolf takes up from Dostoevsky's writing – which are tightly connected to its dialogism – to create her own narrative dialogue that unravels both inside and outside the text itself. The argument is that *An Unwritten Novel* is one of the many examples of how Woolf lives her being a writer as a polyphonic experience, that «happens between various writing consciousnesses»¹ and is constructed through «their interaction and their interdependence» [PDP, p. 36]. The narrative device of dialogism, which in Dostoevsky constituted the bones of his characters' interactions and the whole development of the narrative structure, is metanarratively transferred by Woolf on the level of literary creation. This article proposes, therefore, a reading of Woolf's intertextuality and character creation under the lens of Dostoevsky's dialogism, interpreting *An Unwritten Novel* as the initial product of such a fruitful literary dialogue.

2 READING AND WRITING AS A DIALOGUE

In her essay *How Should One Read a Book?* Virginia Woolf explicitly tackles the process that she has been using throughout her career to approach texts, firstly as a reader, then as a critic, and finally as a writer.

The first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgement upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. But not directly. Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall asleep. Then suddenly without our willing it, for it is thus that Nature undertakes these transitions, the book will return, but differently. It will float to the top of the mind as a whole. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. Details

¹ MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, eng. trans. and ed. by CAROL EMERSON, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1984 (hence [PDP]).

now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pigsty, or a cathedral. Now then we can compare book with book, as we compare building with building. But this act of comparison means that our attitude has changed; we are no longer the friends of the writer, but his judges; and just as we cannot be too sympathetic as friends, so as judges we cannot be too severe.²

As she describes, during all the steps in her reading process, the reader undergoes a transformation as their relationship with the text changes. The reader must put themselves first in a position of communication, decomposing the text into fragments that arouse questions concerning both the deciphering of the characters and their literary world, as well as the reader's inner dimension and reality. Interestingly, a very similar process is described by Woolf in the essay *Characters in Fiction*, later titled *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, as a way to understand human character and consequently create its fictional correspondent. The act of reading is therefore central in Woolf's writing upbringing, but it is also deeply intertwined with the creative process of the fictional world.

Through her «serious» reading method – «reading with a pen and a notebook»³– Woolf perceives and learns different ways of portraying characters, which is the main topic of *An Unwritten Novel*. The argument is that the short story acts as a field for Woolf where she can enact in writing the first phase of her reading process, the «conflict and the questioning»⁴ that happens when approaching another text. The reading process helps Woolf to delineate her own character structure, merging the forms and contests she finds in previous literary traditions into a new writing that is able to represent the real «Mrs Brown».⁵ The metanarrative nature of this short story is perfectly enlightened by Eleonora Natalia Ravizza:

An Unwritten Novel is the forging of the tools of a writer who is aware of the challenge of representing the complexity of the process through which we may, or may not, get to know the 'other'. In this sense, the narrative's greatest task is precisely to find ways to deconstruct (or unwrite) itself.⁶

But why can *An Unwritten Novel* be read as an experimental account of Woolf's dialogic creative process? First and foremost, in this short story Woolf puts into fiction a situation very similar to the one she will use in *Mr*

² VIRGINIA WOOLF, *How Should One Read a Book?*, in *The Common Reader Vol. 2*, London, Random House 2015.

³ EAD., July 28 1923, in *The Diary*, London, The Hogarth Press 1977-1984.

⁴ EAD., *How Should One Read a Book?*, cit.

⁵ EAD., *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, in *The Hogarth Essays Vol. 1*, London, The Hogarth Press 1924.

⁶ ELEONORA NATALIA RAVIZZA, *Four Unwritten Stories and the Geographies of Imagined Encounters: V.S. Naipaul's "A Way in the World" and Virginia Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel"*, in *Translation and Interpretation: Practicing the Knowledge of Literature*, a cura di RAUL CALZONI, FRANCESCA DI BLASIO e GRETA PERLETTI, Göttingen, V&R unipress 2022.

Bennett and Mrs Brown to explain how character should be constructed in a novel. Secondly the narrator is practising an act of reading and writing herself, by inventing a story about a lady she rides with on the train. The narrator asks her character: «Have I read you right?».⁷ It is exactly this act of reading a character that initiates the short story.

