

**Dostoevsky's Seemingly Carelessness Towards Language / O
*aparente descaso de Dostoiévski com a linguagem***

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to show how the language and style employed by Dostoevsky since his debut novel, *Poor Folk*, contributed to the great innovation that he introduced into literary form. By adopting the practical reality of the lower strata of society as his object of representation and, accordingly, a low-style language, Dostoevsky transcended all established literary rules, as well as others that were already being transgressed. He took seriously both the reality of everyday life and its language, the style level proper to it. In so doing, he approached the serious and elevated representation of everyday reality without changing the rules of style, as the French did. What he changed is the point of view, the narrative focus, and he did so in a way that had no precedent even in Western literature.

KEYWORDS: Dostoevsky; *Poor Folk*; Erich Auerbach; Language; Level of style

RESUMO

Este artigo procura mostrar como a linguagem e o estilo empregados por Dostoiévski já em seu romance de estreia, Gente pobre, contribuíram para a grande inovação realizada por ele na forma literária. Ao tomar como objeto de representação a realidade prática de camadas inferiores da sociedade e adotar em sua obra uma linguagem também considerada de nível inferior, própria à maneira de se expressar dessas camadas sociais, Dostoiévski não só transcende todas as regras literárias estabelecidas como também as já transgredidas até então, porque ele leva a sério não só a realidade cotidiana como a linguagem, o nível de estilo próprio a elas. Com isso ele se aproxima da representação séria e elevada da realidade cotidiana sem mudar as regras de estilo, como fizeram os franceses. O que ele muda é o ponto de vista, o foco narrativo, de um modo que não encontra precedente nem mesmo na literatura Ocidental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Dostoiévski; Gente pobre; Erich Auerbach; Linguagem; Nível de estilo*

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When Dostoevsky began his literary career at the age of twenty-four, he had a manner of writing that literary critics considered “diffuse” and “wordy.” But they attributed it to the fact that he was a young, inexperienced writer, who was still experimenting with language and literary forms. This, however, did not prevent his debut work, *Poor Folk* (1846),¹ from being received as an unprecedented event in Russian literary circles. And he, a completely unknown figure until then, would become celebrated overnight, even before seeing his novel published. This is what Dostoevsky himself expressed in a letter to his brother Mikhail, in which, after commenting on Belinsky’s praise, he declares, overjoyed: “They find a new original system in me (Belinski and the others) [...] Read it and see for yourself. I have a brilliant future before me, brother!” (DOSTOEVSKY, 1985, p.118).²

What Dostoevsky could not imagine is that this fame, to the same degree that it had been sudden, would also be ephemeral. As his new works were being published, the same literary critics, who initially put him on a pedestal, started to criticize more and more what they considered the “limited” nature of his realism, which manifested itself not only in his characters’ untypical nature, but also in the language that he used.

The point is that, with the publication of *Poor Folk* in January 1846, an enormous expectation for the maturation of literature (precisely of a realistic nature) had been generated around Dostoevsky’s name. Belinski, reading the manuscripts of the novel, was in ecstasy. To him, this work meant not only the “first attempt at a social novel among us,” but it also revealed “mysteries and characters in Russia of which no one had ever dreamed before him.” (ANNENKOV, 1964, p.137).³

Belinski's enthusiasm was largely due to the fact that the social elements, the elements taken from outside reality, were introduced into the novel in order to ennoble the feelings and actions of a character from the lowest social extraction. Devuchkin’s feelings and actions gravitate mainly around his most basic material needs, ranging from tea and sugar to boots and buttons. The scene in which he finds himself chasing a button

¹ DOSTOEVSKII, F.M. *Poor Folk*. Translated by C. J. Hogarth. 2000. Available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2302/2302-h/2302-h.htm#link2H_4_0005

² In Russian: “Во мне находят новую оригинальную строю (Белинский и прочие) [...] Прочтешь и увидишь. А у меня будущность преблистательная, брат!” Carta de 1º de fevereiro de 1846 [Letter, February 1st, 1846].

