



First Words

On Dostoevsky's Introductions

LEWIS
BAGBY

Boston
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This study is dedicated to

Donna Peters Bagby

In Memory of

Grover C. Bagby

(1916–2010)

and

Dorothy Waters Bagby

(1917–2010)

They could not wait for this book

One feels an urge to smoke
Dostoevsky out with the question,
“Who’s talking?”

—John Jones, *Dostoevsky*

On this occasion I shall include
“The Notes of a Certain Person.”
That person is not I,
but someone else entirely.
I think no further foreword is needed.

—Dostoevsky, “Bobok”

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Note on Transliteration

Russian names in the text are spelled either in the form most familiar to readers who know no Russian or in such a way as to facilitate pronunciation. For all other Russian words I have followed the Library of Congress transliteration system.

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Introduction

I found myself in the fallow field of Dostoevsky's introductions many years ago at a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar on world literature directed by Victor Brombert at Princeton University. Professor Brombert asked me to make comments to our group of mostly non-Slavists on the adequacy of the translation we were using for Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. I began by comparing the original's first words against the translation's. Those words appear in a fictional editor's introduction to Dostoevsky's novel-memoir of his protagonist's life in a Siberian prison. In performing my assignment, I discovered that the translation did not serve the original adequately. The first paragraph alone seemed insurmountable for any translator to capture in another language, for it is coded with a secondary narrative, folkloric in structure and imagery that for linguistic reasons cannot be rendered into English while doing justice to both the overt and covert levels of the discourse. The subsurface story of the hero's quest is encoded in the very roots of Dostoevsky's language and in the motion suggested by his use of prefixes. I was on my way.

Introductions have a long, distinguished, but sometimes zany history in world literature. We dip into a moment of time in that history by taking a close look at Dostoevsky's use of introductions in his fiction. No systematic study has been undertaken of Dostoevsky from this perspective. True, the focus is narrow, but in terms of a narrative's discourse, introductions are important in that they represent the author's first words, the opening into a text. As Edward Said argues, "Every writer knows that the choice of a beginning for what he will write is crucial not only because it determines much of what follows

but also because a work's beginning is, practically speaking, the main entrance to what it offers."¹ Consider Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void."² Introductions often take us to origins, to tales of beginnings, even to ideas about the very beginning of beginnings, or at least to the illusion of beginnings. What would we make of the narrative in the Book of John without its philosophical opening, a prolegomenon to his account of the life of Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"?³ Compare these impactful beginnings with the mundane, even blunt, prologue: "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah."⁴ A mere glance tells us that introductions do many different things.

Fast forward millennia and recall Tolstoy's first sentence of *Anna Karenina*, a stunningly brief prologue with immense import: "All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."⁵ Compare Tolstoy's authoritative voice with the first words of the introduction to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity. Namely, that while I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, so that I can foresee . . . inevitable questions . . ."⁶ While we may be confident that Tolstoy's words represent the direct address of his surrogate omniscient narrator, in Dostoevsky's case we cannot be so sure even though his introduction is entitled "From the Author." Perhaps Dostoevsky has another author in mind, someone other than himself. Might this always or frequently be true of his introductions?

First words are nearly always important, marked in a special way for their being the initial utterances we encounter as we enter into the world of the text. Furthermore, initial remarks that occur in introductions

¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), 3.

² Genesis I: 1–2 in *Holy Bible: King James Text, Modern Phrased Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

³ John I: 1–2.

⁴ Nehemiah I: 1.

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3.

⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 3.

are yet another set of originating utterances of special value (as distinct from those that appear in the body of the work, usually beginning with something often labeled Chapter One). The discourse that appears in introductions represents something of a puzzle if for no other reason than it occupies an indeterminate space between the narrator's and the writer's respective positions. At one extreme, the preface may be wholly in accord with what follows, as we see in Tolstoy, and (questions of authorship aside) in Genesis, John, and Nehemiah. But at the other, it can detach from the text that follows and drift toward an identification with another ontological order, one that appears less continuous with the text, something more problematic than straightforward. The introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov* represents this second variety. Between these two we find many gradations. John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, for instance, begins with the author's direct address in which he disparages both conventional thinking about verbal art and the opinion of literary critics, then transitions almost seamlessly to the voice of the story's narrator (who occupies a different discursive plain).