Stretching meta-narrative techniques to their furthest boundaries, the creative process that Woolf's homodiegetic narrator is enacting reflects the writer's imaginative process of composing the short story. However, this creative process is experimental also because it is developed step by step through the dialogue that the narrator has with her character Minnie Marsh and her readers. Borrowing Ravizza's words, it can be interpreted as an encounter, which «encloses [...] the potential of 'becoming with'».⁸ This multi-layered dialogue allows the narrator to, on one hand, get close to the unknown woman on the train by inventing her story, and on the other hand, to relate to the readers exactly through the narrative creation of Minnie's life:

Now, Minnie, the door's shut; Hilda heavily descends to the basement; you unstrap the straps of your basket, lay on the bed a meagre nightgown, stand side by side furred felt slippers. The looking-glass—no, you avoid the looking-glass. Some methodical disposition of hatpins. Perhaps the shell box has something in it? You shake it; it's the pearl stud there was last year—that's all. And then the sniff, the sigh, the sitting by the window. Three o'clock on a December afternoon; the rain drizzling; one light low in the skylight of a drapery emporium; another high in a servant's bedroom—this one goes out. That gives her nothing to look at. A moment's blankness—then, what are you thinking? (Let me peep across at her opposite; she's asleep or pretending it; so what would she think about sitting at the window at three o'clock in the morning in the afternoon? [UN, p. 28])

In this short passage, the narrator alternates her attempts at connecting with Minnie Marsh with questions and comments explicitly directed to her readers. The “you” pronoun transforms the narrator's inner creative process into a dialogue, making the character answer through her progressive development in form and meaning rather than her actual words. At the same time, the narrator engages also with the reader, switching to a third pronoun form and addressing them directly with expressions such as «let me peep across at her opposite» [UN, p. 28] or with open questions like «so what would she think about [...]?» [UN, p. 28].

The main topic of *An Unwritten Novel* is therefore the creative writing process and the construction of character, which is, for Woolf, nothing other than a dialogue with herself as a reader and as an artist, and a dialogue with her own readers, for the reader is fundamental to the creation of writing itself. But most importantly, the «geography of encounters»⁹ highlighted by Ravizza in this kind of literary text becomes a dialogic encounter, «which

⁷ VIRGINIA WOOLF, *An Unwritten Novel*, in *Selected Short Stories*, London, Penguin Classics 2019 (hence [UN]).

⁸ ELEONORA NATALIA RAVIZZA, *Four Unwritten Stories and the Geographies of Imagined Encounters: V.S. Naipaul's "A Way in the World"*, cit.

⁹ *Ibid.*

traverses [...] the human consciousness».¹⁰ In this sense, Woolf's reading of Dostoevsky's writing can be identified as the very basis of the development of this short story.

The creative process Woolf is studying at this phase in her career engages, in fact, with Dostoevsky's dialogism, inasmuch as she transforms Dostoevsky's character-making technique into her own creative attitude as a writer. This argument starts from Bakhtin's claim that:

In Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates toward itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness. Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself – but it is not in any case concentrated simply on its own object; it is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person. [PDP, p. 32]

Woolf's construction of narrative follows exactly the same principle. Her dialogue with Dostoevsky's writing is «internally dialogic» [PDP, p. 32] in the Bakhtinian sense that it continually glances at other writings, interrogates them, establishes a relationship with other writing consciousnesses. As the next paragraph proposes to show, analysing the re-elaboration of character interaction in *An Unwritten Novel* according to Woolf's dialogic stand towards Dostoevsky calls for an interpretation of Dostoevskian dialogism in Woolf not only as a novelistic feature inside the text, but also as an epistemological posture assumed by the writer to achieve her idea of literary representation in modernist terms.