³ In Russian: “первая попытка у нас социального романа,” “такие тайны жизни и характеров на Руси, которые до него и не снились никому.”

that fell off his uniform, then swirling across the room and finally stopping at the feet of his Excellency, could only have received a comic treatment in any literature at that time. But Dostoevsky's intention in this work was precisely to try to reverse the treatment of everyday practical reality, showing that the deprivation from which his character suffers could not turn him into a comic figure. And, in fact, in the exposition of the background of such a lowly figure's struggle for survival on the urban social hierarchy, Dostoevsky was able, for the first time in the history of literature, to provoke a high compassion in his reader. As Fridlender points out, it is precisely in his reflections about his material needs that the character of *Poor Folk* reveals himself to be a great man, someone capable of thinking, feeling, and even acting in the most profound and human way.⁴

The way Dostoevsky treated such elements in *Poor Folk* was in complete agreement with Belinsky's program for the development of Russian literature, and especially for the tendency that was then developing under the name of "Natural School,"⁵ under whose banner the writer had consciously placed himself. The Natural School, idealized by Belinsky based on the works of Gogol with the aim of strengthening "realism" in literature, required that writers depict reality "as it is."⁶ In other words, the school demanded the maximum objectivity from the writer in the representation of everyday reality, with the focus placed more on the existence of poor people. And both for the idea and its social significance, *Poor Folk* was considered one of the works that best expressed the premises of Russian realism and one of the first testimonies of the growing maturity of the Gogolian realist tendency in the 1840s in the nineteenth century.

In terms of aesthetic value, this requirement from the critics does not represent much, because the social elements, as part of the external reality, only acquire full meaning, aesthetic value, when they enter intimately into the structure of the literary work and become an internal element to it. But that in itself does not mean that they can be

⁴ As noted by the Soviet critic G. Fridlender, "Dostoevsky's heroes are forced at every step to experience material need, dependency, not only from the world of people but from the world of things. Tea, sugar, bread, boots, uniforms – all this becomes an object of the most serious attention and discussion for Makar Alekseevich in his letters" (FRIDLENDER, 1964, p.63).

⁵ In disputes between Slavophiles and Westerners regarding the Gogolian school, the Slavophile critic Bulgarin qualified it as natural, as a synonym of anti-aesthetic, because it represented the dirty, nasty side of the city and of life. But Belinsky adopted the word and turned it into a positive concept and a flag for democratic and progressive literature.

⁶ The School showed the lives of poor people in the city and demanded objectivity in representation, that is, that works highlight the "reality of life." The literary work, then, should have a character of protest and evident social criticism.

considered elements that determine the aesthetic value of a work. That is not the case of language. Language does, indeed, play an essential role in the organization of the structure of a literary text and is, therefore, a determining element of its aesthetic value. For where would the writer's style be reflected more directly, more visibly, if not in language?

However, in regard to language, the innovations made by Dostoyevsky early in his career, which were part of an original creative project, were not only not understood, but they were rejected by the main critics of the time, who did not conceal their disappointment. And with the publication of *The Double* shortly thereafter, this attitude assumed by Dostoevsky came to be seen as sloppy, as a disregard for language. It became a common opinion that his works were distinguished by prolixity, by a lack of polish and stylistic rigor, that his characters' language was of the same kind and form, that they all spoke like the author.

The critic and writer P. V. Annenkov tells that, while writing *The Double*, Dostoevsky read the manuscript at the home of Belinsky, who kept emphasizing “the need to get the hand accustomed, which in literary practice meant to acquire the ability to easily convey one's thoughts and to free oneself from the difficulties of exposition.” Annenkov observes that Belinsky, who liked the text because of the strength and fullness with which it explored such a strange and original subject, certainly could not get accustomed to the diffuse manner that the author still had at the time and attributed this to his inexperience as a young writer, who had not overcome the obstacles related to language and form. Later, Annenkov (1964, pp.138-139) himself came to the conclusion that “Belinsky was wrong: It was not a novice that he had found, but an author fully formed.”⁷

At the time, however, this was a perfectly understandable reaction, even for the first critic. It must have been very difficult, and not only for critics, but also for the public, to accept Dostoevsky's way of writing, which kept coming back to the same words, the same phrases, endlessly repeating and varying them.

