Das absolute Wissen and the Dostoevskian *Sobornost'*. Reception and intercultural transformation between Hegel and Dostoevsky

Elisabetta Romano
University of Venice Ca' Foscari
Sestiere Dorsoduro 3246, Italy
Email: elisabettaromano6@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper explores the intercultural encounter between Hegel's concept of *absolutes Wissen* (absolute knowledge) and Dostoevsky's reworking of the Orthodox notion of *sobornost'*. In nineteenth-century Russia, Hegelian philosophy represented both a powerful intellectual catalyst and a contested cultural paradigm, provoking divergent responses among Westernizers, revolutionaries, and Slavophiles. While Herzen, Belinsky, and Bakunin used Hegelian dialectics to justify progress or revolution, the Slavophiles opposed it but nonetheless engaged with it as a counter-model for reaffirming Orthodox tradition and communal life. Dostoevsky, situated within this philosophical and cultural milieu, absorbed and transformed Hegelian categories into his literary and existential vision. By confronting Hegel's idea of absolute knowledge with the Orthodox concept of *sobornost'*, Dostoevsky reshapes the dialectic into a narrative of freedom, tragedy, and communal responsibility. The analysis highlights how *sobornost'* emerges in *The Brothers Karamazov* not as an abstract utopia, but as a lived, fragile, and open-ended possibility grounded in love, forgiveness, and education. This comparative framework shows how philosophy and literature converge in addressing the tension between individual and community, universality and particularity, reason and faith. Ultimately, the dialogue between Hegel and Dostoevsky illustrates how intercultural reception generates creative reinterpretations that transcend national and disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: Dostoevsky · Hegel · Intercultural Reception · Absolute Knowledge · Sobornost'

Introduction: Hegel in Russia

> Aside from Karl Marx, no modern philosopher had a broader impact in Russia than G. W. F. Hegel (Berdyaev, 1978)[1].

In nineteenth-century Russia, German philosophy exerted a decisive influence, becoming one of the main points of reference for the intellectuals of that time[2] (Jakowenko, 1934; Koyré, 1950; Planty-Bonjour, 1974; Berdyaev, 1978; Frede, 2013). Among the main philosophical systems, Hegel's one was probably the most controversial and divisive. Celebrated by the Westerners as the

expression of the European spirit and a tool for interpreting universal history, it was at the same time criticised by Slavophiles as the paradigm of a rationalism extraneous to Russian religious and community experience. Unlike other European contexts, in Russia Hegel's system became a true cultural battleground, capable of arousing revolutionary enthusiasm and defensive reactions, heterodox interpretations and creative reworkings[3]. Its reception was never passive. It represented a cultural laboratory in which Russia sought to define its identity in relation to the West. Writers, critics and revolutionaries read Hegel in profoundly different ways. Herzen and Belinsky found in him the key to understanding the historical necessity of progress, while Bakunin interpreted dialectics as a justification for revolution. On the other side, Slavophiles, while opposing the Hegelian system, could not ignore it, often using it as a counter-model to reaffirm the value of Orthodox tradition and Russian community life. Hegel's philosophy thus became the terrain on which nineteenth-century Russian culture based its fundamental questions: *what is the relationship between the individual and the community? What meaning should be attributed to freedom and history? What place should faith have in modernity?*

In this scenario, Hegelian philosophy was never perceived as an extraneous doctrine[4], but as a *prism* through which reading the tensions within Russia itself, like the conflicts between the individual and community, freedom and authority, universalism and national identity. Herzen, Bakunin, Belinsky – and even the Slavophile thinkers – engaged in dialogue with Hegel, recognising in his dialectic a decisive test for the definition of Russia's destiny. This debate intertwined fruitfully with literature, which in Russia was never simply aesthetic production, but always a vehicle for philosophical thought and social reflection[5].