Prefaces as an object of literary study have drawn attention over the course of time, but in more recent history Gérard Genette's *Paratexts* presents something more comprehensive than any study preceding it.⁷ Genette provides a helpful typology of introductions to works of verbal art. We shall soon have recourse to it. Edward Said has contributed to the topic, as has a wide range of articles on introductory words, signs, and symbols as coded phenomena of literary texts. Turning to specific examples, Pushkin's and Gogol's famous introductions to their first published pieces of prose fiction, *The Tales of the Late Ivan Belkin* (1831) and *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1831–1832), have been treated extensively in the critical literature.

In contrast to Pushkin's and Gogol's introductions, however, Dostoevsky's have received short shrift.⁸ There is no study of his use of

⁷ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸ Not to mention Sir Walter Scott, whose famous *Waverley* prefaces, separated from their narratives entirely, have been published in a single volume, *The Prefaces to the Waverley Novels by Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Mark A. Weinstein (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978). See also Charles W. Eliot, ed., *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, in *The Five Foot Shelf of Books*, vol. 39 (New York: Collier and Son, 1910); Herbert S. Greshman and Kernan B. Whitworth, Jr., eds., *Anthology of Critical Prefaces to the 19th Century French*

introductions as a device—as strategy, frame, authorial stance—in his prose fiction. From reading the literature, it would appear that his forewords more than any other response have caused consternation. This is certainly understandable. Dostoevsky's novels hold so many riches that their prefaces pale in comparison. His introductions are quickly forgotten in the forward press of his powerful narratives. Do Dostoevsky's beginnings have anything to contribute to our understanding of the works in which they appear? Or do they hang by an almost invisible thread to the work's great bulk?⁹ Dostoevsky's creative power is so great, his ideas so challenging, his narratives so deeply engaging, that the functions of the introduction, minor subgenre that it is, have found no significant place in the critical literature on Dostoevsky's art, at best appearing as afterthoughts, and at worst judged useless verbiage.

This study finds that introductions are complex, multifunctional, variegated rhetorical phenomena. They are a literary artifact we should not take for granted, least of all in Dostoevsky's neglected case.

Dostoevsky provides clues that introductions hold greater importance to him than readers have acknowledged previously. He never used them in his pre-exile work of the 1840s, when it was a fairly common practice, but in his fiction of the post-exile years he delivered up many an introduction when it was less normative to do so. From the first work out of Siberian imprisonment and exile, *The Village of Stepanchikovo and its Inhabitants* (1859), to his last, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880–1881), Dostoevsky published forewords on many occasions. The list of works with prefaces is quite impressive. In addition to these two novels, we find forewords in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860–1862), *Notes from the Underground* (1864), and *Demons* (1871–1872). To this list we can add the nonfiction *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863) and four short stories that emerge within his *The Diary of a Writer*, “Bobok” in 1873, and for the year 1876, “The Boy at Christ's Christmas Party,” “The Peasant Marei,” and “A Gentle Creature,” the last being one of Dostoevsky's greatest short stories. None of his other works from this period (*Crime and*

Novel (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962); Richard P. Blackmur, ed., *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934); and A. S. Demin, ed., *Tematika i stilistika predislovii i posleslovii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981).

⁹ As Genette mentions, readers often bypass prefaces (*Paratexts*, 4).

Punishment and *The Idiot*, for example) includes a foreword labeled as such.¹⁰ Rather than this fact rendering introductions irrelevant, it instead marks their occurrence as unique. We are immediately forced to ask: Why does he use an introduction in one text but not another? Is the absence of a preface as significant as its presence? What characteristics of a given work militate toward the use of a preface or its avoidance? These and related questions are addressed when sufficient information has been amassed to turn to them productively.

Other than using prefaces in some very significant works, Dostoevsky engages in a signaling strategy to underscore their non-trivial nature. First, he uses different labels for them in all but two instances. Second, in his fiction he never utilizes the most common form of preface of his day—direct authorial address. Except for his non-fiction, where he does use his own voice, in his fiction Dostoevsky casts the voice emanating from his prefaces as someone else's. He is completely consistent in this practice.