3 FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY AND VIRGINIA WOOLF: A CONVERSATION

If we follow Virginia Woolf's life and work chronology, the contemporaneity between her reading of Dostoevsky and the writing of her short stories, including *An Unwritten Novel*, appears very clear. Even though Woolf mentions him as «the greatest writer ever born»¹¹ already in 1912, it is in January 1915 that we have the first account from her diaries of Woolf reading the Russian author:

Well, I'm reading *The Idiot*. I can't bear the style of it very often; at the same time, he seems to me to have the same kind of vitality in him that Scott had; only Scott merely made superb ordinary people; & D. creates wonders, with very subtle brains, & fearful sufferings.¹²

Already from this first comment, the interest of Woolf for Dostoevsky's construction of character is evident. It is however the period between 1917 and 1919 one of the most fruitful ones for her interpretation of the Russian

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ EAD., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* & *M Lytton Strachey*, London, The Hogarth Press Chatto & Windus 1956.

¹² EAD., January 19 1915, *The Diaries*, cit.

author. In 1917 she reads the minor works by Dostoevsky, *The Gambler and Other Stories*, *The Eternal Husband and Other Stories*, and *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*, which are critically analysed respectively in her essays *A Minor Dostoevsky* (1917), *More Dostoevsky* (1917) and *Dostoevsky in Cranford* (1919). It is not a coincidence that during this period of time Woolf composes her most famous essay about fiction, *Modern Novels*, published in April 1919 on the «Times Literary Supplement» and later inserted in *The Common Reader* as *Modern Fiction*. In this essay, the main characteristics that Woolf wants to incorporate from Russian writing and transform into her new form of writing are already mentioned. A profound «understanding of the soul and heart»¹³ and «a natural reverence for the human spirit» [MF, p. 153] is what modernist writers must learn from the Russians. But what is particularly relevant for this paper is their interest in *questioning*, what Woolf calls «inconclusiveness» [MF, p. 153], which is also what she represents in *An Unwritten Novel*:

The conclusions of the Russian Mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate, are inevitably perhaps, of the utmost sadness. More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills up with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair. They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision. [MF, p. 153]

Woolf's critical work on Dostoevsky does not stop here. She will continue to read the Russian writer throughout her life, making a lot of references to him in her private writings when composing her greatest novels, such as *Mrs Dalloway*. One of the highest points in Woolf's criticism is the essay *The Russian Point of View* (1925), which goes deeper into the topics already presented in *Modern Fiction* focusing only on the effects of the Russian influence on modern British literature. Some of the formal and content aspects already tackled in *Modern Fiction* are here addressed in much more detail, especially with reference to Chekhov, but also Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. The portrait that emerges from these critical essays is a fragmented and «questioning»¹⁴ soul, which becomes the main subject of representation for Dostoevsky and, of course, also according to Woolf new rules about what literature should be about. As she writes, «everything is the proper stuff of fiction» [MF, p. 154] and the job of the writer is to capture the turmoil and the movements of «an ordinary mind on an ordinary day» [MF, p. 149]. Woolf claims that the character is not constructed only by the external objects, or the external descriptions offered by the author, but the main substance that makes a fictional character is how their inner perspective puts itself in dialogue with the external world. This is what Woolf learns in a very different but also fruitful way from her encounter with Russian authors, Dostoevsky above all.

¹³ EAD., *Modern Fiction*, in *The Common Reader Vol. 1*, London, Random House 2015 (hence [MF]).

¹⁴ EAD., *How Should One Read a Book?*, cit.

In this portrayal of the soul, the role of dialogue is fundamental. The writer portrays «souls, tortured, unhappy souls, whose only business it is to talk, to reveal, to confess, to draw up at whatever rending of flesh and nerve those crabbled sins which crawl on the sand at the bottom of [them]».¹⁵ The characters in Dostoevsky talk «at the top of their voices»¹⁶ but, as Mikhail Bakhtin showed in his critical work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, their words are always directed to someone, their dialogue is with themselves, between them and with their creator and their readers as well:

Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. [...] It is constructed [...] as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other, this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category [...] – and this consequently makes the viewer also participants. [...] Everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable. [...] In the novel itself, nonparticipating “third persons” are not represented in any way. [...] By this means a new authorial position is won and conquered, one located above the monologic position. [PDP, p. 18]

