

Petr Vaškovic, *Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky: The Search of the Authentic Life and the Problem of Existential Entrapment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).

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Petr Vaškovic's monograph *Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky: The Search of the Authentic Life and the Problem of Existential Entrapment* revives the scholarly tradition of reading two existential authors and thinkers together. As Vaškovic, like many before him, remarks, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1888) were contemporaries who dealt with intriguingly similar themes of Christianity and existence—and yet, they knew nothing about one another. Vaškovic's main aim is to examine the similar ways in which these two authors address the search for the authentic life. Throughout the book, Vaškovic reads Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard by turns and points out similarities in their ways of depicting the obstacles of pursuing authenticity. The book is composed of three parts: The first part deals with similarities between Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's thought (including the introduction of the preexisting tradition of reading them together). The second part, then, introduces the stories of entrapment, with focus on the various obstacles to the individual's ethical-religious development. This part includes the main readings of both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. The last part provides some ways out of entrapment.

Vaškovic argues that the characters in the books by both authors are not ready-made but struggle in order to become authentically ethical and religious individuals. Vaškovic calls the various ways in which each character's progress is hindered "existential entrapment." By existential entrapment, Vaškovic refers to moments when an individual wishes to progress towards the ethical-religious, but for one reason or another is unable to take any steps. The obstacles of existential development include, but are not limited to, daydreaming, indecisiveness, and obsession with an idea. The study is well-structured and easy to follow. In each chapter, Vaškovic alternates between Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky (instead of devoting independent chapters for each author, say), which works well, and at the same time, proves how strikingly similar Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are.

Considering the vast corpus that Vaškovic works with, the book is rather concise, 269 pages in total. Despite the brevity, Vaškovic manages to provide an overview of each text he analyzes and combine his original text analyses with summaries of reasonable length of various works by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. I consider his readings of Dostoevsky better, as they less often build an argument on a kind of psychologizing of the characters, and involve more literary history. That might stem from

Vaškovic's "methodological" distinction of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher and Dostoevsky as an author. Since philosophy and literature were not particularly distinctive fields in Golden Age Denmark, Vaškovic could have contextualized Kierkegaard more within the literary field of his time. I will leave Vaškovic's readings of Dostoevsky mostly aside, as this review focuses on the approach to Kierkegaard.

The analyses of Kierkegaard's writings have their pros and cons. Beginning with the achievements, it is overall a welcome idea to closely read Kierkegaard's novelistic works. Vaškovic devotes sections to texts that are undeservedly overlooked in Kierkegaard's corpus, such as "Silhouettes" in *Either/Or*. Similarly, Vaškovic offers detailed analyses of some posthumous books that are often left out of the Kierkegaardian core (such as *Johannes Climacus, or, De omnibus dubitandum est*, and *The Book on Adler*).

Vaškovic makes some linguistic remarks on both Kierkegaard's Danish and Dostoevsky's Russian. That is refreshing against the backdrop of the Anglophone dominance of this area of study. For instance, he analyzes the overabundant use of various Russian words referring to shame in Ivolgin's dying speech in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (90), and how the prefixes change the meaning of the same root form (112). Similarly, he recurrently comments on the various possible translations for Danish words. However, some core concepts would have benefited from more discussion. Vaškovic quite loosely uses the terms "imagination," "fantasy," and "dreaming," even though "imagination" in particular is a multifaceted key term in Kierkegaard's thought. Vaškovic presents imagination almost as if it should be avoided, even though for Kierkegaard it allows us to imagine one's better self, and as such, it could provide another way out of entrapment. Similarly, Vaškovic adopts the Hongs' translation for *Tungsind* as "depression," despite the anachronism. Regarding the definitions of imagination, *Tungsind*, and moods in general, a consideration of Vincent McCarthy's work would have been an asset.¹ Since Vaškovic reads Russian, the study would have also been more relevant if it had introduced some previous studies of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky in more detail. For instance, Piama Gaidenko's dissertation receives only a passing mention, when it could have perhaps deepened Vaškovic's undertheorized account of characterological analysis.²

Vaškovic aims to make a characterological analysis of Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's heroes, but it is difficult to determine what kind of theoretical framework he is using. At least, it is not drawn from literary studies, and certain concepts and theories

¹ See e.g., Vincent McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978); Vincent McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

² Piama Pavlovna Gaidenko, *Tragediia estetizma: K kharakteristike mirovozzrenii S. K'erkegora* [The Tragedy of Aestheticism: On the World-View of Søren Kierkegaard] (Moscow: Iskysstvo, 1970).

from literary studies could have improved the argument. Vaškovic does not pay attention to the unreliable narrators both in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, and he seems to overlook the metafictional nature present in the imaginary psychological constructions of *Repetition* and *Stages on Life's Way*. Thus, Vaškovic's interpretation of novelistic works contains some of the main weaknesses of the study.

The readings also occasionally suffer from carelessness. Vaškovic rushes into interpreting, at the expense of reliable framing. For instance, he frames *Repetition's* Young Man as someone who chooses "to poeticize rather than experience the romantic relationship, his existence takes on a dream-like quality. He lives in his imagination, fantasizing about his love and paying little attention to other people or events unfolding around him" (83). That seems rather a strange statement, since the Young Man actually tries to avoid becoming a poet, and he makes recurrent remarks on Constantin Constantius and their relationship.

Vaškovic argues that the Young Man pays "very little attention to what was 'objectively real,' i.e., what was present within the intersubjectively established space they share with other individuals" (102). If that is true, it makes it hard to explain how the Young Man seems to care more about Constantin Constantius' judgment of him than the beloved girl's opinions. After *Repetition* takes its turn into an epistolary novel, relatively little happens, but everything that does happen takes place exactly in "the intersubjectively established space" between the Young Man and his confidant. *Repetition* seems not to support Vaškovic's discovery of the Young Man's isolated dreaming. Moreover, the account overlooks the novella's main theme of suffering as something beyond any imagination.

