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DOSTOEVSKY
On the Threshold
of Other Worlds

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READING THE GAMBLER AS ROULETTEBURY

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The original title of the novel Fyodor Dostoevsky (and his future wife) wrote down in twenty-six days in October 1866 was not The Gambler but Roulettenburg. This title, however, was not accepted by the publisher Fyodor Stellovsky, who proposed the version which from then on has followed the book: The Gambler. Dostoevsky did not set himself against the change, even though the inventor of the new title ‘did not understand anything’—maybe because the question did not seem all that important to him. Or maybe the writer did not want another controversy with this unscrupulous speculator.

But what does this change mean? Nothing? The text of the novel remains the same. On the other hand, the title is in fact the first words the prospective reader meets, and everything that happens in the novel is viewed and evaluated in the light of these first words. When the novel is named The Gambler, the focus inevitably is on the narrator, who in fact is ‘the gambler’,—but not the only one. If the novel had retained its original title—Roulettenburg, the attention of the reader would have been directed more towards the whole society gathered around the roulette table. However, there is no sharp contrast between these two possibilities; in both cases Aleksei Ivanovich in his capacity as author of the notes, as narrator, will occupy a special place, just as the whole gambling society surrounding him will attract the attention of the reader anyhow. But if we look at the novel as Roulettenburg, the society will move from the background to the foreground.

Dostoevsky has a relatively high rate of work titles indicating collectives—from Poor Folk to The Brothers Karamazov. But Roulettenburg and The Village of Stepanchikovo and its Inhabitants are the only two containing a place name. Roulettenburg and Stepanchikovo, however, are names of two different types; the last one has no apparent symbolic meaning, while the first one is saturated with it. No real town or city is named Roulettenburg; the name has been invented with an evident intention—to show a community totally dominated by gambling. And in fact we see very little of what is going on in the town outside the precincts of the casino, the spa with the adjacent park, and the hotel.

1PSS, XXVIII: 2, 159. (Letter to Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya, dated 17th June, 1866).
We are not told in what country the town of Roulettenburg is situated, but the ending -burg and several other details point at one or another of the western German states, although the first part of the word is of Romance origin. Thus the name attains a more general Western European colour, indicating that what is happening there is not connected with only one nation or one country. In accordance with this striving towards a general European setting Dostoevsky also chooses characters from various great European nations: France (Mlle Blanche des Cominges, Marquis des Gri eux), Great Britain (Mr Astley), Germany (the Prussian baron Wurmerhelm and his spouse) and of course Russia; there are also some Poles, as usual in Dostoevsky's work—very unsympathetic ones. Moreover, these representatives of various countries also bear their nation's typical characteristics according to common cliché (or even prejudice): 'The General is the pathetic Russian cosmopolitan, prey to all the evils Dostoevsky imagines come with rootlessness; de Grieux is the prototypical Frenchman, smooth, well-mannered, and unprincipled; Mr Astley is the quintessential Englishman, laconic, honest, unperturbed on the surface; Mlle Blanche is the beautiful, predatory, superficial French seductress.² In fact, Dostoevsky himself explicitly emphasizes the 'Germanness' of the baron's appearance and asserts that des Grieux 'was like all Frenchmen' (p. 58), then listing all the main traits of that variety of mankind.

Then comes the Russian group, by far the largest. It is not homogeneous; several ages and social layers are represented. At the top we find the general, his sister and his children, then comes his stepdaughter Polina, then the family's tutor Aleksei Ivanovich—the narrator; he too is a nobleman, although in a subordinate position. Servants also appear on the scene but play no significant role.

This Russian group is closely affiliated with the French one, which consists of a false marquis, a mademoiselle with a dubious identity, and her pretended mother. The Englishman remains on the periphery of the story, while the Prussian baron and baroness are only episodic figures: one even gets the impression that Dostoevsky introduces them only to expand his list of represented national types.