Encountering a text is never a neutral experience. It involves a dialogue between what the text proposes and what the reader projects onto it, consciously or unconsciously. In an intercultural context, this dynamic is amplified, since reading a foreign work involves not only encountering a different language and tradition but also the weight of emotions that shape our reception in many forms, such as curiosity, mistrust, fascination and fear.

Nineteenth-century Russia offers an emblematic example of this dynamic. The arrival and spread of Hegelian philosophy did not produce uniform adherence, but a multiplicity of responses that reflected ideological, historical and spiritual tensions. As we previously stated, Herzen and Belinsky saw in it a confirmation of the historical necessity of progress, Bakunin transformed dialectics into revolutionary language, while the Slavophiles, although opposed to the Hegelian system, used it as a counter-model, reinforcing through comparison the value of Orthodox tradition and *sobornost'*.

Dostoevsky is part of this picture. Although not strictly a philosopher, he is rightly considered one of Russia's greatest intellectuals. Influenced by an environment marked by idealistic philosophy (although he never fully adhered to it), he assimilated and reproposed Hegelian categories through his own *Erwartungsrichtung*[6] (Jauss, 1982, 103). His narrative, filled with metaphysical and ethical questions, reworks many of the issues raised by Hegelian philosophy, but transforms them into a tragic and existential key. This study aims to fit into the context of intercultural reflection, highlighting a

paradigmatic moment in European intellectual history, i.e. the encounter between Hegelian philosophy and 19th-century Russian literary sensibility. This encounter represents not only a phenomenon of philosophical reception, but also an example of dialogue between different cultures, in which conceptual categories born in Germany are translated and reinterpreted within a different historical, literary and linguistic horizon. The analysis of the Hegelian concept of *absolutes Wissen* in tension with Dostoevsky's *sobornost'* allows us to question not only the roots of Russian culture, but also how literature becomes a privileged tool for intercultural understanding, capable of relating *universal* and *particular*, *individual* and *community*, *Europe* and *Russia*.

Christian heritage and tragic of the *Absolute Wissen*

In this paper we will focus on analysing the dialectic of *Absolutes Wissen* – the culmination of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – which comes into tension with the concept of *sobornost'*, a cornerstone of the Orthodox tradition, which Dostoevsky rethinks as a narrative and anthropological principle. The concept of *das Absolutes Wissen* in Hegelian philosophy represents the culmination and resolution of the dialectical process of the Spirit. However, this concept is the subject of intense debate both among Hegel's critics and scholars (Cortella, 2020). It would seem to suggest an idea of total and definitive knowledge that appears problematic when compared with the contemporary awareness of human finitude and the fallibility of knowledge. From a modern perspective, all forms of knowledge are considered situated and limited, subject to revision and historical development. The idea of *Wissen* that proclaims itself *absolute* may therefore seem to contradict this conception, a sort of *philosophical omniscience*. "The world, nature and history have 'disappeared' or, in Hegel's words, been 'digested' by knowledge"[7] (Cortella, 2020).

However, through a more careful reading of Hegelian thought, *absolute Wissen* cannot be identified as perfect and definitive knowledge, but rather as the point at which consciousness reaches full awareness of its own historicity and dialectic. It does not eliminate the *procedural* nature of knowledge but embraces it in its entirety. It recognises that every moment of knowing finds its meaning only within a broader and more organic structure. In this process, the Christian religion plays a crucial role. Within it, the *spirit* presents itself in a form that anticipates, even though still in the mode of representation, the philosophical truth of the *absolute*. Indeed, it is in Christianity that the spirit first takes on the character of concrete universality to achieve a form of reconciliation and full realisation of the spirit, overcoming the abstractness of Kantian morality and the fragmentation of modern subjectivity. Hegel recognises in Christian doctrine a dialectical structure that makes it the highest religious moment. Within it, the divine is not conceived as an unreachable transcendence, but is incarnated in history, taking on the traits of human individuality. The incarnation of the *Logos* in Christ represents the first step in the movement by which the spirit unfolds itself in the world, accepting its own finitude and then overcoming it through death and resurrection. The *Cross* marks the point at which the singularity of the individual is annihilated. However, this annihilation does not lead to nothingness, but rather to the resurgence of a new reality in which the individual is

transfigured into the universality of the spirit. The death of Christ is therefore not a mere conclusion, but the act through which the divine becomes universal, no longer confined to a particular individual but diffused in the community that forms around his memory. From this perspective, resurrection is not simply the return to life of the individual, but rather the process by which empirical individuality gives way to a higher reality, in which the truth is manifested no longer in his particularity, but in the communion of the spirit.

