

“The Impression of Reality”: Fiction and Testimony in Dostoevsky’s *Notes*

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Truth of fiction might sound like a paradox, at least within the Platonic *doxa*. But perhaps there is no truth without fiction; Plato’s own myths would testify to this necessary combination of “history” and “story” (*histoire*, *storia*, *Geschichte*, etc.). Still, it might be not enough simply to affirm the necessity of fictional narrative for an historical account. In some cases, it would be difficult to accept a fictional aspect of historical testimony. Jorge Semprún claims, on the other hand, that only fiction is able to communicate a traumatic, “unbearable” experience such as the one of prison camps. He refers to the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky as his model. My paper analyzes this testimonial aspect of Dostoevsky’s *Notes*, especially the *Notes from a Dead House*. It shows, the particularity of this work, which combines an intense personal experience with a fictional elaboration, a quasi-novelistic setting, plot, and characters. I claim that in a sense such a combination might be considered as a model for literature in general, for its testimonial value, for its truth.

Keywords: historical testimony, fictional biography, Dostoevsky, Semprún, prison literature

Perhaps there will be a literature of the camps ... And I mean literature, not just reportage ... We’ll need a
Dostoevsky.

—Jorge Semprún

Literature or Life (1998/1994)¹

With enormous skill Dostoevsky fashions out of his *personal* impressions, feelings, and evaluations the “peculiar world” of penal servitude, and artistically persuades us of its reality.

—Konstantin Mochulsky

Dostoevsky (1967/1947)²

One shouldn’t judge about certain things if one has not experienced them.

F. M. Dostoevsky

—*Notes from a Dead House* (2015/2006)³

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¹ Semprún (1998, p. 127; 1994, p. 170): Il y aura peut-être une littérature des camps ... Je dis bien: une littérature, pas seulement du reportage ... Il nous faudra un Dostoïevski.

² Mochulsky (1967, pp. 185-186; 1947, p. 153): Достоевский с огромным мастерством строит из своих личных впечатлений, чувств и оценок “особый мир” каторги и художественно убеждает нас в его реальность.

³ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 64; 2004, p. 54; 2006, p. 104): Неиспытав, нельзя судить о некоторых вещах.

Introduction

What is the relationship between fiction and historical testimony? Does fiction necessarily falsify history or on the contrary it can contribute to its truthfulness? And what if the truth of history depended on fiction? What kind of experience would need to have the author of such testimony? Could s/he have just a fleeting experience of the subject or an essential experience of reality would be necessary to any, also fictional, testimony? In other words, would the fictional witness need to be a true witness of the events described?

Semprún-Lanzmann Controversy Over the Legitimacy of Representation

In his novel *Literature or Life* (*L'écriture ou la vie*), Jorge Semprún writes that artistic literary narrative is capable of testifying to the unbearable experience of the concentration camps, of conveying some of its truth; and he adds that this is true of all historical experience (1998, p. 13; 1994, pp. 25-26). This statement seems to undermine a long tradition in Western thought separating historical truth from literary fiction.⁴ To be sure, Semprún is not the first to question the comfortable classical distinction between the truth of history and the fiction of literature, but the occasion for this questioning, the event of the Holocaust, and the sensitivity to the accurateness of the testimony to its exceptional atrocity, makes the statement of Semprún more provocative than the new-historicists discussion of the texts from the early-modern period for example.⁵ The debate that followed the publication of *L'écriture ou la vie* in 1994 testifies to the complex nature of this issue, which is often inscribed in the overall questioning of the metaphysics of representation in modern thought (Saxton, 2007, pp. 1-14). Claude Lanzmann's cinematic work, and his philosophical justification of the irreplaceable documentary criteria, are perhaps the most striking critique of *L'écriture ou la vie*; what is more, Lanzmann explicitly refers to Semprún's breach of the documentary/fictional divide. There are cases and the event of the Shoah (Lanzmann prefers the word "Shoah" to "Holocaust"; it is also the title of his celebrated documentary film from 1985, a "model of oral history") is for Lanzmann such an exemplary case where to fictionalize is to trivialize, to undermine the uniqueness of the event: "Fiction is a transgression; I deeply think that there is a prohibition of representation" (Lanzmann, 1994, pp. I, VII).

Prohibition of graven images, of representation, has a long religious tradition in the West (although more radical in its Eastern parts, especially those in contact with the Muslim Empire), going back to the second commandment in Exodus: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Holy Bible, 1974, p. 72). In modern aesthetic domain the notion of the sublime seems to connect with this religious tradition. Kant refers to the second commandment as the most sublime manifestation of the negative presentation of the infinite that expands the soul: "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image ..." (Kant, 2000, p. 156; 1981, p. 201). Kant's notion of the negative presentation influenced the modern and postmodern aesthetic reflection on the sublime, as for example in Lyotard's famous definition of the postmodern as "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81).⁶ A suspicion towards images (*eidola*

⁴ Cf. Semprún's (2007) claim to have crossed in his work the traditional divisions and genres—in an interview with Lila Azam Zanganeh.