As his new works were published, comments on the style and language employed in them became increasingly laconic. D. V. Grigorovich, who at the time was also a first-

⁷ In Russian: “необходимость *набить руку*, что называется, в литературном деле, приобрести способность легкой передачи своих мыслей, освободиться от затруднений изложения.” “Но Белинский ошибся: он встретил не новичка, а совсем уже сформировавшегося автора.”

time author, was the first to read the manuscript of *Poor Folk*, along with N. Nekrasov. In spite of their shouting that a new Gogol had been born and predicting a brilliant future for the author, they were also extremely harsh in their criticisms of the language and the style of initial Dostoevsky's works. In Grigorovich's opinion, "repeating words," used by the author to exhaustion, resembled an "imitation of the language of government departments,"⁸ common in their work relations (IVANTCHIKOV, 1976, p.8).

Although by no means did the critic K. S. Aksakov question Dostoevsky's talent, he fiercely condemned his literary language and accused him of imitating Gogol's literary techniques. Aksakov (1847) argued that Devushkin "could speak exactly as in the story," but "he would never write that way... The character himself would never write as he speaks."⁹ Even though that was the way low-ranking employees expressed themselves, it was not the level of style expected of a writer. Dostoevsky could not simply reproduce, from the beginning to the end of the novel, a mode of expression that was not at all literary.

Therefore, the same critics who demanded writers a representation of reality "as it is," demanded, at the same time, the use of the author's language – the cultured, literary language – rather than the language of the lower social strata "as it was." However, in his work, Dostoevsky only took the demands of the natural school, of realistic tendency, to their logical conclusions, since colloquial language was much closer to the "real."

And even later, when the novel *Humiliated and Insulted* was published, N. A. Dobrolyubov (1837-1861), already in the 1860s, in his article "Zabitye liudi" (*Downtrodden People*), considered the novel to be "beneath aesthetical criticism" (1972, p.374).¹⁰ He declared that the "lack of pretension of artistic signification was evident even in the narrative." For "the characters speak like the author; they use the same favorite words and phrases; they have the same sentence structure," "and the result is that everyone likes to revolve around the same word and to keep hitting the same key as the author" (DOBROLYUBOV, 1972, pp.370-371).¹¹

⁸ In Russian: "подражание языку канцелярских отношений."

⁹ In Russian: "мог говорить точно так, как в повести"; "он никогда не писал так"; "но само лицо никогда бы не написало так, как говорит."

¹⁰ In Russian: "ниже эстетической критики."

¹¹ In Russian: "даже в изложении своем обнаруживает отсутствие претензий на художественное значение" / "действующие лица говорят как автор; они употребляют его любимые слова, его обороты; у них такой же склад фразы..." "и оканчивает чем, что они все любят вертеться на одном и том же слове и тянуть фразу, как сам автор."

In his study based on an analysis of the syntactic particularities of the text of the novella *The Meek One*, scholar E. A. Ivanchikov's wrote that "as Dostoevsky's works appeared, the language of his novels and stories only received negative, sometimes ironic, reviews and comments, when they were not completely ignored" (1976, p.7).¹² And in fact, Dostoevsky's literary language is characterized by an apparent stylistic neglect, which sometimes creates the impression of his simple inability to handle linguistic tools, as the academician D. S. Likhachev convincingly argues in his article "Nebrezhenie" slovom u Dostoevskogo ("Carelessness of the Word" in Dostoevsky; 1974, p.32). Nonetheless, this was an intentional and very conscious resource of the author, who was pursuing an extremely precise goal. What he had been trying to promote since the beginning of his career, and with great daring, was a formal innovation that proved to be extremely important, not only for Russian literature, but also to the way literature itself is made.

In order to justify, or even to understand, certain stylistic features that still surprise us in his work, it will be of help to briefly resume the period in which the formation of the Russian literary language was concluded. Until the end of the seventeenth century, the Russian literary language was old Church Slavonic, which had nothing in common with the Russian spoken by people in general, an oral tradition that long predated the written language.

With the reforms of Peter the Great in the 18th century, the language spoken by the people came into use and was also elevated to the quality of a literary language. The task of drafting grammatical norms and rules to be used in literature was assumed mostly by Lomonosov, who formulated his theories based mainly on the classical rule of distinct levels of style at high, intermediate and low levels.