Dostoevsky's characters are «A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices» [PDP, p. 6] that act as «autonomous subjects, not objects» [PDP, p. 7], as it is in fact the case also for the characters in *An Unwritten Novel*, where the level of the author, the narrator, the character and the reader are all intertwined in a «great dialogue» [PDP, p. 40] of representations. As Angela Locatelli claims, what is ultimately «the virtually endless plurality of life forms»¹⁷ is portrayed in *An Unwritten Novel* through «a homodiegetic narrator's stream of thoughts that puts the issue of life in plurivocal terms»¹⁸, breaking the traditional barrier between text, reader and creator.

According to Bakhtin's framework, «Dostoevsky's characters are created by their “own” words»¹⁹ and they «represent the point where the realist novel comes closest to crossing into its reader's world, overstepping the limits of fiction and text.»²⁰ Virginia Woolf makes a step further: not only does she challenge the traditional structure of fiction and text by creating characters that are, through their words and thoughts, «autonomous carrier[s] of [their] own individual word» [PDP, p. 5], she also deploys a very effective

¹⁵ EAD., *The Russian Point of View*, in *The Common Reader Vol. 1*, London, Random House 2015.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ ANGELA LOCATELLI, *Constructing and Deconstructing 'Forms of Life': Life in Literature and the Life of Literature*, in *Emergent Forms of Life in Anglophone Literature: Conceptual Frameworks and Critical Analyses*, a cura di MICHAEL BASSELER, DANIEL HARTLEY, ANSGAR NÜNNING, Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2015.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ CHLOË KITZINGER, *Mimetic Lives. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and the Character in the Novel*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press 2021.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

metanarrative technique to make her first person narrator enact a character-making process as core of the short story development, indeed to investigate how this creative evolution works.

Furthermore, Minnie Marsh, James Moggridge, Hilda Marsh, are all created with the collaboration of the reader, with whom the narrator has established a dialogue:

James Moggridge is it, whom the Marshes call Jimmy? [Minnie you must promise not to twitch till I've got this straight]. James Moggridge travels in—shall we say buttons?—but the time's not come for bringing them in—the big and the little on the long cards, some peacock-eyed, others dull gold; cairngorms some, and others coral sprays—but I say the time's not come. [UN, p. 32]

In this example, the narrator uses again the “you” form to relate to Minnie, while she constructs James Moggridge's character by openly questioning the reader about how he should be like.

Oh, Moggridge, you won't stay? You must be off? Are you driving through Eastbourne this afternoon in one of these little carriages? Are you the man who's walled up in green cardboard boxes, and sometimes has the blinds down, and sometimes sits so solemn staring like a sphinx, and always there's a look of the sepulchral, something of the undertaker, the coffin, and the dusk about horse and driver? Do tell me—but the doors slammed. We shall never meet again. Moggridge, farewell! [UN, pp. 33-34]

The dialogues again intertwine in this passage, where the narrator directly “talks” to Moggridge, after having constructed his character through a multitude of fragments: pieces of dialogue, perspectives, and images, because, as Woolf writes in her diary, «character is dissipated into shreds now»²¹ and this is what she defines «the old post-Dostoevsky argument».²² There is no doubt then that for Woolf there is a before and after reading Dostoevsky, and the main effects that this reading had on her writing must be found in character construction, the nuclear theme of *An Unwritten Novel*.

Woolf describes as such the experience of reading Dostoevsky:

And then, in the usual miraculous manner in the midst of ever-thickening storm and spray, a rope is thrown to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy; we begin to understand more than we have ever understood before, to follow feverishly, wildly, leaping the most perilous abysses, and seeming as in a crisis of real life, to gain in flashes moments of vision such as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest.²³

²¹ VIRGINIA WOOLF, June 19 1923, *The Diary*, cit.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ EAD., *A Minor Dostoevsky*, in *The Essays*, London, The Hogarth Press 1986-2011.

What Woolf finds in her reading of Dostoevsky's short stories of *The Gambler and Other Stories*²⁴ is exactly what she will define as core elements to create the new form of writing and literary representation to which modernists aspire.