⁵ For a philosophical discussion of the truth of testimony in the context of the Holocaust, see Lyotard (1988, 1983) and Agamben (2002, 1998).

⁶ Lyotard (1988, p. 15; cf. 1994, 1991) and Lacoue-Labarthe (1993, pp. 74, 96 at passim; 1988, pp. 101, 132 at passim).

and especially *phantasmata*) has been always contained in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic current; in Plato himself the allegory (or image, *eikōn*) of the cave has been, somewhat paradoxically, the most famous image of this suspicion.⁷

On the other hand, another Western tradition has emphasized the dignity of literary fiction, its “philosophical character”. Such fiction, or rather *poiēsis*, says Aristotle at the beginning of this tradition, in chapter 9 of his *Poetics*, does not register the events that did occur (τὰ γενόμενα), but rather considers “the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity” (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον) (Aristotle, 1995, 1451b37-38).⁸ Poetry’s philosophical superiority over history consists in its generality (τὸ καθόλου). The events registered by history (by chronicle, by diary), on the contrary, are singular, one time events (τὸ καθ’ ἑκάστων) (Aristotle, 1995, 1451b7).⁹ To be sure, Aristotle’s *ἱστορία* is not exactly history in the modern sense, and his *ποιήσις* is not exactly literature in the modern sense, but the rapprochement between the two is perhaps not illegitimate, and certainly legitimate is the problematization of the relationship between the fictional world of a literary work and the world of the writer and the reader. It is legitimate to ask what Aristotle might have thought and what he would think today about the relationship between historical and literary accounts of the world.

The Difficulty of First-Hand Testimony

For Dostoevsky, like for Semprún, a first-hand autobiographical testimony is hardly possible. The underground man quotes Heine as claiming that “faithful autobiographies are almost impossible, and that a man is sure to tell a pack of lies about himself” if nevertheless attempting such confession (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 39; 2006, p. 636). The underground man agrees with Heine and, like Semprún, he doubts the faithfulness of any direct account of experience. Most people would be afraid of such account, of “the whole truth” (вся правда). But writing is necessary, for both Semprún and for the underground man, although apparently for the opposite reasons: for the underground man in order to be rid of hundreds of “oppressing recollections” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 40)¹⁰ for Semprún, in order to remember better the traumatic events: “Books do not exhaust memory; on the contrary, they vivify and fertilize it. More I write, more I remember” (Semprún, 2000, p. 12).¹¹ In fact, the two functions of writing are simultaneously present, causing the anguish of both, the underground man: “But enough; I don’t want to write any more ‘from Underground’... However, the ‘notes’ of this paradoxalist do not end here. He could not help himself and went on” (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 130; 2006, p. 699) and of Semprún: “I can live only by assuming that death through writing, but writing literally prohibits me from living” (Semprún, 1998, p. 163).¹² Paradoxically, this cathartic failure of literature is the source of its testimonial value, especially in the case of traumatic experience. Perhaps this is what Semprún has in mind when he calls for a “new Dostoevsky”. Only fictional narrative would approach the density, the truth of personal (historical)

⁷ See Nancy’s discussion of the problematic of representation in the West pushed to its limit by the Nazi *Weltanschauung* in the form of “taking part/taking apart” (partage) of representation-exposition on the one hand and representation-imitation on the other hand in (2005, p. 39; 2003, p. 80).

⁸ The optative with ἂν (ἄνγένοιτο) expresses potentiality, a future possibility; see Smyth, (1956, p. 407f).

⁹ Dostoevsky clearly distinguishes between the chronicle (хроника) and history/story (история) in his novel *Demons* from 1871/72 (1994, p. 7; 2001, p. 21).

¹⁰ Dostoevsky (2006, p. 636): подавляющие воспоминания.

¹¹ Semprún (2000, p. 12): Les livres n’épuisent pas la mémoire. Au contraire, ils la ravivent et la fertilisent. Plus j’écris plus je me souviens.

¹² Semprún (1994, p. 215): “je ne puis vivre qu’en assumant cette mort par l’écriture, mais l’écriture m’interdit littéralement de vivre”.

experience. And notes (записки) would constitute a genre most adequate to this task.