All these uncertain positions—general but not rich, nobleman but only a tutor, stepdaughter, not daughter, false title, false identity—create a state of general instability which is reflected in the prevailing tense atmosphere; scandal is continually looming on the horizon. As usual both in Dostoevsky and in literature in general, the story gains speed when a new person arrives in this labile milieu. In The Gambler, the new person is la baboulinka ('Granny'),³ who also brings

³The Russian word babushka with the diminutive babulin'ka denotes not only the mother of the father or mother (grandmother), but any elderly female relative.
with her fresh money, the stuff that keeps the story going on. Coming directly from Russia, she gives a new facet to the Russian group, which otherwise consists of people who have lived abroad for quite a long time and have become affected by their absence from home.

The arrival of 'Granny' is the big surprise in the novel. Everybody has been waiting for a message about her demise, but then she suddenly appears 'like a bolt from the blue' (p. 78)—true, in a wheeled chair, but bursting with energy. There is often something wrong with Dostoevsky's generals; their wives and widows, however, are magnificent: 'Granny' is 'alert, perky, and sure of herself as ever before, sitting upright in her chair, shouting in a loud and imperious voice, scolding every one.' (p. 78)

'Granny' has come to Roulettenburg to undergo treatment—and to visit the roulette table. The medical treatment is hardly mentioned any more, for when 'Granny' enters the casino the roulette immediately attracts all her attention. She is totally unprepared, knowing the casino only by hearsay or from literature, and therefore needs a guide or 'tutor'. She chooses Aleksei Ivanovich. He has gambled once before, on behalf of Polina, and he has studied the procedures of the roulette, so he is quite able to act as 'Granny's' adviser. The old lady soon becomes totally absorbed by the gambling, and her excitement also infects Aleksei Ivanovich: 'I was myself a gambler; I felt it at that very moment. My limbs were trembling, and I felt dazed.' (p. 104) But Dostoevsky has composed his novel in a way that does not let us see both of them gamble at one and the same time; only when 'Granny' has finally lost all her money and all of the stocks and bonds she had brought with her from Russia, Aleksei Ivanovich starts gambling, again for Polina's sake, but now with his own money—fifty pieces of gold which he has got from none other than 'Granny'.

Their fates on the whole follow the same curve: first they win an enormous fortune—and then they lose everything. But they end in different ways; 'Granny', having spent her last rouble in the casino, returns to Russia, where she still possesses three villages and two houses; Aleksei Ivanovich, however, seems to be fettered to the roulette for the rest of his life.

There is a multitude of gamblers in the casino of Roulettenburg; especially in chapter one, when Aleksei Ivanovich enters the casino for the first time, we are given a vivid description of the various categories of gamblers. 'Granny' and Aleksei Ivanovich, however, are the only two whom we follow as individuals. We are offered insight into their psychology, we can see how people become involved with gambling, while for all the others we only observe how they already are gamblers. This makes them by no means uninteresting. First of all they form an impressive background for the development of gambling addiction in the heroine and the hero—'The Gambler'. But they are important also in themselves, giving meaning to the whole society's name—'Roulettenburg'. The novel is in fact more than the story of one single man, it is the tale of how gambling changes men in general. Therefore Aleksei Ivanovich is not alone, his psychological development is paralleled by that of 'Granny', and all the other people around the tables in Roulettenburg, but only one or two. These have been devoured by the game.

In the novel's last chapter, Aleksei Ivanovich again meets his fate. ‘Verily, even in our old age pride.’ (p. 147) Almost all his plans to organize her return by train to Roulettenburg: 'From now I start to ‘Granny’ foolish things' (p. 147)—and home in Russia for the rest of the age of 100, as supposed by Dostoevsky, but only one or two. The rest have been devoured by the game.

However, the changes that complex that those in 'Granny' by side with his problematic if he starts gambling in order to get bank notes and rolls of gold eyes off it. There were mom 160) And further on: 'I swear, the moment I had touched the scoop up those bundles of background.' (p. 168) Part of passion serves as a substitute for the same sado-masochistic labyrith he gets another woman—Mill Blanche.' (p. 172) She, too, is robs him of his two hundred it itself could have done.

What is going on with ‘Granny’ effect of the roulette: it drains
people around the tables in the casino show traits of the same addiction that befalls these two. When reading the novel as Roulettenburg, we interpret the detailed description of Aleksei Ivanovich's development as gambler as a prototypical feature rather than as something singular and only personal.