At the end of the eighteenth century, a new trend, led by Nikolai Karamzin, emerged. In place of the official themes, Karamzin and his followers wanted to introduce new content and new themes into literature. In their works, they wanted to express more refined ideas and emotions of people of their own social circle, the cultured aristocracy; they wanted to express more subtle and complex feelings, such as happy and unhappy love. However, these were not common themes at the time, as words and expressions

¹² In Russian: "Язык повестей и романов Достоевского получал по мере их выхода в свет лишь отрицательные, иногда иронические отзывы и характеристики, либо не рассматривался совсем."

capable of conveying them did not exist in the Russian language. In order to make literary language more flexible, Karamzin began to include new words and expressions from the French in his works, something that also ended up generating controversy, in which Pushkin participated.

By arguing that Russians had no reason to use a foreign language to express their feelings, Pushkin sought to show that the Russian language was perfectly capable of expressing any thought, even the most profound, and any feeling, however complex, with great strength and with all its nuances and subtleties. He started to use the language of all social classes in his works to introduce elements of popular speech, of peasant dialects, that had never been accepted, especially in poetry - a highly elevated genre and, at the time, the dominant one in Russia.

Following the tradition begun by Pushkin, in his works, Gogol also uses elements of the colloquial language of the representatives of various social classes and strata. What can therefore be seen is that the formation of a new Russian literary language is closely related to the introduction of new themes, new content and, above all, new heroes in literature.

When Dostoevsky began his career as a writer, the process of formation of the literary language, as we know it, was almost complete. But he also presents himself as a strong representative of this innovative trend, even though his goals were different. He began to write using, from the very outset, the living colloquial language of even those most miserable strata of urban society. This resource, introduced principally by Pushkin and Gogol, was already common in the literature of the time. But it was limited to dialogues, to direct speech of characters. The style and language that stood out was undoubtedly that of the author himself.

Dostoevsky, however, began with a novel in which he did not even show his face, as he himself commented in a passionate letter to his brother, Mikhail, concerning the criticism of his style in *Poor Folk*, in which he had already manifested the basic principles that would guide his creative project from then on:

In our public there is instinct, as in any crowd, but not education. They don't understand how one can write in such a manner. They are accustomed to seeing the face of the writer in everything; but I didn't show mine. And they aren't aware that it is Devushkin speaking and not me, and that Devushkin cannot talk otherwise. They find the novel

drawn out, and yet there is not a single superfluous word (DOSTOEVSKY, 1985, p.117).¹³

And what permitted the absence of the author or an educated narrator in this was the fact that Dostoevsky chose, as a suitable technical procedure for the presentation of his characters, the epistolary form, which, by its very nature, requires a narrative in the first person. It was in this narrative genre that Dostoevsky found a way to let the characters themselves express their feelings, their perceptions, their emotions by themselves, with their own words and in their own style. So much so that the novel's own character, Devushkin, when struggling with language in his correspondence with the protagonist, who is criticizing him, attributes his lack of style and his difficulty in expressing himself to his poor education:

Do not be angry, beloved, that I should write like this. Style, I have not. Would that I had! I write just what wanders into my brain, in the hope that I may cheer you up a little. Of course, had I had a good education, things might have been different; but, as things were, I could not have one. Never did I learn even to do simple sums! (DOSTOEVSKY, 2009, p.28).

As this excerpt shows, there is an entirely new element in this work. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the epistolary form was intended to express the most intimate, subtle and deep emotions and feelings of characters from the upper social classes. In sentimental and romantic novels, correspondence generally takes place between passionate and virtuous young people, who are in contradiction to the surrounding world, in which they find no echo to their lofty romantic impulses and ideals. At least since Goethe's *Werther*, the epistolary form had been used for the presentation of psychologically interesting figures, such as *Adolphe* by Benjamin Constant, *Rafael* by Lamartine, etc. And the language, the level of style employed, were those of the cultured language, corresponding to the character's social level, usually the same as that of the author.