A note appended to *Notes from Underground* insists on the truth of a fictional, artistic account. To be sure, it still distinguishes between the general considerations in the first part and the particular considerations in the second; the latter are called "notes" in the strict sense (настоящие "записки") (2006a, p. 610).¹³ But the reflections of the first part, displaying the necessary conditions producing the character of the underground man (те причины, по которым оно (лицо—personage) явилось и должно было явиться в нашей среде) need to be historically accurate as well; they cannot be of purely general, abstract nature. Thus, even though the underground man and his notes are fictional (вымышлены), writes Dostoevsky or rather the eventually fictionalized editor of the notes—"such persons as the writer of these notes not only may but even must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed" (Dostoevsky, 1993, p. 3; 2006a, p. 610). The necessity of the character of the underground man, and of the events (события) in which he takes part, are of historical/philosophical nature, in the Hegelian rather than Aristotelian sense; they result from the spirit of the time, the state of society (общество) in its development—in fact, from a resistance to the universal, "logical", nature of human beings and the world.¹⁴ In a sense, both kinds of considerations are of course fictional, and they are interdependent: the notes in the strict sense of the second part are inseparable from the historical/philosophical reflections in the first part; the latter give them their meaning and their potentiality to be experienced by the reader, perhaps also by the reader of a different epoch and place. The *persona*, character (лицо) of the underground man seems to be neither a particular historical figure nor a universal type.¹⁵ He is part of "our" world, the world of nineteenth century to be sure, but also of the twenty-first century world, a world unable to subscribe to the Aristotle's rational, optimistic humanism. One might say, paraphrasing Nancy, that the world that led to the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century questioning of scientism and utilitarianism, and at the same time of their counterpart in the carceral, tsarist, and then Stalinist, systems, "is still our world" (Nancy, 2005, p. 46).¹⁶

The World of Fiction

Notes from a Dead House is not as explicit as *Notes from Underground* in questioning the Aristotelian general logo-centrism and his poetical mytho-centrism, but it poses—perhaps in a more poignant way—the question of the (historical) truth of a fictional literary work, of its relationship to the world of the writer and of the reader.¹⁷ Indeed, *Notes from a Dead House* is a fictional work, a fictional story, told by a fictional narrator, a story, which however "could have happened", or even "had to have happened" in the historical, social, and political conditions of the mid-nineteenth-century Russia. More than that, the same kind of story "could happen" anywhere given the development of human beings, their "logical" and "political" nature, of their "view of the world", of its practical, political organization, and of the (carceral) limitations of their being-in-the-world.

The prison, called by the author of the *Notes*, a dead house (мертвый дом), constitutes a world, even if a

¹³ Dostoevsky (1993, p. 3): "the reasons why he appeared and had to appear among us".

¹⁴ Human being has been anything but rational (or reasonable, благо-разумный), the underground man affirms and substantiates historically in his long (dialogical) monologue of the first part of the *Notes*, Dostoevsky (1993, pp. 29-30; 2006a, p. 629).

¹⁵ He is perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari call a "conceptual persona" or conceptual character (le personnage conceptuel), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, pp. 62-83; 1991, pp. 60-81).

¹⁶ Nancy (2005, p. 46): "the world that created Auschwitz is still our world", (2003, p. 94): le monde qui a fait Auschwitz est toujours notre monde.

¹⁷ Semprún is right to evoke Dostoevsky when talking about twentieth-century literature of the camps in his (1998, p. 127; 1994, p. 170).

strange world (странный мир), perhaps in its “strangeness” emphasizing, and thus making apparent, some essential traits of every world.¹⁸ The dead house highlights the Heideggerian major characteristics of being-in-the-world: the “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) of the prisoners, the inescapability from this world, from destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft, Geschick, Geschichtlichkeit*; “there is nowhere to run”, бежать некуда) (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 254; 2004, p. 211; 2006, p. 267), and the experience of death as the ultimate “possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence” (*die Möglichkeit der maßlosen Unmöglichkeit der Existenz*), to the open horizon of possibilities, rather than to the actuality of death (Heidegger, 2010, p. 242; 1979, p. 262). The “house of the dead” (мертвый дом) certainly does not refer to “being-at-an-end” (*Zu-Ende-sein*), but rather to “being-towards-the-end” (*Sein zum Ende*), in other words, to a possibility, to a “not yet” (*Noch-nicht*) (Heidegger, 2010, p. 228; 1979, p. 245).¹⁹ Goryanchikov insists on this strange interpenetration of life and death in this world: тут был...заживо мертвый дом (Dostoevsky, 2006, p. 53)²⁰ and on his fate to be part of it: “All this is my milieu, my present-day world”, I thought, ‘which I’ve got to live with, like it or not...’ (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 83).²¹ The strangeness of this world, the difficulty to integrate it, combined with the necessity to do so, render the relationship to the world dynamic and thus facilitate the participative experience of the reader.²² The latter, like the hero-narrator, is placed before the task of entering the house of the dead, of retracing the path of the author.

Indeed, *Notes from a Dead House* is also a personal testimony. All introductions to this book insist on Dostoevsky’s experience of prison life: “the fiction (фикция) of the narrator-prisoner Aleksandr Petrovich Goryanchikov cannot deceive; everywhere is heard the voice of Dostoevsky, an eye-witness of the events (очевидец событий)” (Mochulsky, 1967, p.185; 1947, p. 152).²³ The commentators seem to share the hero-narrator’s belief that one couldn’t have formed the faintest idea of the “strange house” (странный дом), of the “unknown world” (неведомый мир), if one “had not experienced them in reality” (не испытав их на самом деле) (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 11; 2006, pp. 56, 67).²⁴ Later in the text, when reporting the convicts’ beliefs as to the insufficiency of food in the prisons of the European parts of Russia, the hero-narrator makes the following disclaimer, rejecting hearsay as not fulfilling the standard of adequate testimony: “Of that I cannot venture to judge: I have never been there” (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 23).²⁵ Finally, after having unsuccessfully questioned Akim Akimych about his “present-day world” (мой теперешний мир), he comes to this conclusion: “I must experience it myself and not keep asking questions” (надо самому испытывать, а не расспрашивать) (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 83; 2006, p. 121).²⁶ One might assume that the exactness, the truth of Goryanchikov’s notes, depends as much on Dostoevsky’s skills as a writer, as on the genuineness of his

¹⁸ This function of intensification of “worldliness” of the world would perhaps complement the list of the functions of heterotopias, of which prison is for Michel Foucault one of the foremost examples; see Foucault (1986, pp. 22-27; 2001, pp. 1571-1581).