Regarding these two signaling strategies, Dostoevsky utilizes a wide variety of synonyms to identify his introductions:

- An Introductory (*Vstuplenie*) for *The Village Stepanchikovo and its Inhabitants*
- Introduction (*Vvedenie*) for *Notes from the House of the Dead*
- Instead of a Foreword (*Vmesto predisloviia*) for *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*
- [A zero label] for *Notes from the Underground*
- Instead of an Introduction (*Vmesto vvedeniia*) for *Demons*
- [A zero label] for “Bobok”
- “A Boy with his Hand Outstretched for Alms” (“Mal’chik s ruchkoi”) for “A Boy at Christ’s Christmas Party” in *The Diary of a Writer*
- “On Love of the People” (“O liubvi k narodu”) for “The Peasant Marei” in *The Diary of a Writer*
- From the Author (*Ot avtora*) for “A Gentle Creature” in *The Diary of a Writer*
- From the Author (*Ot avtora*) for *The Brothers Karamazov*

¹⁰ Dostoevsky never includes an introduction when he uses an omniscient narrator. This point is discussed in the Conclusion.

Only in the final two cases are the labels the same. I shall address this anomaly later. For the moment, let us simply note that a constant feature of the titles is their variety. His consistency in using different forms suggests that his practice was most probably intentional. Just what his intent was in shifting labels from one work to the other will be discussed in due time. For now, we need only acknowledge that Dostoevsky wished to highlight his introductions and that he did so by calling them by different names almost every time he used them.

To alert us to the notion that his introductions are to be accorded more than passing attention, Dostoevsky also avoids their most commonly attested form—direct authorial address. This point requires some amplification. To this end we turn to Gérard Genette's typology of prefaces to see where Dostoevsky's fit.

Genette identifies three general types of preface—authorial, allographic, and actorial. The first represents any foreword that comes directly from the implied author, “the second self,” who “chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read.”¹¹ Except in his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky avoids them in his prefaces. As we shall see, this is true even when he affixes his name to the preface. The second of Genette's types denotes a preface that comes from a third party, someone either real, living (once living), or fictional, but certainly not the author. Dostoevsky only once uses an allographic preface in his fiction. The third general type identifies introductions that come from a character, fictional or authentic, who figures in the subsequent narrative. Autobiography supplies the most examples here, but not exclusively. Dostoevsky's practice moves toward this type over time.

Genette divides each of these preface types into three subcategories—authentic, fictive, and apocryphal. Thus, an authentic authorial preface would be one that comes to us in the voice of the implied author. A fictive authorial preface is one that issues from the voice of a character who also serves as narrator. And an apocryphal authorial foreword is one cast in the speech of someone (“an author”) other than the person to which the foreword is explicitly ascribed. In other words, let us say that Dostoevsky signs the preface of his work of fiction, thus

¹¹ Booth explains that readers “infer [the implied author] as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices” (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 74–75).

leading us to believe that the preface represents his direct authorial address. Then, by clues he provides, we learn that it isn't his person at all, but someone else. That makes it apocryphal. Dostoevsky employed this ruse, in fact, in *Notes from the Underground*, but not only there.

Rather than describing each of the permutations and combinations of Genette's main types and subtypes, we shall look into the forms relevant to Dostoevsky's fiction that we are treating in this study, specifically, works with clearly demarcated forewords duly indicated, with rare exception, as such. They provide a shorthand for us as we work through the prefaces. His forewords represent a solid portion of Genette's typology:

	Authorial	Allographic	Actorial
Authentic	<i>Winter Notes on Summer Impressions; Notes from the Underground</i> ; "Bobok"; "A Boy at Christ's Christmas Party"; "A Gentle Creature"; <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>		<i>Winter Notes on Summer Impressions</i>
Fictive	<i>The Village of Stepanchikovo; Demons</i>	<i>Notes from the House of the Dead</i>	<i>The Village of Stepanchikovo; Demons</i>
Aprocryphal	<i>Notes from the Underground; The Brothers Karamazov</i>		<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>

Given the overlap of Dostoevsky titles across Genette's categories, as we see here in the case of *The Village of Stepanchikovo*, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, *Notes from the Underground*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, I suggest in this study that Dostoevsky engages hybrid forms of Genette's typology. They cannot be pigeonholed into one part of the grid at the expense of another. We shall examine these instances in due time.

Dostoevsky did not operate in a preface vacuum. There are myriad examples of preface, introduction, prologue, and foreword in the literature with which he was familiar, indeed, in the literature he most loved to read and that influenced his practices. Consequently, in Chapter One we first take a look at the models Dostoevsky had

before him when he began using forewords with some regularity. This is not meant to be a mere academic exercise, but one that allows us to accomplish three things simultaneously: to identify many of the purposes to which introductions are put as part and parcel of Dostoevsky's literary heritage; to enjoy the play that inheres in those models; and to put flesh on the bare bones of Genette's typology as it applies to Dostoevsky's work.