Furthermore, the analysis of the final letter by the Young Man goes as follows: "Some might argue that the Young Man's joy at seeing his ex-lover's marriage proves that he actually cares for her. But would he be any less happy if this woman were to free herself from him not by marriage but by death? Probably not" (103). But the Young Man is not happy at all. His apparent joyfulness is bittersweet at best, the Young Man's clumsy attempt to become ironic.

Vaškovic's speculation over the alternative ending and the Young Man's feelings about it brings us to the next criticism. On many occasions, Vaškovic reads the writings as if the characters were real people, and sometimes veers too closely in the psychological readings to diagnosing the characters. For one, when discussing Marie Beaumarchais in "Silhouettes," Vaškovic posits that "Marie's ability to switch quickly between often contradictory opinions and beliefs might still seem to be an advantage rather than a pathological existential state," and "that Marie's mind is so extraordinarily flexible that she can quickly and effortlessly change even the most ingrained of

her opinions” (134). However, I would argue that neither Goethe’s *Clavigo* (from which her character is borrowed) nor *Either/Or* provides us access to Marie’s mind, since she is a fictional character.

Unfortunately, psychologizing characters or pseudonyms is a constant undercurrent in the history of Kierkegaard research. In the 1930s, L. C. Knight made a similar observation about Shakespeare studies, and advocated a shift from characterological analysis to thematic approaches, in a wittily titled paper, “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” Knight implied that the scholars kept themselves busy with such ridiculous questions. Occasionally, Kierkegaard scholars seem to be too tempted by Kierkegaard’s psychologically rich characters, with the consequence of dismissing the textual and structural choices in his *oeuvre*. I do not claim that this only happens in Kierkegaard research, but dealing with literary artifacts seems difficult whenever literary texts are used to illuminate philosophical or psychological phenomena. However, some promising counterexamples occur, too: Kresten Nordentoft’s *Kierkegaards psykologi* succeeds in combining the thematic level of psychology with the linguistic-structural level.³ Nordentoft was, of course, a literary scholar. Vaškovic’s psychological insights have their value, but lack that kind of balance between the psychological and literary aspects.

If there were a single lesson to be learned from literary studies, it would be that the characters do not have any agency by themselves; rather, the author has designed them in a certain manner to communicate something to the reader. That should be our main interest, not further speculation on the destinies of individual characters. We should always bear this artificiality in mind, and more precisely, take it into account while writing about novels, or any other literary narratives. What is the author’s purpose behind such characters, events, and so forth? For one reason or another, Vaškovic often refers to Dostoevsky’s authorial purposes while analyzing his novels, but whenever Kierkegaard’s writings are in question, he treats the pseudonymous authors or characters as if they were real people with purposes of their own.

The first introductory chapter on polyphony seems a bit unnecessary, as Vaškovic employs the notion of polyphony only once in the rest of the book. Polyphony has become a widely used term, and as such, it has relatively little to do with Mikhail Bakhtin’s initial theory of the polyphonic novel. In its original sense, polyphony is rather a simple concept: the author places multiple voices, independent from the author’s worldview, in a single novel. However, Vaškovic presents the term quite poorly,

³ Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards Psykologi* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1972). For the English translation, see Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard’s Psychology*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, Duquesne Studies, Psychological Series 7 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978).

as he uses Johannes Climacus' reading of Judge William's part of *Either/Or* as an example of polyphony, when it is rather a case of intertextuality. *Either/Or*, in and of itself, with Aesthete A, William, and the priest from Jutland, or *Stages on Life's Way*, with various characters and life-views, would have illuminated polyphony well enough. Perhaps Vaškovic misrepresents polyphony and treats Kierkegaard's pseudonyms in a different manner than Dostoevsky's characters for the same reason: he aims to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher and Dostoevsky as an author. Thus, Vaškovic seems to read Kierkegaard's novels almost as if they were not novels. At the same time, Vaškovic sporadically goes on to examine authorial intention by referring to both of the writers' journals and early drafts of the works. That seems unnecessary, and worse still, contradicts the polyphony that Vaškovic presents at the outset. Polyphony, in the Bakhtinian sense, is disinterested in the author's final word, for it is the variety of characters' truths that matters.

Even with these shortcomings, Vaškovic's study eloquently foregrounds the existential depth of both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. As such, the study emphasizes the role that literature has in existential thinking. Although Vaškovic leaves this undertheorized, the combination of profoundly existential literature and philosophical-religious questions speaks for itself. As mentioned above, in terms of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*, Vaškovic reads books that are rarely touched on in the current Kierkegaard research, like *Stages on Life's Way* and its deliberately tedious Quidam's Diary. As such, the study participates in the ongoing existential approach to Kierkegaard. His original idea of existential entrapment captures what some other scholars have approached in terms of the failing life-views of various pseudonyms. Here it is easy to agree with the author that the three existential stages do have their value in regard to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous characters. Vaškovic builds his argument without delving too deeply into the theory of indirect communication. Indirect communication is an age-old problem in Kierkegaard research, mainly revolving around whether Kierkegaard was a religious author from the outset and thus, aimed to mislead the readers by means of the vivid pseudonymous oeuvre. Vaškovic shows that the existential questions in Kierkegaard (and Dostoevsky) are valid and rich despite the debate around the indirect communication. Thus, Vaškovic approaches the existential questions at eye level with each literary character.