¹⁹ Cf. Heidegger (2010, p. 239; 1979, pp. 258-259).

²⁰ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 8): “here was . . . an alive dead house”; 2004, p. 5: “the house of the living dead”.

²¹ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 69; 2006, p. 120).

²² “The principle of composition in the Notes is not static, but dynamic (динамический)”, writes one of the most perspicacious commentators, Mochulski (1967, p. 186; 1947, p. 153).

²³ Cf. Joseph Frank (1986, p. 213): “House of the Dead records a crucial event in Dostoevsky’s life and, at the same time, is also an independent literary creation; to do it full justice requires that it be studied from both these points of view”.

²⁴ See Dostoevsky (2004, p. 7).

²⁵ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 18; 2006, p. 67): Об этом я не берусь судить: я там не был.

²⁶ See Dostoevsky (2004, p. 69).

personal experience, and the scrupulousness of its transmission, of the testimonial quality of the book.²⁷ Goryanchikov's justification of the truthfulness of his notes could be thus ascribed to Dostoevsky:

I am convinced that those remarks are right. I became convinced of it, not through books, not by speculation (неумозрительно), but in reality (в действительности), and I had quite enough time to verify my conviction. Maybe later on everyone will come to know how true (right, fair, справедливо) it is... (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 254, translation modified)²⁸

Again, the immediate context might seem to limit this "manifesto", but when combined with all previously quoted statements, it cannot deceive. The very genre of "notes" (записки) points to a possible convergence between literary fiction and personal history. Thus in Aristotelian terms, the *Notes* would be at the same time "philosophical" in their questioning character, and "historical" in the singularity of the underlying experience. They are indeed notes of personal experience of the historical conditions of social development.

Goryanchikov, the fictional hero-narrator of the *Notes*, is marked by Dostoevsky's experience more than is an ordinary literary *persona*. Semprún would place Dostoevsky, just like he did André Malraux, in a category of writers who integrate their literary texts into their autobiographical texts, "shedding light on reality through fiction, and illuminating the fiction through the extraordinary destiny of [their] life". They are sharply opposed to those writers "whose lives are bounded and consumed by writing itself, and who have no other biography than that of their texts" (Semprún, 1998, p. 52; 1994, p. 74). Writers like Malraux, Dostoevsky, and Semprún himself, are able better to succeed in their testimonial vocation because they have both art and an extra-literary life experience.

And yet, the person, the figure (личность) of Dostoevsky, writes Fyodor Michailovitch to his brother Michail in October 1859, should disappear from his "memoirs" thus detaching the work from the particularity of his biography and giving it a "most capital interest" (интереснаи капитальнейший), that is, a general, exceeding a purely personal interest (Dostoevsky, 1988, p. 390; 1985, vol. 28, p. 349). However, Dostoevsky is well aware that it is his personal experience that will warrant the truth of a fictional account of experience ascribed to an "unknown person" (неизвестный). That is why he eventually considers his name the crucial factor of the success of the book. In other words, the more general perspective, which the fictionalization secures to the *Notes*, doesn't relinquish the singular perspective of Dostoevsky the prisoner: "This double perspective", writes Joseph Frank, "is very carefully maintained, and must constantly be kept in mind if we are to avoid the error of taking the work as either an unadorned memoirs or a purely fictional construct; in fact, it is a unique combination of both" (Frank, 1986, p. 214). This unique combination of historical and literary testimony explains Semprún's admiration for Dostoevsky. Indeed, Semprún also attempts "to step away from the traditional genres". His books are—just like *The Notes from a House of the Dead*—"both memoirs and novels, both fiction and first-hand testimony" (Semprún, 2007). Semprún's aim is to create a "synthesis of the two genres"; and such a synthesis will require, according to Semprún, a new kind of literary criticism (Semprún, 2007).

²⁷ Various independent testimonies proving the exactness of Dostoevsky's "data" are adduced, see Belknap (1985, p. 105): "... other memoirists have identified most of the officers and convicts Dostoevsky describes, making *The House of the Dead* either a real memoir with a fictional narrator or else a novel with the first-person form and the experienced content of a memoir".

²⁸ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 211; 2006, p. 266).