After examining Dostoevsky's models from Russian literature of the early nineteenth century, we turn our attention in Chapter Two to Dostoevsky's work in the last years of his exile and the first years of his return to St. Petersburg. This is the period when Dostoevsky first began to put introductions to work. He quickly transitioned from some awkward first steps in *The Village of Stepanchikovo and its Inhabitants* to the kind of astounding aesthetic achievement, in *Notes from the House of the Dead*, that we associate with his name. Through the remainder of the 1860s and 1870s, Dostoevsky alternately did and did not use forewords to his work. We examine the texts containing prefaces in Chapters Three and Four, then turn in Chapter Five to *The Diary of a Writer* with its unusual application of forewords. In the final chapter we take up an analysis of the curious introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Its preface may not represent the summit of Dostoevsky's achievement as a writer of prefaces (*Notes from the House of the Dead* and "A Gentle Creature" hold that place), but it discloses the man behind his masks as few others did before it. A Conclusion hazards informed guesses about the function of Dostoevsky's use of forewords, when he used them, why he used them, and what they tell us about verbal art as authors choose how to set their readers loose to inhabit the worlds they create for us.

Before turning to introductions as a literary phenomenon, it might be helpful first to establish the technical vocabulary to be used throughout this study. Genette opts for "preface" because it is predominant in French. Since it is a finely tuned and well-oiled lexical item, derived from seventeenth-century French, Medieval Latin, and Ancient Greek, it has pedigree. But I intersperse it with synonyms: foreword, introduction, and introductory—lexical items Dostoevsky himself was most inclined to use.

There are also a variety of permutations on these terms, all denoting initial remarks made to the reader by another party. In Dostoevsky's

first words alone we find attested “From the Author” (“Ot avtora”) and “In Place of an Introduction” (“Vmesto vvedeniia”). More striking than the mutability of the signs, or the fixity of the notion of what is denoted by the signs, are the spatial and temporal suggestions each contains—that is, their chronotope.¹²

Imagine a medieval illuminated manuscript for a moment, for example, the eleventh-century *Marvels of the East*.¹³ The text demonstrates two phenomena that pertain to prefaces: their framing capacity in both a literal and figurative sense and their images’ inspired, if fitful, transgressions of the frames. Prefaces, and the range of synonyms that represent them as verbal signs, possess this duality. In the *Marvels*, there are figures (monsters) that illuminate the pages, often representing the verbal text’s first letter or word. They do not move outside the clearly and ornately adorned frames in which they are located. But there are other figures whose appendages—a foot, head, or an arm, for instance—cross into the frame’s space. They are still wholly contained within the outer edge of the frame, but they now form a part of it. Then there are monsters that have broken through the frame border, torn it open in such a way that they might step or gesture out into the text they accompany. There are also partially as well as completely splintered frames. Here the monster transgresses the space of the discourse, sometimes even producing in cartoon boxes the folio’s first words as quoted speech from the mouth of the beast. And finally, there are frames that have wholly disappeared. The monster roams the page freely.

Introductions, prefaces, forewords, prologues, and their other synonymous forms do something quite similar. Like the monsters’ feet, prefaces are contained in time and space in distinct ways. Their labels’ roots indicate those differences in a way conventional usage appears to

¹² This is Mikhail Bakhtin’s term for the space-time continuum in discourse, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258; M. M. Bakhtin, “Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romane. Ocherki po istoricheskoi poetike,” in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki* (Moscow: Khudlit, 1975), 234–407.

¹³ *Marvels of the East* (British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV), https://imagesonline.bl.uk/?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&q=Marvels+of+the+East.

me to have lost. For example, “introductions” conduct across a threshold (*intro+duct*). In this sense, they move discourse from one qualitative level to another (the fictional narrative’s). Like its usage in common parlance, when we are introduced to someone or something, we move from a state of not knowing to knowing. Introductions in literature perform a similar service. They take our familiarity with the object (which we might best imagine as zero) and conduct us into a level of initial knowing. Introductions thus prepare us to become even more familiar with the object. The chronotope of introductions involves movement in time across discursive space. It suggests a dynamism. It gestures outside the frame toward utterance.

