

Writing Crime to Seduce the Reader: A Dostoevskian “Philosophical Project” through J. M. Coetzee’s Eyes

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“To a reader sensitive to their implications, the twists and turns of erotic abasement in the novels of Dostoevsky are far more disturbing than anything likely to be encountered in commercial pornography, no matter what the latter’s excesses.”

(Coetzee, “The Harms of Pornography” 73)

In 1994 J. M. Coetzee (1940-), the already celebrated South African writer who was yet to be awarded with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, created his vision of the Russian classic Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*. Coetzee’s choice to make the Russian novelist the main character of his narrative is not particularly surprising given the widely known fact that Dostoevsky was a major influence on his art (Boehmer, Iddiols and Eaglestone 3). What is more intriguing is that Coetzee’s text is a consistent rewriting of Dostoevsky’s *Devils* (1871-72) – a major, but in many ways flawed novel – with special emphasis on its probably most problematic chapter, “At Tikhon’s” (better known as “Stavrogin’s Confession”). Problematic, because the chapter was famously censored on account of its scandalous content: its primary focus is Stavrogin’s written confession, in which the central character of *Devils* admits – among many other crimes – to raping/seducing a childish girl in her early teens called Matryosha. Even more shockingly, he relates how he did not prevent his victim from committing suicide, although it would have been in his power to do so (Dostoevsky, *Devils* 468-9). Though *The Master of Petersburg* reworks many other motifs from *Devils* – indeed, almost all of Dostoevsky’s major works, as among others Margaret Scanlan points out (463-70; 476-7) – the Matryosha plotline is central to the novel. In other words, Coetzee seems to have chosen for some reason to write his text, so to say, into the gaps of “Stavrogin’s Confession” – a more than unpleasant narrative of child abuse and suicide, which is of a rather dubious critical stance, as will be discussed later.

In an attempt to interpret Coetzee's choice let me read *The Master of Petersburg*, on the one hand, in front of the backdrop of the novelist's other – fictional and non-fictional – comments on the representation of (sexual) crime and torture, and the concomitant issues of pornography, writing and censorship. On the other hand, based on the interrelationship which Coetzee's own comments establish among these issues, let me also refer to Peter Brooks' and Judith Butler's theoretical approaches to crime, narrative and censorship to outline Coetzee's special vision of the dynamics of (transgressive) desire behind writing and reading, the internal censorship that accompanies it, and the writer's responsibility it entails. That is, in my view Coetzee rereads the Dostoevskian scene of rape/seduction and the written confession through a metafictional recreation of its writing process as a gradual transition from pornography to blasphemous, metaphysical provocation – a philosophical experiment. Thereby, he interprets the Dostoevskian narrative as a textbook case of how crime – seduction, transgressive desire – is an archetypal motive force behind writing and reading. At the same time, he implies that the creative process ultimately also involves the "purging" of the text from the explicit traces of sadistic fantasies: due to the operation of an internal and productive censorship all that is left of them are gaps, euphemisms and tropes. In addition, Coetzee fundamentally changes the Dostoevskian narrative by turning writing itself into the means of potential seduction with a heightened emphasis on the possibly fictitious nature of the crime itself. Thus, the restaging of the Dostoevskian crime scene on an emphatically fictional plane provides an opportunity for Coetzee to tackle the gravely problematic issue of authorial responsibility in the representation of evil – the dangers of writing stories of evil and seducing audiences into reading them – without making judgemental and didactic comments on it, but clearly implying its complexity.

Indeed, Coetzee's general comment on the specifically "disturbing" nature of some Dostoevskian erotic relationships, which provides the motto of this paper, is nowhere more relevant than in the context of the infamous Matryona scene and its critical assessment. In *Devils* the story is narrated by Stavrogin about four years after the event. He reveals in his confession that he, then a twenty-four-year-old man, had sexual intercourse with an emphatically childish girl called Matryona, aged maybe twelve, who was the daughter of his one-time landlady in Petersburg. Stavrogin claims to have known beforehand that the traumatised girl would commit suicide and nevertheless not to have stopped the tragedy from happening. In fact – so his story goes – his premonition of this potential outcome might have been the major motivating force behind his actions. Far from being pornographic, the text refrains from representing either the sexual intercourse, or Matryona's death. Indeed, both acts of violence are present as ominous gaps in the confession

(Dostoevsky, *Devils* 465; 468-9), as if too horrible or ugly even for Stavrogin to name. Or for contemporary readers to digest: the censored chapter was only to come to light in its entirety in 1921 (Сараскина 703) and to produce a heated critical debate partly still in process.¹