The Double Reference in the *Notes*

In the *Notes*, the discrepancy between the presentation of the character of Goryanchikov by the frame-narrator, on the one hand, and his self-presentation as a prisoner in the fortress, on the other hand, emphasizes the double reference to fiction and life: only the view of the prisoner in the fortress reflects the experience of Dostoevsky himself. The mood of tragic author-character of the Introduction, a common criminal, condemned for a passionate murder of his wife, tormented by his conscience, and “living out his life” in a little Siberian town, doesn’t have much in common with Dostoevsky’s spirit in Omsk’s prison and his exile at Semipalatinsk and Tver; the murderer’s life is over, and there is no question of redemption, of a rebirth, with which the actual *Notes* end, and with which one is familiar from Dostoevsky’s letters (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 4; 2004, p. 2; 2006, p. 50).

The experience of Goryanchikov in the actual “Scenes from a Dead House” (Сцены из Мертвого Дома, the title he gave to his notes), on the other hand, clearly recalls Dostoevsky’s stay in Omsk between 1850 and 1854, as well as the recollection of his journey from St. Petersburg across the Ural Mountains. There are constant references to his stay in Tobolsk in the *Notes*, for example to the gift of the Bible to Dostoevsky. In his diary from 1873 he recalls his journey to Omsk. After a moving description of his encounter with the wives of the Decembrists (the legendary exiles after the revolt against Nicolas I in 1825), Dostoevsky writes:

they handed a New Testament (оделили Евангелием) to each of us—the only book a convict was allowed to have in prison. It lay for four years under my pillow. I read it sometimes myself and read some of it to others. I used it to teach one convict to read. (Dostoevsky, 1949, vol. 1, p. 9)²⁹

To be sure, the Bible of Goryanchikov did not stay under his pillow for the whole time since it was stolen, but precisely this dramatic event was an occasion for highlighting the importance of the Bible; and before the theft Goryanchikov did use it for teaching a young Tartar Alei reading and writing.³⁰ The wives of Decembrists are not explicitly mentioned in the *Notes*, probably in order not to provoke the censure for which the name Decembrists was still a taboo even in 1860, but the opening of chapter VI in the first part unmistakably refers to this encounter:

this book [the Gospel, Евангелие] with money glued into it had been given to me back in Tobolsk, by those who also suffered in exile and already counted their time in decades, and who had long been accustomed to seeing a brother in every unfortunate. (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 81)³¹

Finally, in the diary from 1876, the actual experience of the hard labors (каторга) in Omsk (a “remote reminiscence”) is brought together with the *Notes from a Dead House* (a “story”, анекдот):

... up to the present day almost never have I spoken in print about my life in prison, whereas I wrote my *Notes from a Dead House* fifteen years ago under the name of a fictitious person, a criminal who had supposedly had murdered his wife. (Dostoevsky, 1949, pp. 205-206)³²

The identification of Dostoevsky with the hero-narrator of the *Notes* in the minds of some readers was

²⁹ Dostoevsky, (2011, p. 16); see Mochulsky (1967, p. 147ff; 1947, p. 121ff), and Magarshack (1962, p. 183ff).

³⁰ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 63, 104; 2004, p. 52, 86-87; 2006, p. 103, 139).

³¹ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 67; 2006, p. 118); cf. the letter of Dostoevsky to his brother Mikhail from 30 January-22 February 1854 in (1988, p. 186): “The old-time exiles (that is, not they, but their wives) looked after us as though we were family members”; (1985, vol. 28, p. 169).

³² Dostoevsky (2011, pp. 132-133).

such that many people considered him actually a murderer. But such simple identification should be prevented by the structure of the *Notes*, the particularity of which lies in the mediation of the reader/editor.³³ His attitude is that of distanced curiosity (любопытство); the manuscript he reads is "not devoid of some interest". Interesting, and thus able to find readers among the large public, is the criterion for his appraisal of the notes, and their eventual publication. Not sure of his judgment, the editor wishes to defer to the readership (публика).³⁴ But the interest of the eventual readers cannot be limited to the formal literary qualities of the text. They have to relate the world of the dead house to their own world, have to see a possibility of a passage between them, "an opening in the wall."

Goryanchikov, the hero-narrator of the "Scenes from a Dead House", opens such a passage for the readers. He is a very different character from the one introduced by the frame-narrator. He is certainly not an anti-social man, apprehensively avoiding any contact with others. Just the opposite, he yearns for such a contact since his entrance into the fortress. He doesn't have any irrevocable prejudices against the particular world (особый мир) of the prison; he doesn't share the Pole M-cki's attitude expressed in his repeated "*Je haïs ces brigands*" (an attitude that Dostoevsky justifies historically in his autobiographical reminiscences from 1876).³⁵ But he doesn't share a "disinterested interest" of the frame-narrator either; Goryanchikov's inquiry never results from vain curiosity, but rather from his genuine desire to understand the world, in which he is caught up anyway, in order to become part of it.