The community of believers, which is formed after Christ's death, is the representation of what Hegel means by *spirit*: an entity that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual consciousness, but which exists in their mutual interaction and recognition. In its theological structure, Christianity prefigures the Hegelian idea that the individual is not a closed unity but finds its truth only in relation to others. However, although Christianity contains this essential insight, it remains bound to the form of *representation* and does not reach full conceptual awareness of the *truth* of the spirit.

> Insofar as spirit in religion represents itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the actuality enclosed within religion is the shape and the clothing of its representation (Hegel, 2018, 269).

As narrated in Christian tradition, the event of redemption represents a story that is accepted by faith, not grasping its underlying rational structure. The task of philosophy is therefore to translate into concepts what religion expresses symbolically, bringing to completion the process that faith has only anticipated (Cortella, 2020, 116). In this sense, *absolute knowledge* is the full realisation of the truth implicit in religion. It is the moment when the spirit no longer recognises itself in the figure of a God external to itself, but knows itself to be God, an absolute reality that knows and determines itself through its own historical development. We can then understand how for Hegel the Christian religion is not simply a stage of the past to overcome, but a necessary phase in the journey of the spirit. Without the experience of the Christian community, humanity would not have been able to acquire the awareness of its own universality that constitutes the prerequisite for *absolute knowledge*. The transition from religion to philosophy is therefore not a rejection of the former, but its fulfilment. *Absolute Wissen* is nothing more than the conceptual revelation of what Christianity has always proclaimed in mythical and narrative form. In this way, Hegel can affirm that the *absolute spirit* is the ultimate truth of humanity, the awareness that our individuality is always already intertwined with the universal, and that our freedom is never an isolated fact but the result of a historical and relational process in which we recognise ourselves as part of a larger whole. To the Russian philosopher Leont'ev's question about what the brotherhood of peoples, universal peace and universal harmony have to do with the teaching of the Gospel, we could answer that Christianity, far from being a simple vehicle of universal harmony and pacification among peoples, carries a principle of *crisis*, division and existential drama (Givone, 2007, 13). Following Givone's interpretation, The Gospel message cannot be reduced to an idea of linear progress towards a peaceful and indistinct unity, but implies a radical confrontation with negativity, evil and human freedom, elements that generate conflict and tension rather than easy reconciliation.

Dostoevskian reception of *Absolute Wissen*: the *Sobornost'* case

Dostoevsky's vision is aware of this tragic dimension of Christianity. The Gospel truth does not translate into a historically realised utopia of universal brotherhood, but rather into the necessity of an individual choice between faith and nihilism. Authentic Christianity, for Dostoevsky as for Givone, is no guarantee of a harmonious earthly order. It places man at an existential crossroads, where freedom becomes the fundamental value and, at the same time, the most difficult challenge. Christianity, rather than dissolving into a humanistic and universalist ideal, retains its paradoxical and tragic essence, requiring an inner transformation that cannot be reduced to a simple political or social project.

This dimension has been analysed and identified within Dostoevsky's poetics (and specifically within his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*) by the critic Terrence Tilley in his book *The Karamazov Case, Dostoevsky's argument for his vision*. He highlights a theoretical core within the Orthodox concept of *sobornost'*. The term derives from the Slavophile interpretation of *katholikos* in the Nicene Creed, translated into Old Slavonic as *sobornyi*, which indicates a spiritually united community. Theologian Kallistos Ware describes *sobornost'* in terms of organic unity: "it means togetherness, integral unity, the organic gathering of the 'many' into 'one'... a free, mystical-ontological union of those who, though they differ in personal qualities and individual being, are nevertheless one in the Spirit of Love" (Tilley, 2023, 119).