“Preface” comes from Medieval Latin *prefatia*; *pre+fari*, speech beforehand or in advance of some other speech act. It suggests something more static, something oriented to a prior condition in and of itself and before something new (once introduced) is encountered. It is preparatory. Its prefix and root suggest a chronotope that focuses on the moment and on the current discursive space of utterance. Its root emphasis is on itself as a speech act. It stands within the frame structure and does not break out of it.

A “prologue” is related, as forebear, to “preface.” It derives from Greek *pro+logos*. It is speech before other speech, discourse in advance of another level of discourse. When thinking of presentations in drama wherein a *dramatis persona* steps forward (perhaps in front of the curtain) and pronounces on the play that follows, think prologue. It is already outside the frame and stalking the narrative on its own stage. But its discourse is qualitatively distinct from that of the characters whose speech floats next above the boards. Fictional though it may be, the prologue plays at the level of narrative discourse, but only by having stepped out of a traditional prefatorial frame. It frames, but is not chronotopically bound within a traditional frame discourse or introduction. Nor does it occupy a space within the text (play) that unfolds in its aftermath. It is a pointer directed at the drama about to unfold. Having broken through the frame, it stands on the same stage that the actors will, but it does not wander.

“Foreword” (German *Vorwort*, which is modeled on Latin *praefatio*, whence “preface”) indicates a moment of discourse that precedes the one when readers enter into the text of fiction. It is marked by a decided differentiation of the discourses in the foreword and in the

ensuing story. Like a preface, it marks out a speech act that precedes other speech acts, which are, of necessity, of a qualitatively different order. Its temporal and spatial orientation is the same as in a preface—it is more static and implies a speech act rather than motion across a threshold.

When not marshaled as synonyms with differing suggestive potentials, I use the four terms—introduction, foreword, preface, and prologue—to reflect Dostoevsky's own language usage. For example, when he says "Introduction" ("Vvedenie"), I use it when referencing his term; and when Dostoevsky uses an apparent variant of it, "Introductory" ("Vstuplenie"), I employ his term, too.¹⁴ When speaking more generally about a given work without reference to Dostoevsky's specific term or phrase, I utilize the synonyms rather freely.

Use is also made of the notion of frames. There are three ways in which the term is used to indicate distinct phenomena. It would be wise to keep them separate for they impact discussions of Dostoevsky's introductions in meaningful ways. In the first instance, frames are conceived in spatial terms, as verbal structures very much like those in the plastic arts that separate the object from a larger, containing context. Think here of the images from *Marvels of the East*. In verbal art, the spatial nature of framing occurs when the preface is marked off in terms of voice, style, and spatio-temporal setting from the narrative discourse that follows (the fictional tale). In a second sense of framing, the term is used to indicate the means by which an argument or a theme is prepackaged in order to sway reader or target audience response in a particular direction. The third sense refers to the phenomenon of narrative framing, a phenomenon of verbal art through which the discourse, setting, and spatio-temporal (chronotopic) elements interact with the fictional narrative to generate a covert message or a third tale which synthesizes the elements of story and frame.

I offer apologies for introducing what might seem to be unnecessary distinctions so early in the game. I only do so because I feel they shall prove useful as we examine the first words Dostoevsky and some

¹⁴ "Introductory" (*Vstuplenie*) possesses its own etymology. It is made up of the prefix meaning "in/inward" (*v-*) and "step" (*stup-*) and thus suggests motion, not across a threshold, but into a new space. Note: Dostoevsky usually puts the label "foreword" (*predislovie*) in the mouth of his narrator and tends not to use it himself.

of his immediate Russian predecessors committed to the page in their verbal art. I should note, too, that in large measure, I conduct close readings of Dostoevsky's prefaces guided by formalist, structuralist, and semiotic practices.

One final clarification before proceeding: I have named the study "First Words" in a narrow sense to indicate the first complete utterances of any text penned by the author. The titles and epigraphs attached to a literary text also represent first words, but not necessarily as complete or sustained utterance. Needless to say, titles and epigraphs deserve treatment every bit as much as do introductions.¹⁵ By my definition, they lay beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁵ See, for example, A. N. Andreeva, et al., *Poetika zaglaviia* [*The Poetics of Titles*] (Moscow-Tver': Liliia print, 2005).