The break between the distant curiosity of the editor and the involvement of the prisoner-narrator occurs in Dostoevsky's book in the transition from the introduction (введение)—which introduces only the manuscript and its extravagant author—and the first chapter, the real intro-duction into "our prison." The "absolutely new, until then unknown, world" (новый мир) receives now some tangible characteristics, becomes reality: the solid wall or rampart, "fence of high posts stuck deeply into the earth", and on one side a gate "always closed, always, day and night, guarded by sentries" (Dostoevsky, 2015, pp. 7-8).³⁶ Closure is the predominant trait, and the sense of closure the predominant feeling of those entering this world as prisoners. But the editor-narrator doesn't enter it; his narrative remains a "simple tale" (простой рассказ), as opposed to the "true" evidence of Goryanchikov, with its sense of *reality*; as the "real" hero-narrator Goryanchikov/Dostoevsky maintains: "the impression of reality is always stronger than the impression from a mere account" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 31).³⁷ The Russian word for reality, *deystvitel'nost'* (from *delo*, deed, action, practice) emphasizes the experiential, "practical" nature of this notion.

Goryanchikov of the "Scenes" behaves like a political prisoner; he associates with the Poles, not only because of their common social origin, but also because of their (common) political interest. One of the Poles,

³³ Like in the *Notes from Underground*, there is a frame-narration in the *Notes from a Dead House*; and like in the former, it seems to situate the estranged hero-narrator and the strange world into which he is thrown, in respect to the ordinary world of the reader. Also in this case, the writer of the notes is branded as anti-social, as in the literal sense para-doxical (парадоксалист) – Dostoevsky, 1996, p. 130; 2006a, p. 698 in fine.

³⁴ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 7; 2004, p. 5; 2006, p. 53).

³⁵ Dostoevsky (2015, pp. 8, 276; 2004, pp. 5, 230; 2006, pp. 53, 286); Dostoevsky (1949, pp. 205-210; 2011, pp. 132-137).

³⁶ Dostoevsky (2004, pp. 4-5; 2006, p. 53).

³⁷ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 25; 2006, p. 74): впечатление действительности всегда сильнее, чем впечатление от простого рассказа. The "impression of reality" should be sharply distinguished from what Roland Barthes calls the "effect of reality" (Barthes, 1989, pp. 141-148). The latter designates a mostly rhetorical device of introducing some apparently insignificant details in order to enhance the feeling of reality in the reader. It is played entirely on the plain of verisimilitude. The "impression of reality" in Dostoevsky, on the other hand, functions on the plain of reality, and it concerns the author as witness, his being under a strong impression of events. The testimonial value of a literary work of art depends on this "impression".

T—ski, is certainly referring to this political nature of their imprisonment when he addresses Goryanchikov during the episode of the grievance (complaint, претензия): "remember what we came here for. They'll simply get beaten, but we'll go on trial" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 260).³⁸ And Akim Akimich, when explaining to Goryanchikov the hostility of the common prisoners, says that "they are not fond of gentlemen...especially political" (дворян они не любят...особенно политических) (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 30; 2006, p. 73).³⁹ Commentators explain this discrepancy between the initial presentation of the inside-narrator and the actual experience described in the "Scenes from a Dead House" by the concern with the censorship, that is to say, by Dostoevsky's wish to mask the political aspect of his testimony from a superficial reader.⁴⁰ However, such "un-poetical" explanation seems insufficient to some more sophisticated readers, as for example Victor Shklovsky, for whom there is in fact no contradiction between the presentation of the character of Goryanchikov in the introduction and his actual attitude in the "Scenes from a Dead House"; the former should guide the interpretation of the *Notes* as a whole. The way to freedom described in the "Scenes from a Dead House" is in fact the way towards the death of Goryanchikov that is mentioned in the introduction. Shklovsky analyzes in particular two scenes of the liberation from the fetters, which he considers structurally parallel: the last scene of the book and the last scene of chapter one in the second part, where a prisoner Mikhailov is also "liberated" from his fetters, but only after his death. The vision of the naked cadaver in fetters (голый мертвец в кандалах) cannot but question the exaltation of the "glorious moment" at the end of the book, which is for Shklovsky only seemingly a "happy end".⁴¹ In fact,

the novel in the beginning and in the end tells the story of a ruined human being; it is the cadaver that is unfettered ... the artist has made the choice of nature, make a juxtaposition and discovered in the common-terrible (страшное-обычное) the terrible-inhuman (страшное-нечеловеческое). (Shklovsky, 1957, p. 102)

It is this dark conclusion that questions Robert Louis Jackson. To be sure, there are two aspects, two visions of the same Goryanchikov—the dying man of the Introduction and the liberated prisoner from the end of the *Notes*—but it is the final rebirth that should be emphasized: the glorious moment is real even though the structure of the *Notes* takes into account all the difficulties and dangers that threaten such rebirth. Dostoevsky's letters and diaries point out this cycle of death, suffering, and rebirth.