Certainly, the greatest literary advantage of the epistolary form lies in the fact that the letters constitute the most direct, material proof of their authors' interior life. And

¹³ Letter to M. M. Dostoevsky, dated September 1, 1846. In Russian: "В публике нашем есть инстинкт, как во всякой толпе, но нет образованости. Не понимают, как можно писать таким слогом. Во всем они привыкли видеть рожу сочинителя; я же моей не показывал. А им и невдогад, что говорит Девушкин, а не я, и что Девушкин иначе и говорит не может. Роман находят растянутым, а в нем слова лишнего нет."

Dostoevsky employed this same resource in his first novel for the same purposes that his predecessors had used it: the social and psychological depiction of characters. The difference is that he uses this form to expose the most intimate, subtle and profound emotions and feelings of characters drawn from the lowest strata of society – an old, poor and insignificant employee and his protégée, a simple wronged young woman. In other words, Dostoevsky uses the epistolary form to present a theme and a content specific to the “physiological essay,”¹⁴ a literary genre designated to expose the lives of poor people with an evident sense of social criticism. However, the most that this genre was able to awaken in the reader was the intermediate level of compassion for the characters represented; never the serious, elevated participation that the epistolary genre had hitherto demanded.

In this sense, the depiction of characters in *Poor Folk* went precisely in the direction of the expectations of the critics of the 1840s, who complained that the employees “give literature almost exclusively material for vaudevilles, soap operas, comedic scenes and other types of entertainment.” (CHKLOVSKI, 1974, p.161).¹⁵ In other words, the habits and the pitiable situation of poor St-Petersburg employees, people with similar occupations and destinies, had become commonplace, vulgar material of current humorous literature. Even Gogol’s *The Overcoat* had not been able to overcome this wave of mockery of the poor employees. On the contrary, it seemed to have increased the attractiveness of the theme.¹⁶ Hence Devushkin’s deep indignation when he recognized himself in the figure of Akaky Akakievitch, as expressed in the following excerpt:

Sometimes a man will hide himself away, and not show his face abroad, for the mere reason that, though he has done nothing to be ashamed of, he dreads the gossip and slandering which are everywhere to be

¹⁴ The physiological essay was largely popular in Russia before the 1840s and became one of the most popular genres of the “Natural School.” Representatives of the genre in the Russian literature expected writers to employ the most accurate representation of contemporary social life, especially for lower-class types, who were excluded from great literature until then. The physiological essay (also called “daguerreotype”), rather than representing reality as a whole, aimed at “selecting” a part of it, generally in the form of a series of separate essays, each addressing a detailed description, physiologically “accurate,” of various types and professions, for example, poor employees, hand-organ player, doorman, etc.

¹⁵ In Russian: “доставляют литературе почти единственный материал водевилей, комедий, сатирических сцен и проч.”

¹⁶ A detailed account on the subject of poor employees – who were almost one third of the urban population at the time of the novel –, in all its manifestations, by V. V. Vinogradov in “Эволюция русского натурализма” [*The Evolution of Russian Naturalism*].

encountered. If his civic and family life has to do with literature, everything will be printed and read and laughed over and discussed; until at length, he hardly dares to show his face in the street at all, seeing that he will have been described by report as recognizable through his gait alone! (DOSTOIÉVSKI, 2009, p.95).

In an attempt at “rehabilitating” the poor employee, Dostoevsky in *Poor Folk* presents the theme of *malenkiy chelovek*, the small, unimportant man typical of the “physiological essay,” by employing a form of an elevated genre – the epistolary form. And even if Dostoevsky was following a certain, already established literary tradition, as Fridlender observed, “the application of this tradition by him was profoundly original, innovative and unusual” (FRIDLINDER, 1964, pp.62-63).¹⁷

According to the classical rules of separating styles, everyday life, in its practicality, commonness and ugliness, was only suitable for comical, satirical treatment; and it could never reach a level beyond being merely touching. Daily, real life, even for the intermediate layers of society, was considered to be of low style and could, therefore, only be represented in a lower literary style suited to it.