But what does the roulette do, then, to those who touch it? Let us first have a look at 'Granny'. The imposing old lady has now turned weak and meek: 'Verily, even in our old age God exacts retribution and punishes us for our pride.' (p. 147) Almost all her energy is gone, what is left of it she spends to organize her return by train to Russia. However, she has been taught a lesson in Roulettenburg: 'From now I shall no longer blame young people for doing foolish things' (p. 147)—and probably she will be able to lead a normal life home in Russia for the rest of her days. That will not be twenty-five years, till the age of 100, as supposed by the Russian group when she arrives in Roulettenburg, but only one or two. The reader suspects that the remaining expected years have been devoured by the gambling.

In the novel's last chapter, a couple of years after the events in Roulettenburg, Aleksei Ivanovich again meets Mr Astley, who reproaches him with the following words (among others): 'Yes, you have destroyed yourself. You had some abilities, a lively disposition, and you were not a bad man. In fact, you might have been of service to your country, which needs men so badly. But you are going to stay here, and your life is finished'. (p. 196)

However, the changes that take place in Aleksei Ivanovich's mind are more complex that those in 'Granny', since his involvement with gambling lives side by side with his problematic infatuation for Polina and competes with it. In fact, he starts gambling in order to help his beloved, but what happens? 'A huge pile of bank notes and rolls of gold filled the whole table, and I could not take my eyes off it. There were moments when I completely forgot about Polina.' (p. 160) And further on: 'I swear, I felt sorry for Polina, but strangely enough, from the moment I had touched that gaming table the night before and had begun to scoop up those bundles of money, my love had somehow receded to the background.' (p. 168) Part of the explanation for this may be that 'gambling passion serves as a substitute for eroticism because it keeps one caught in the same sado-masochistic labyrinths.'

Aleksei Ivanovich does not get Polina, but he gets another woman—Mlle Blanche. True, there may have been a touch of eroticism in their relationship, but decidedly no love: 'No, as I recall now, I was terribly sad even then, even though I tried to laugh as heartily as that silly goose Blanche.' (p. 172) She, too, is part of the machinery that rules Roulettenburg and robs him of his two hundred thousand francs almost as rapidly as the roulette itself could have done.

What is going on with 'Granny' and Aleksei Ivanovich clearly shows the effect of the roulette: it drains the life energy—including the ability to love and

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thereby make life continue in new generations—out of them and the other people gathered around the gaming table. It also supplants the normal common reason with a mind filled with illusions: the gambler seeks power and freedom, but becomes trapped in hopeless determinism.\(^5\) Before he starts gambling, Aleksei Ivanovich is fully aware of ‘the mercenary motives and snares upon which the bank is founded and built’ (p. 18), just as he clearly understands the immorality of the whole institution of the casino. But being one of Dostoevsky’s rebels, revolting against the restrictions set by reason and morality, he confesses: ‘But I would like to take notice of one thing: of late I have been finding it somehow extremely repulsive to apply any kind of moral standard to my actions and thoughts. I was guided by something quite different...’ (p. 19) These words also show that the future gambler has been infected with the spirit of Roulettenburg even before entering the casino building. We may suppose that he possesses the same knowledge also after this spirit has completely invaded him, but then he has neither the freedom nor the power to make use of his insight.

It should be mentioned that this devastating effect has not only an individual aspect, but also a national one, insofar as the roulette seems to be especially suited for Russians. Thus it becomes an instrument with which wicked Western Europe can tap the more primitive and formless but also more vigorous Russians for their energy.