Joseph Frank, also referring to Shklovsky's interpretation, sides nevertheless with the traditional view:

The accepted view, which seems to me more convincing, is that Dostoevsky introduced Goryanchikov primarily as a means of avoiding trouble with the censorship, and that he did not expect his readers to take him as more than a convenient device. (Frank, 1986, p. 219)

To be sure the device seems also convenient for the narrative of initiation. A hero-narrator, situated between the two worlds—that of common and that of political criminality—is better suited than an unequivocal political prisoner to undertake the task of assimilation into the world overwhelmingly composed of common criminals. But the discrepancy between the two presentations of Goryanchikov might be more than a simply "convenient device" or, certainly more than just negligence: "so glaring is this contradiction that it seems inconceivable to attribute it to mere carelessness" (Morson, 1994, p. 129). Morson suggests a reading of the

³⁸ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 216; 2006, p. 272).

³⁹ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 24).

⁴⁰ See Frank (1986, p. 219); also Dostoevsky (2015, Pevear's Foreword, p. xi).

⁴¹ Cf. Jackson (1981, p. 36); Shklovsky (1957, p. 101).

two narratives in *The House of the Dead* as resonating with each other (in his language, as "sideshadowing" each other) in the psychological-moral sphere: the same experience of suffering could result either in death or in resurrection; every prisoner (every human being) would face a choice "between the suffering that deforms and the suffering that ennobles" (Morson, 1994, p. 129).

Morson is right to reject any attempt at a smooth integration of the two aspects of the narrative. They certainly belong to "different wholes", and there will always remain parts that "will not fit". But perhaps Dostoevsky's questioning of the narrative goes further, perhaps the discrepancy between the two narratives, that of the frame-narrator and that of the hero-narrator, is not just a "convenient device" but a device of estrangement (of defamiliarization, прием острания) (Shklovsky, 1991, p. 6; 1929, p. 13),⁴² which questions the narration itself, its "wholeness". This would be so especial if one considers the intervention of the frame-narrator at the beginning of chapter VII in the second part, entitled "The Grievance". He corrects one important fact registered in the *Notes*: a parricide, whose cheerful, even frivolous, behavior in prison, whose unconcern with "his" crime, was presented as the most striking case of insensibility—of a mask covering an extreme cruelty (жестокость) so well that Goryanchikov "had never noticed in him any sign of it" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 16)⁴³—turned out to be in fact innocent according to well-verified information of the editor of the *Notes*: the investigators discovered the real murderers who had confessed, and consequently the prisoner, unjustly accused and condemned, had been released. "The editor can in no way doubt the truthfulness of this news ..." (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 249).⁴⁴ Of course, he didn't feel any doubt earlier on, nor did apparently Goryanchikov, or the reader of the *Notes* for that matter. Thus, the correction doesn't only undermine the reliability of the inside-narrator but also the nature of the distinction between the historical and the poetic truth in general. The editor quotes verbatim the text of the first chapter and then he acknowledges Goryanchikov's initial doubt: "Of course I did not believe in that crime" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 249; 2006, p. 262).⁴⁵ This account and quote is not altogether fair; indeed, the initial doubt had been ultimately overcome by testimonies and by *facts* (факты), by "what people told who knew all the details of his story: the facts were so clear that it was impossible not to believe in his crime" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 249).⁴⁶ Thus, even though the inside-narrator didn't believe, he eventually "had to believe". The order of the statements is important here, and it is not hermeneutically correct to reverse it. Goryanchikov's initial doubt in the culpability of the young man would have been supported by his personal experience had he abided by it against the common opinion, against the hearsay, and had he not misinterpreted it under the pressure of hearsay/facts; indeed, the cheerfulness of the "parricide", his indifference, were interpreted as "monstrosity", rather than an indication of his innocence. In this case, Goryanchikov did not follow the rule repeatedly affirmed in the *Notes* that hearsay, even the supposed objective report of facts, has to yield before a direct life experience of reality.⁴⁷ Interpretation should take into account first of all such an impression of reality (впечатление действительности) since its value,

⁴² Dostoevsky uses the word прием (Pevear & Volokhonsky translate it as method) in the sense of an artistic device consecrated by the tradition, in the last chapter of the first part "The Performance" (Представление) (2015, p. 149; 2004, p. 123; 2006, p. 177).

⁴³ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 12; 2006, p. 61).

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 207; 2006, p. 262).

⁴⁵ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 207).

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 249; 2004, p. 207; 2006, p. 262).

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky (2015, p. 31; 2004, p. 25; 2006, p. 74).

both historical and poetical, resides in the genuineness of this experience.⁴⁸

At the end of his intrusion in the direct narrative the frame-narrator invites the reader to draw some general conclusions beyond the “tragic” aspect of the reported case, beyond a judicial error: “we also think that if such a fact turns out to be possible, then the possibility itself adds another new and extremely striking feature to the description and full portrayal (картина) of the *Dead House*” (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 250).⁴⁹ Possibility (возможность) takes precedence over facts because the facts can never be affirmed with absolute certainty and always need to be interpreted, and the mode of possibility invites an interpretation.⁵⁰ Literature is a privileged form of such interpretation because it openly acknowledges, it accepts its representational, and potential character.⁵¹ It is not just an actual, necessarily true, chronicle-like, linear recording of events; Goryanchikov explicitly rejects such a model:

Must I make note of all that life, of all my years in prison? I don’t think so. If I were to write out in order, in sequence, all that happened and that I saw and experienced (испытал) in those years, I could, naturally, write three or four times more chapters than I have written so far. But such a description would, willy-nilly, become too monotonous. (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 281)⁵²

In Aristotle’s terms, one might say that such a description would become a *historia*, devoid of any philosophical questioning. This is certainly what Semprún has in mind when rejecting the simple inventory of facts, a quasi-documentary report, supposedly objective historical account. Contrary to an imaginative choice proper to fiction, such an account of reality would become “repetitive and uninteresting” (Semprún, 2000, pp. 11-13).