On the other hand, Dostoevsky offers a less idealised and more realistic view, setting *sobornost'* in a complex and diverse town rather than in a patriarchal and idyllic Russian village. Although we know that for Vladimir Soloviev *sobornost'* had a more eschatological meaning (i.e., the communion between the divine and the human extended not only to religion but also to society and politics and radically transforming them) we cannot say the same for Dostoevsky, who does not take a clear position in the Orthodox theological debate on this concept. Although it is present in *The Brothers Karamazov*, although this concept is present, it is not made clear whether it is only an idea to be realised within the church or a principle to be applied to society. However, following Tilley's analysis, we can argue that: "the novel's approach offers a fundamentally anthropological argument: 'What does it mean to be fully human?'" (Tilley, 2023, 121).

The novel is not a theological treatise. Indeed, it does not present a dogmatic definition of *sobornost'*. However, through its narrative, it shows that the concept of *community* is essential for the formation of the individual. The true realisation of *sobornost'* is not confined to the monastery but must take place in society. Father Zosima sends Alyosha out into the world so that he can realise the Christian community not in monastic isolation, but in everyday life, among ordinary people. Alyosha and the group of young people who gather around him represent an early example of this emerging *community*.

Dostoevsky neither supports nor directly criticises Russian *primitive socialism*. However, his novel clearly shows that political and legal structures cannot create a true human community. The trial of Dmitri Karamazov demonstrates that the Russian judicial system of that time was incapable

of supporting true community justice. It is described as *procedural, not substantial*, and therefore cannot create a genuine community, but only enforce the law in a mechanical way. "Political-legal structures are merely procedural, not substantial, and thus are unable to support a substantial vision of community. To think otherwise is to conflate substantial justice with procedural fairness" (Tilley, 2023, 121). Dostoevsky claims that the real problem is not only the injustice of the legal system, but its inability to form an ethical community based on substantial justice. This is because the change that a society can guarantee at most –even the best society in the world– would remain only superficial and formal. According to Dostoevsky, goodness, the ideal to strive for, is not defined as a noun, but as something that contains within itself the dialectical process of real knowledge and the overcoming of evil. This form of processualism is not possible within the legal world, which, for political reasons, must stop at the external definition of goodness. This ideal is rather configured with what Hegel describes in the *Preface* to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: "In my view, which must be justified only by the presentation of the system itself, everything depends on conceiving and expressing the true not as substance, but just as much as subject" (Hegel, 2018, 10).

Hegelian forgiveness, therefore, takes the form of Dostoevskian one, capable of forgiving even the negative and reconciling reality through the concrete experience of evil. The city that constitutes the background of the novel is a metaphor for Russian society and, by extent, the whole world. It can evolve into a *sobornost'* community or fragment into an individualistic and destructive society. The outcome is not determined and remains open, as Dostoevsky does not provide a definitive answer about its fate. The conclusion of the novel suggests that the choice between the two types of society depends on individual actions and choices.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's works, *sobornost'* emerges as a central force that contrasts with Western individualism and rationalism, promoting spiritual union and solidarity among humans. It represents a dynamic unity that does not deny diversity but transcends it in a higher synthesis, *a process like Hegelian dialectics*. Both the concepts of *sobornost'* and reconciliation aim to overcome the separation and isolation of the individual. Both concepts affirm that true knowledge and realisation cannot occur in a purely subjective dimension, but only through a process of higher synthesis that embraces the totality. Just as *sobornost'* rejects solipsistic individualism and promotes harmonious communion, Hegelian dialectics shows that isolated subjectivity is destined for ontological incompleteness. *Sobornost'* does not deny differences, but integrates them into an organic synthesis, like Hegelian *Aufhebung*[8], which overcomes antithesis without denying it.

