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Dostoevsky's Virtual Sequels

This paper revisits the topic of my article "Bakhtin and the 'Virtual Sequel' in Russian Literature" (Slavic and East European Journal, 2000), which explores the particular type of epic unfinishedness that we see in the classical Russian novel, as the manifestation of an authorial strategy to compensate for the impossible redemptive mission imposed upon nineteenth-century literature by critics and writers alike. Dostoevsky, for whom "everything is directed toward that unspoken and as yet unpredetermined 'new word'" (Bakhtin), emerges as grand champion (powering past Gogol in the homestretch) of this strategy. He gestures toward the virtual sequel textually, paratextually, and extratextually: from those early feuilletons that never get to the point, to novels like "A Raw Youth," the whole of which is offered as merely "material for a future work of art" – not to speak of the famous preface to "The Brothers Karamazov," with its explication of two key features of the virtual sequel, as 1) a text for which the existing book is but an introduction; 2) a consummation of the novel's asymptotic drive toward the unfinished present, promoting its fictional hero into "the very present moment" of contemporary reality.