“Monotonous”, in both Garnett’s and Pevear and Volokhonsky’s translations suggests an aesthetic quality of boredom,⁵³ whereas Dostoevsky’s word *odnoobrazno* literally means “of one image, picture (*obraz*)”, “uniform”, and suggests rather a unified worldview. Perhaps a translation by “monolithic”, although not literal either, would better indicate Dostoevsky’s preoccupation with an adequate testimony to the diversity of reality. Indeed, the notion that opposes *odno-obrazno* would be *razno-obrazno*, and this word also opposes speculative generality. But such a general classification of the events, an abstract ordering of reality into categories does not constitute a proper alternative to a chronicle/*historia*: “here I am now trying to sort our whole prison into categories”, reflects Goryanchikov after an attempt to classify the characters of his fellow inmates into a few distinct groups, and he has to acknowledge his failure; reality resists a classification: “Reality (действительность) is infinitely diverse/varied (разнообразна) compared to all, even the most clever, conclusions of abstract thought, and does not suffer sharp and big distinctions. Reality tends towards singularisation/fragmentation/(раздробление)” (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 252).⁵⁴ Thus the quality of infinite

⁴⁸ Thucydides, the founder of ancient Greek history, insists on the importance of the personal experience in the methodological introduction to his work 2013, Book I, 22, pp. 15-16; 1919, 1956, I, 22, pp. 39-42.

⁴⁹ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 207; 2006, p. 262).

⁵⁰ Nietzsche (2003, 7[60], p. 139): Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—there are only facts (Thatsachen)—I would say: no, facts are just what there aren’t, there are only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact “in itself” (Factum “an sich”): perhaps it’s nonsensical to want to do such a thing; (1999, vol. 12, 7[60], p. 315).

⁵¹ See Morson (2002, pp. 212-234); cf. also Paul de Man (1983, p. 17, and his 1979, p. 19).

⁵² Dostoevsky (2004, p. 234; 2006, p. 290).

⁵³ A word *ton* which appears soon after provides a certain justification for this interpretation; on the other hand the Russian word *monotonnyj* (монотонная жизнь) in the later part of the chapter, (p. 295), (which certainly means boring, routine) should be somehow distinguish from *odnoobraznyj*.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky (2004, p. 209; 2006, p. 264).

"diversity" (*razno-obrazye*) opposes both chronological listing of facts on the one hand, and their categorization (schematization) on the other hand.⁵⁵ Only art and literature would be able to do justice to such variation in life, to allow a consideration of possibility (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατόν): to be sure, a plausible or even necessary possibility (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκάϊον). Even if the particular experience of Goryanchikov is personal, he has written it down (записал), because he thought, it would be understood by everyone, it would concern everyone "because the same thing should happen with anyone (everyone, всякий), if he falls into prison (попадет в тюрьму) in the flower of his youth and strength" (Dostoevsky, 2015, p. 282; translation modified).⁵⁶ "Anyone" here will include the reader if s/he is willing to re-live the experience of Goryanchikov and of Dostoevsky, and if the art of the latter makes it possible.

Conclusion

We can now answer some of the questions asked in the beginning of this paper. The relationship between history and fiction turned out to be more complex than a simple opposition. In the case of Dostoevsky, fiction seems to be indispensable to the truthfulness of the true. But the counterpart of this participation of fiction in historical testimony is the requirement that the experience of the author of fiction be that of the events described, of what Dostoevsky calls "the impression of reality". The notes (*zapiski*), certainly the notes of Dostoevsky, problematizing the authorship of the author, are perhaps the genre best suited to such fictional/historical testimony.

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⁵⁵ Raznoobrazye is formed in the same way as Bakhtin's raznorechie and raznojazychie for which the work of Dostoevsky offers a perfect example. The adjective "razno-obraznyj" is commonly used by Dostoevsky to indicate diversity of views and attitudes, and a potentiality for transformation. It is proper to life. Kulikov, one of those few who will risk an escape from the fortress, is characterized by a great vitality (живучий, this is in fact Goryanchikov's definition of human being in general, pp. 10/6/55) and extraordinary and varied abilities (чрезвычайные и разнообразные способности). He is a born actor with a variety of roles that would correspond to the variety in life (разнообразие). Goryanchikov doesn't conceal his admiration for Kulikov who might thus be seen as the model of an artist in the Notes, Dostoevsky (2015, pp. 252, 284; 2004, pp. 209, 236; 2006, pp. 264, 292).

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky (2004, pp. 234-235; 2006, p. 291).

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