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being "like this". Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday and Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. [MF, pp. 149-150]

From these theoretical premises, Woolf constructs *An Unwritten Novel*, trying to capture Life through the representation of her characters. These characters appear to be independent from the author, according to the lesson taught by Dostoevsky: the first person narrator is an autonomous voice because she is given the power to create other characters, while Minnie Marsh, Hilda, James Moggridge, all gain their independent standing in the short story almost by "rebell[ing]" to their own creator, as this short passage put by the writer into brackets shows: «[Yes, Minnie; I know you've twitched, but one moment—James Moggridge]» [UN, p. 33]

Also the narrator of *An Unwritten Novel* is constructed as an independent character in the short story. She has, in fact, the same independent power that the Underground Man or the husband-narrator have respectively in Dostoevsky's short novels *Notes from the Underground* and *A Gentle Spirit*, because of the relation that she constructs with her readers, the same way Dostoevsky does it, through a fragmented language, direct questions and open addressing words to the readers, as if their opinion, the ideas about the characters and the story they develop, are as important as the ones created by the narrator. An example would be the passage below, taken from *A Gentle Spirit*:

Listen. I was convinced of her love at that time. [...] Yes, that's just what it was, she wanted to love; she was trying to love. And the point was that in this case there were no villainies for which she had to find justification. You will say, I'm a pawnbroker; and everyone says the same.

²⁴ It is the edition read by Woolf to write *A Minor Dostoevsky*, published by William Heinemann in 1917 and translated by Constance Garnett.

But what if I am a pawnbroker? It follows that there must be reasons since the most generous of men had become a pawnbroker. You see, gentlemen, there are ideas...that is, if one expresses some ideas, utters them in words, the effect is very stupid. The effect is to make one ashamed. For what reason? For no reason. Because we are all wretched creatures and cannot hear the truth, or I do not know why. I said just now, “the most generous of men”—that is absurd, and yet that is how it was. It’s the truth, that is, the absolute, absolute truth! Yes, I had the right to want to make myself secure and open that pawnbroker’s shop: [...].²⁵

A similar pattern can be recognised in this extract from *An Unwritten Novel*:

Yes, sitting on the very edge of the chair looking over the roofs of Eastbourne, Minnie Marsh prays to God. That’s all very well; and she may rub the pane too, as though to see God better; but what God does she see? Who’s the God of Minnie Marsh, the God of the back streets of Eastbourne, the God of the three o’clock in the afternoon? I, too, see roofs, I see sky; but, oh, dear—this seeing of Gods! More like President Kruger than Prince Albert—that’s the best I can do for him; and I see him on a chair, in a black frock-coat, not so very high up either; I can manage a cloud or two for him to sit on; and then his hand trailing in the cloud holds a rod, a truncheon is it?—black, thick, thorned—a brutal old bully—Minnie’s God! Did he send the itch and the patch and the twitch? Is that why she prays? What she rubs on the window is the stain of sin. Oh, she committed some crime! I have my choice of crimes. The woods flit and fly—in summer there are bluebells; in the opening there, when Spring comes, primroses. A parting, was it, twenty years ago? Vows broken? Not Minnie’s!...She was faithful. How she nursed her mother! All her savings on the tombstone—wreaths under glass—daffodils in jars. But I’m off the track. A crime...They would say she kept her sorrow, suppressed her secret—her sex, they’d say—the scientific people But what flummery to saddle her with sex! No—more like this. [UN, pp. 28-29]

By closely analysing these passages, it is fair to claim that Woolf incorporated Dostoevsky’s techniques of creating a character as an autonomous subject in the story, by making them build a personal relationship with the readers through the establishment of a dialogue with them. However, Woolf gives this technique a new life and a new function: she uses, in fact, the dialogue between the reader and the character to unravel her own understanding of Dostoevsky’s writing, in order to incorporate and transform the elements that she finds most compelling for her writing into her modern idea of literary representation. How does she enact this step further in the short story? The main point is that the dialogue between reader and narrator that in Dostoevsky’s *A Gentle Spirit* was mainly to give life to the characters and establish their own standing in the short story, in Woolf’s work the same dialogue becomes a metanarrative interrogation about how this process of character-making and storytelling should proceed. By making her character enact