But Dostoevsky not only takes the practical reality of the lower social layers of society as his object of representation, as in his work he also adopts a language that was also considered to be of a lower level, proper, therefore, to the way the characters expressed themselves. As a result, he not only transcends all the established rules of level of style, but also those already broke, because he presents, in a serious and elevated way, not only the daily reality, but also the language and the level of style proper to it.

Dostoevsky’s achievement in *Poor Folk* was without precedent even in Western literature. It was very different, for example, from what Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, the so-called great French realists, had done, who had also promoted great innovation in literature by breaking with the classical rules of separate levels of style in force until then. But they broke with classical rules, as Erich Auerbach observes in his book *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, by representing events of everyday practical reality in a high level of style. In other words, the object of representation was the real, practical life of the lower social strata, but the language used to present it was the author’s cultivated language.

¹⁷ In Russian: “то самое применение им этой традиции было глубоко оригинальным, новаторским и необычным.”

As Auerbach puts it:

When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subject of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct level of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment (1953, p.554).¹⁸

And yet, their intention, which was too tragic a compassion for the events of practical reality, was no different than what Dostoevsky intended. The difference is that Dostoevsky is able to evoke the same tragic compassion as the French authors without changing the rules of style, by portraying everyday reality at a level of style that is also inferior, proper to it.

How did he achieve that? By changing the point of view. Dostoevsky gave characters themselves the chance to present themselves and the world around them; this is, everything that until then had been presented from the author's dominant point of view, as Bakhtin (1984)¹⁹ pointed out.

Therefore, this narrative attitude adopted by the author is in the closest relationship with the style of the work. By placing a poor employee, an unimportant man, at the center, telling his own story, Dostoevsky consciously renounces omniscience and finds, precisely from the limitation of his intellectual capacity, special effects for the realization of his artistic project. For although there had been other literary characters with Devushkin's social status, there was certainly none whose daily thoughts and feelings were made known to us with such intimacy as to reveal the character's spiritual world in all its inner complexity. And the main factor that allowed Dostoevsky to impart this subjective and inner orientation to his novel is to be found in the formal basis of the narrative: the epistolary form, which not only presupposes much more feelings than actions, but also allows the characters involved to express their feelings with greater sincerity.

¹⁸ AUERBACH, E. *Mimesis*. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

¹⁹ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

This new perspective, this new point of view adopted by Dostoevsky, by allowing him to grasp the existence of his heroes in all their depth, also overwhelms the reader by their fate, in a way that very much resembles the tragic compassion. Although the characters are certainly not authentic tragic heroes, they cannot be said to be comical in any sense.

As we see, Dostoevsky promoted an innovation in literature that is as brilliant as that of the great French realist writers. In his works, the representation of more ordinary and simple everyday reality could receive a serious, elevated, and even tragic treatment without parting from the level of style that was peculiar to it, that is, by employing a level of style that was reserved for comedy, for entertainment literature.

Belinsky eventually understood this procedure that would become characteristic of Dostoevsky's style. As he read the manuscript of *Poor Folk*, the critic immediately realized that Dostoevsky was narrating the hero's adventure through the hero's language and understanding, which, for Belinsky, revealed "an infinite capacity for objective contemplation of the phenomena of life, the ability, so to speak, to enter the skin of a person completely different from himself" (BELINSKY, 1956, pp.28-29).²⁰ But the critics and the general readership did not understand how one could write in such style and they took the "unusual" language in *Poor Folk* as a transgression of the literary norms. As Dostoevsky said himself, they were "used to seeing the face of the creator in everything," and could not distinguish the character's speech from the author's speech and realize that they could not express themselves in any other way. Hence the rejection by the critics of the language employed in the novel.

Therefore, precisely the language, so criticized in the writer, appears as one of the elements that allowed him, at the beginning of his career, to question the whole current mode of realistic representation and, with that, the very position occupied by the narrator. For the narrative attitude adopted by Dostoevsky – that allowed him to transfer to the point of view of the character everything that used to be represented from the author's dominant point of view without changing the classic rule of separating the levels of style – was something new and completely unusual for the time, so it was not understood and then created a special problem for his readers.

²⁰ In Russian: "бесконечно могущественную способность объективного созерцания явлений жизни, способность, так сказать, переселяться в кожу другого, совершенно чуждого ему существа."

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