The novel is not just a story, but a narrative argument in favour of *sobornost'* as the true model of human community. It is not a perfect utopia, but a possible and concrete reality that would manifest itself in a society characterised by the principle of *sobornost'*, in acts of love and sharing. Indeed, Dostoevsky does not impose a dogmatic view but invites the reader to reflect and choose whether to live according to *sobornost'* or isolate themselves in individualism. The opposition between this and the rejection of community is also the choice that every reader must face: whether to remain in Ivan's isolation or to embrace love and responsibility like Alyosha. Despite the similarities with Hegelian

dialectics, Dostoevsky's vision cannot be fully traced back to a strictly Hegelian system. This emerges above all in the resolution of the individual crisis. In Dostoevsky's case, it is not entrusted to the rationality of the concept, but to the individual choice between faith and nihilism.

The dimension of social mediation, carried out by civil society, is not considered by Dostoevsky, probably because of the specific historical moment in which he lived. In fact, as we have previously pointed out, the novelist's lack of trust in political structures is clearly visible in the errors committed by the judicial system. It would therefore seem that the decisive moment passes rather through belinskian *law of love* (Kliger, 2014, 192). The individual freedom (and not of the spirit of the people) is the essential value for achieving evolution and overcoming the divisions of reality. However, we must not forget two fundamental components in assessing the overall picture of this perspective. Firstly, we must not underestimate the importance given in the last chapter to the role of education of the young Russian generation. Secondly, we must not forget that *The Brothers Karamazov* is only the first part of an incomplete project.

Concluding Remarks: the genesis of an idea

Every thought, the moment it is expressed, ceases to belong exclusively to the person who formulated it and becomes potentially common heritage. Its vitality lies precisely in this openness, in the possibility of making itself available to other sensibilities, other horizons of meaning. When such a thought reaches not only another individual from the same culture, but also somebody with different paradigms, the encounter proves even more fruitful. We are no longer dealing with just two individuals, but two different worlds.

The Russian reception of Hegel and Dostoevsky's reworking of idealistic dialectics offer important evidence of this. It is not simply appropriation, but creative transformation that connects philosophy and literature, rationalism and mysticism, Europe and Russia. Continuing research in this direction, i.e. cultivating a hermeneutic dialogue that transcends both geographical and space-time boundaries, means accepting that a single seed can bear different fruits, differences that do not impoverish but enrich our view, multiply perspectives and allow us to understand more deeply the complexity of the problems we face. In this context, reading reveals itself to be both a critical practice and an intercultural act, an exercise in knowledge and listening those feeds on plurality to restore a more complex vision of the world.

Hegel's reflection on *Absolute Wissen* and Dostoevsky's reworking of *sobornost'* show how philosophy and literature can converge in a reading experience that transcends national and disciplinary boundaries. In Dostoevsky, *community* is not an abstract concept, but an affective and narrative reality, embodied in the relationships between characters and open to the ethical responsibility of the reader himself. Indeed, reading *The Brothers Karamazov* from this perspective means not only understanding the dialogue between Hegel and the Orthodox tradition, but also practising listening and openness towards others, which today seems more urgent than ever in a global context marked by conflict, misunderstanding and cultural tensions. In this sense, reading becomes an intercultural act. A way of knowing, of learning to listen and of engaging in a relationship based on respect and love.