²⁵ FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *A Gentle Spirit*, in *The Eternal Husband and Other Stories*, trans. by Constance Garnett, London, The Macmillan Company 1923.

a character-making process, Woolf interrogates herself on how characters should be built in the first place, decomposing, incorporating and transforming all the innovations she encountered in Dostoevsky's writing. The dialogic aspect of this relation manifests itself in the fact that Dostoevsky's writing does not become an «object» [PDP, p. 18] for Woolf to englobe, but rather a separate consciousness with whom she can actively engage in dialogue.

Another example of this multifaceted uses of dialogue in *An Unwritten Novel* is to be found in the following passage:

James Moggridge is dead now, gone for ever. Well, Minnie—"I can face it no longer." If she said that—(Let me look at her. She is brushing the eggshell into deep declivities). She said it certainly, leaning against the wall of the bedroom, and plucking at the little balls which edge the claret-coloured curtain. But when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?—the entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil and left the world—a coward perhaps, yet somehow beautiful, as it flits with its lantern restlessly up and down the dark corridors. "I can bear it no longer", her spirit says. "That man at lunch—Hilda—the children." Oh, heavens, her sob! It's the spirit wailing its destiny, the spirit driven hither, thither, lodging on the diminishing carpets—meagre footholds—shrunken shreds of all the vanishing universe—love, life, faith, husband, children, I know not what splendours and pageantries glimpsed in girlhood. "Not for me—not for me." [UN, p. 34, bold mine]

Here the narrator interrogates herself – together with her readers and Dostoevsky – about the nature of monologue, which is a technique that Russian authors beautifully mastered and modernist writers picked up to achieve their personal writing mission of «looking at [them]selves in a new way».²⁶ In this extract one of the few instances of Minnie Marshes' direct discourses is to be found, where she is actually speaking to herself. The narrator gives her this possibility to understand how inner monologue works, a technique that has been used by Dostoevsky in almost every one of his works. The answer that Woolf offers in the short story to this question of who is speaking in a monologue is consistent with her reading of Dostoevsky: «the entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil and left the world» [UN, p. 34]. This is how Woolf understands Dostoevsky's representation of the self, as it clearly emerges by reading her essays about his writing. In *An Unwritten Novel* Woolf is thus trying to deconstruct it in a fictional form, in order to achieve the representation of «every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit» [MF, p. 154] in her experimental writing.

Furthermore, the monologue for Woolf becomes a way to create multiple characters, the one who speaks and the one who is talked about, a technique that happens also in Dostoevsky, which results in a very complex embedding of stories and voices that replicate the job of the writer. Let us compare a few examples, taken from *An Unwritten Novel* and two short stories by Dostoevsky, *A Gentle Spirit* and *An Honest Thief*. Woolf lets Minnie's character emerge through the imagination of her narrator:

²⁶ EDWARD MORGAN FORSTER, *Aspects of the Novel*, London, Penguin Classics 1999.

I have my choice of crimes. The woods flit and fly—in summer there are bluebells; in the opening there, when Spring comes, primroses. A parting, was it, twenty years ago? Vows broken? Not Minnie's!...She was faithful. How she nursed her mother! All her savings on the tombstone—wreaths under glass—daffodils in jars. But I'm off the track. A crime... [UN, p. 29]

A straight correspondence in the character-construction process is to be found in Dostoevsky's monologues respectively by Astafy Ivanovich and the narrator in *A Gentle Spirit*:

1 And at that his blue lips began all of a sudden to quiver, and a tear ran down his white cheek and trembled on his stubbly chin, and then poor Emelyanoushka burst into a regular flood of tears. Mercy on us! I felt as though a knife were thrust into my heart! The sensitive creature! I'd never have expected it. Who could have guessed it? [...] Well, sir, why make a long story of it? And the whole affair is so trifling; it's not worth wasting words upon. Why, you, for instance, sir, would not have given a thought to it, but I would have given a great deal – if I had a great deal to give – that it never should have happened at all.²⁷