All in all, the result is a sort of mental death befalling everyone trapped by the roulette, and in accordance with this interpretation of his situation Aleksei Ivanovich claims: ‘Tomorrow I may rise from the dead and begin a new life!’ (p. 187) Consequently Roulettenburg can be viewed as a kind of ‘House of the Dead’, and in fact, in the early stages of the planning of his novel, Dostoevsky mentions that book as a model for his new enterprise.\(^6\)

The realm of the dead in the Christian tradition is either heaven or hell. And the gambling casino is surely no heaven; Aleksei Ivanovich confesses: ‘Yet at the same time I have a feeling that I have grown numb, somehow, as though I were buried in some kind of mire.’ (p. 189) Konstantin Mochulsky states: ‘The author relied on the effect of the subject’s novelty and compared the “hell of roulette” to the hell of the House of Death.’\(^7\)

The interpretation of Roulettenburg as a hellish place is strengthened by the occurrence of another place name connected with it: Schlangenberg, that is ‘the Serpentine Mountain’.\(^8\) Both ‘devil': ‘Again the devil taken sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the power thereof, to shew him; and said unto him, All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me' (Matt. 4: 8, 9) In the first chapter last time at the Schlangenburg me to throw yourself down here think’ (pp. 12-13), which reminds us of the Holy Scripture: ‘Then the devil, taking him up to a high mountain, showed unto him all the kingdom of the world and the glory of it, and said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.’ (Matt. 4: 5-6) The Schlangenber is here connected habit; however, there is at this point these two themes insofar as the Polina urges him to go to the feeling of falling (with its symbol Polina to the roulette: ‘There Whitaker may perhaps have resembled the she was hurtling to the ground Blanchard’s life ended in flames.

We may have our forebod that Aleksei Ivanovich will succeed he heard Mr Astley’s prediction, to the mysterious omniscient fig, ‘new life’ (p. 187) after the roubl: The Gambler is, together with autobiographical of all Dosto extensively used to illustrate the phantastic liaison with Apollon. Its full meaning, however, can whole gambling community of

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\(^6\)PSS XXVIII: 2, 50-51. (Letter to Nikolai Strakhov, dated 18 (30) September, 1863.)


\(^8\)Joseph Frank, in Dostojevski: The Man and His Work, pp. 170-183, repeatedly names the town inversely, when Victor Terras in his
Serpentine Mountain'. Both ‘serpent’ and ‘mountain’ are associated with the devil: ‘Again the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.’ (Matt. 4: 8, 9) In the first chapter of The Gambler, Polina says: ‘You told me last time at the Schlangenburg [sic] that you were ready at a single word from me to throw yourself down head first, and it’s a thousand-foot drop there. I think’ (pp. 12-13), which reminds the reader of an adjacent passage from the Holy Scripture: ‘Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down.’ (Matt. 4: 5-6) True, the eventual throwing himself down from the Schlangenberg is here connected with his infatuation for Polina, not his gambling habit; however, there is at this point already a ‘metonymic’ connection between these two themes insofar as the Schlangenberg promise is mentioned just before Polina urges him to go to the casino and gamble for her. Later on we see this feeling of falling (with its symbolic overtones) more explicitly transferred from Polina to the roulette: ‘There was a moment, though, as I was waiting, which may perhaps have resembled the feeling experienced by Mme Blanchard when she was hurtling to the ground from her balloon, in Paris.’ (p. 154) Marie Blanchard’s life ended in flames.

We may have our forebodings, but Dostoevsky does not tell us whether Aleksei Ivanovich will succeed in ‘rising from the dead’. But we have already heard Mr Astley’s prediction, and this English gentleman is playing the role of the mysterious omniscient figure in the novel. Aleksei Ivanovich’s hope for a ‘new life’ (p. 187) after the roulette appears as just another illusion.

The Gambler is, together with Notes from the House of the Dead, the most autobiographical of all Dostoevsky’s novels, and quite naturally it has been extensively used to illustrate the author’s own experiences at the roulette, his phantastic liaison with Apollinaria Suslova, the psychology of the gambler etc. Its full meaning, however, can only be brought to the surface if we include the whole gambling community of Roulettenburg in our analysis.

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8Joseph Frank, in Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871 (London: Robson Books, 1995), pp. 170-183, repeatedly names the town ‘Roulettenburg’, thus unconsciously (?) emphasizing the ties between it and the mountain (in German: ‘Berg’). The very same effect is achieved, although inversely, when Victor Terras in his translation writes ‘Schlangenburg’.

45