Endnotes:

1. Nikolai Berdyaev argued that Hegel's importance to Russia was comparable to Plato's importance to patristics and Aristotle's importance to scholasticism.
2. For these thinkers, Germany represented *the promised land, Jerusalem of modern mankind* (Gronicka, 1968, 169).
3. "When I started life Hegelianism was the basis of everything: it was in the air, found expression in magazine and newspaper articles, in novels and essays, in art, in histories, in sermons, and in conversation. A man unacquainted with Hegel had no right to speak: he who wished to know the truth studied Hegel. Everything rested on him; and suddenly forty years have gone by and there is nothing left of him, he is not even mentioned – as though he had never existed" (Tolstoy, 1935, 114).
4. Although in the early 1930s unfamiliarity with Hegelian philosophy led to the revival of certain Hegelian formulas in a more nebulous version, watered down by the most original features, which were transformed into less compromising ideas.
5. Especially if we consider that philosophy emerged as a discipline in Russia much later than in the West (Koyré, 1929, 1950, 1976; Planty-Bonjour, 1974; Ignatov, 1996; Florovskij, 2009; Epstein, 2019).
6. *Erwartungsrichtung*, borrowed from Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, refers to the *horizon of expectation* that shapes how a text is received and reinterpreted within a specific cultural context. Applied to Dostoevsky's engagement with Hegel, it highlights that his appropriation of Hegelian categories was never passive but mediated by his own cultural, religious, and existential concerns. Dostoevsky's *Erwartungsrichtung* thus transformed philosophical concepts into narrative and ethical problems, reframing Hegel's dialectics in terms of Orthodox spirituality, human freedom, and the tragic dimension of community life.
7. *Author translation.*
8. In Hegel, *Aufhebung* designates the dialectical process that simultaneously negates, preserves, and elevates a given determination. Rather than simple abolition, it integrates contradictions into a higher synthesis. This dynamic reveals why oppositions, such as individual and community, are not dissolved but transformed into richer, more comprehensive unities.

References

Berdyaev, Nikolai. 1948, (repr. 1972), *The Russian Idea*. Translated by R. M. French. New York: Macmillan.

Cortella, Luciano. 2020, "Sapere assoluto e riconoscimento. Hegel e la conclusione intersoggettiva della *Fenomenologia dello spirito*." *Filosofia e critica del dominio. Studi in onore di Leonardo Samonà*, vol. II. Ed. C. Agnello, R. Caldarone, A. Cicatello, R. M. Lupo, G. Palumbo. Palermo: New Digital Frontiers.

Epstein, Mikhail. 2019, *The Phoenix of Philosophy. Russian Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953–1991)*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Florovskij, Georgij V. 2009, *Puti russkogo bogoslovija*. Moscow: Institute of Russian Civilisation.

Frede, Victoria. 2013, "Stankevič and Hegel's Arrival in Russia." *Studies in East European Thought* 65.3, 159–174.

Givone, Sergio. 2007, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*. Milano: Laterza.

Gronicka, Victor. 1968, *The Russian Image of Goethe. Goethe in Russian Literature of the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2018, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Michael Inwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ignatov, Assen, 1996. "Zur Frage nach den Verhaeltnissen zwischen westlichem und russischem Philosophieren." In Helmut Dahm and Assen Ignatov (eds.), *Geschichte der philosophischen Traditionen Osteuropas*, 230–256. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Jakowenko, Boris, 1974. "Geschichte des Hegelianismus in Russland." In G. Planty-Bonjour, *Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie 1830–1917*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Jauss, Hans Robert. 1982, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti, introduction by Paul de Man. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kliger, Ilya. 2014, *Hegel's Political Philosophy and the Social Imaginary of Early Russian Realism*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Koyré, Alexandre. 1929, *La lutte contre la philosophie*. In *La philosophie et le problème national en Russie au début du XIXe siècle*. Paris: Champion.

Koyré, Alexandre, 1950. *Études sur l'histoire de la pensée philosophique en Russie*. Paris: J. Vrin.

Koyré, Alexandre, 1976. *La philosophie et le problème national en Russie au début du XIXe siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.

Tolstoy, Leo. *What Then Must We Do?* Trans. A. Maude. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935.

Planty-Bonjour, Georges. 1974. *Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie 1830–1917*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Tilley, Terrence W. 2023, *The Karamazov Case: Dostoevsky's Argument for His Vision*. London: T&T Clark.