2 Suddenly I heard her, sitting in our room, at work at her table, begin softly, softly...singing. This novelty made an overwhelming impression upon me, and to this day I don't understand it. [...] Now her little song was so faint – it was not that it was melancholy (it was some sort of ballad), but in her voice there was something jangled, broken, as though her voice were not equal to it, as though the song itself were sick. She sang in an undertone, and suddenly, as her voice rose, it broke – such a poor little voice, it broke so pitifully; she cleared her throat and began softly, softly singing...²⁸

The process of character-making is at the centre of these three instances, in two different ways: in the case of Dostoevsky the autonomous voice of the narrator is made by his personal impressions, his subjective perspective that dominates the construction of the other character; on the other hand Woolf upgrades this technique by making her narrator, through her subjective perspective and very similar narrative devices, literally invent the character's own story, for she is metanarratively studying the different possibilities of character construction by exploring what Woolf herself is doing as a writer when composing a short story or a novel.

In all the examples that I have quoted, the use of monologue flows into the concept of dialogue. The narrators in Dostoevsky are, in fact, putting themselves into dialogue with their readers and at the same time, they intertwine their voice with the one they are reporting in their monologues. This instance taken from *An Honest Thief* clarifies my interpretation:

²⁷ ID., *An Honest Thief*, in *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*, trans. by CONSTANCE GARNETT, London, William Heinemann Ltd 1919.

²⁸ ID., *A Gentle Spirit*, cit.

After hearing that threat, Emelyanoushka sat at home that day and the next; but on the third he slipped off again. I waited and waited; he didn't come back. Well, at least I don't mind owning, I was in a fright, and I felt for the man too. What have I done to him? I thought. I've scared him away. Where's the poor fellow gone to now? He'll get lost maybe. Lord have mercy upon us!

Night came on, he did not come. In the morning I went out into the porch; I looked, and if he hadn't gone to sleep in the porch! There he was with his head on the step, and chilled to the marrow of his bones.

“What next, Emelyanoushka, God have mercy on you! Where will you get to next!”

“Why, you where—sort of—angry with my, Astafy Ivanovich, the other day, you were vexed and promised to put me to sleep in the porch, so I didn't—sort of—venture to come in, Astafy Ivanovich, and so I lay down here...”

I did feel angry and sorry too.

“Surely you might undertake some other duty, Emelyanoushka, instead of lying here guarding the steps”, I said.

“Why, what other duty, Astafy Ivanovich?”

“You lost soul” – I was in such a rage, I called him that – ‘if you could but learn tailoring work! Look at your old rag of a coat! It's not enough to have it in tatters, here you are sweeping the steps with it! You might take a needle and boggle up your rags, as decency demands. Ah, you drunken man!’

What do you think, sir? He actually did take the needle. Of course I said it in jest, but he was so scared he set to work.²⁹

In this passage, the main voice belongs to Astafy Ivanovich, who has become the narrator in the story, since, according to what the original first-person narrator tells the readers, «in the perpetual boredom of my existence such a storyteller was a veritable treasure»³⁰, and therefore takes up the main position as a narrator. He tells the story of a beggar, Emelyan Ilytch, and his attempts at reeding himself from his life of dissolution.

Thus, reading the quoted extract from the short story, the readers can experience a very complex polyphony and levels of dialogue: Astafy's narrating voice, which is addressed to both the first-person narrator and the readers, creating two levels of dialogue at once, connected in turn to the dialogue between Astafy and Emelyanoushka, the third level of dialogue present in the short story.

Woolf recognises this kind of overlapping of voices and takes it up in *An Unwritten Novel*, letting many different voices free to express themselves and frequently changing the point of view from which the characters are constructed. In this way, Woolf explicitly questions, through a first-person narrator that is not able to maintain her predominance in the narration, the sovereignty of the author herself in the development of the creative process. The centre of Woolf's literary goal, however, remains the portrayal of life. On the

²⁹ ID., *An Honest Thief*, cit.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

one hand she engages with the dialogic technique to reach the representation of a life-like character, a character that coincides with the alteration of human nature that is happening at the beginning of the 20th century. Woolf strongly believes, in the words of Angela Locatelli, that «new modes of representation will have to correspond to new ‘forms of life,’ As a consequence, new forms of literature must emerge».³¹ On the other hand, portraying many overlapping voices is a way to fuse together, through the many levels of her characters’ discourses, the different roles she takes during her writing creative process. The following passage from *An Unwritten Novel* shows the intertwining of the dialogue between the narrator and her readers, the dialogue that she establishes with her character-creation Minnie, and finally Minnie’s voice, who cries out to her creator in order to portray her independent role as a character in the short story:

She runs, she rushes, home she reaches, but too late. Neighbours—the doctor—baby brother—the kettle—scalded—hospital—dead—or only the shock of it, the blame? Ah, but the detail matters nothing! It’s what she carries with her; the spot, the crime, the thing to expiate, always there between her shoulders. “Yes” she seems to nod to me, “it’s the thing I did.” Whether you did, or what you did, I don’t mind; it’s not the thing I want. The draper’s window looped with violet—that’ll do; a little cheap perhaps, a little commonplace—since one has a choice of crimes, but then so many (let me peep across again—still sleeping, or pretending sleep! white, worn, the mouth closed—a touch of obstinacy, more than one would think—no hint of sex)—so many crimes aren’t your crime; your crime was cheap; only the retribution solemn; for now the church door opens, the hard wooden pew receives her; on the brown tiles she kneels; every day, winter, summer, dusk, dawn (here she’s at it) prays. All her sins fall, fall, for ever fall. [UN, p. 29]

The way in which Virginia Woolf re-elaborates Dostoevsky’s polyphonic technique ultimately demonstrates that literary cross-cultural conversation becomes for her an instrument to investigate how writing can innovate and continuously transform itself into that «special prose»³² she so eagerly looked for to represent both the subject and the reality around them.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the cross-cultural conversation that Virginia Woolf had with Fyodor Dostoevsky’s writing throughout her writing career, with a specific reference to her short stories, which explicitly show her engagement with a critical reading and interpretation of the Russian writer. By

³¹ ANGELA LOCATELLI, *Constructing and Deconstructing ‘Forms of Life’*, cit.

³² KATHERINE MANSFIELD, *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY, New York, A.A. Knopf 1929.

analysing and questioning every impression that Dostoevsky's writing produced on her, Woolf decomposed and exploited different techniques in order to innovate her own literary representation, Dostoevsky's dialogism above all. Through the intertwining of a dialogue between writers, readers and characters, Woolf manages to adapt Dostoevsky's representation of characters as autonomous subjects through the use of dialogue to her own idea of character representation, which is here shown as a proper analysis of the character-making process. *An Unwritten Novel* speaks to its readers, but also from writer to writer, trying to understand how and why literature works the way it does. Ultimately, Woolf found in Dostoevsky and the other Russian writers what she could not find in most of her English predecessors: the confirmation that every character, every Mrs Brown deserves representation, for the interesting stuff of fiction is the inner voyage that these characters – and the writer along with them – can undertake, though an end to this exploration does not seem to exist. The narrator's final words in *A Gentle Spirit* are: «what will become of me?».³³ On a similar note, the Underground Man asks himself and his readers: «Why, we don't even know what living means now, what it is, and what is called?».³⁴ This final inconclusive remarks resonate in the ending of *An Unwritten Novel*: «Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life's bare as bone.» [UN, p. 36] However, also thanks to Dostoevsky's lessons, Woolf tries to find the impossible answer:

Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world! [UN, p. 36]

The only path, therefore, is to continue this intertwined dialogue between writers, readers and characters, and by so doing, literature can succeed in the representation of Life and the Soul that both Dostoevsky and Woolf so eagerly sought through the development of their creative process of writing.

³³ FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *A Gentle Spirit*, cit.

³⁴ ID., *Notes from the Underground*, cit.

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