From the perspective of the present reading, four important factors in this debate are worth emphasising. First, the silences of the text and the contradictory details in the various manuscript versions as to Matryosha's age, for example, fuelled a discussion on whether Stavrogin's deed should be interpreted as rape or seduction (e.g. Александрович 574-82). Second, as is clear from the above, it is Stavrogin's crime that produces writing. In fact, the one and only major first-person narrative of this otherwise conspicuously reticent central character's identity in *Devils* is rooted in his crime and his concomitant (metaphysical) guilt – or maybe rather his obsession with his inability to feel it.² Third, exactly because the scene is emblematic of metaphysical guilt, its symbolic nature is so clear that attempts have been made to read the Matryosha narrative as Stavrogin's self-incriminating fiction (e.g. S. Horváth 282-3). The fact that no evidence of his crime remains (even the house providing the crime scene has been demolished), and that Stavrogin is clearly going through a mental crisis at the time of the confession and commits suicide soon afterwards, corroborate this reading. And last but not least, the enigma that Stavrogin's crime and identity therefore present has "seduced" generations of readers – both lay and professional – into repeated and painstakingly close readings of the confession. Whether Stavrogin's confession fell victim to Dostoevsky's self-censorship – that is, whether it should be restored to the novel – was not the least of the issues at stake in these interpretations (e.g. Александрович 582). In other words, the authorial and censorial "silencing" of the crime at the core of *Devils* seems to have an irresistible allure for lay readers and critics alike – and provide an inexhaustible source for further textual production in the case of the latter.

Of which Coetzee's reimagining of *Devils* in *The Master of Petersburg* is a blatant example – and one that seems to be keenly aware of the critically noted ambiguities of Dostoevsky's text listed above. This might not come as a surprise, given the fact that Coetzee points out in his review-essay on Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky

1 Lyudmilla Saraskina's 1996 critical edition of the novel includes an excellent cross-section of that debate, which involved such prominent figures as Nikolai Berdyayev (Сараскина 518-25) and Fr. Sergei Bulgakov (Сараскина 489-508). Saraskina herself is a major critic to support the reinsertion of the censored chapter – a point she makes clear by placing "At Tikhon's" in the critical edition where it originally should have stood, as Part II, chapter 9. As she argues, the novel's reception history has already made "Stavrogin's Confession" an unalienable part of *Devils* (Сараскина 459).

2 The detailed analysis of "Stavrogin's Confession" along these lines is outside the scope of the present study and is to be found in (Reichmann, *Desire – Narrative – Identity* 23-82).

biography, originally published in 1995, that Stavrogin's "character would remain too enigmatic, his spiritual despair excessive, and his suicide at the end of the book unmotivated" without the confession. He adds, however, that the censored chapter "cannot be simply reinserted into the book because of the amount of secondary revision Dostoevsky had to perform on its context" (*Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years* 122-3). Also, Coetzee's most ambitious critical engagement with Dostoevsky's oeuvre, his 1985 study "Confession and Double Thoughts," makes it clear that the novelist's reading of Dostoevskian confession is informed by Bakhtinian thought. As a matter of fact, that essay at the time of its publication proved to be more sensitive to the subtleties of the Dostoevskian novel than most other critical assessments of "Stavrogin's Confession."³

Before moving on to Coetzee's version(s) of the Matryosha narrative, however, let me take a closer look at "The Harms of Pornography," another essay by Coetzee from 1996 that seemingly could not be less relevant to his discussion of Dostoevsky. This distance, however, is only superficial: as a matter of fact, this text implicitly contextualises "Stavrogin's Confession," and therefore *The Master of Petersburg* also as "philosophical projects" which a writer may carry out in accordance with the ethical imperative to disclose the darkest depths of the human psyche. That is, apropos of the MacKinnon debate on the necessity to "delegitimize" pornography, Coetzee suggests that serious writers might also produce texts highly reminiscent of pornography in representing victimisation and (sexual) humiliation. And they might do so as part of a "philosophical project" to discover the deepest recesses of evil – a task that in itself poses immense dangers for writers even without the added risk of being taken for pornographers, or persecuted for publishing illegal material, indeed (73-4). As Michelle Kelly puts it, "[t]he attempts of censors to prevent the circulation of obscene material, or of MacKinnon to 'delegitimize' pornography, merely add to the risk undertaken by the writer, so that for Coetzee the question that remains is: 'at what cost to them; and do we want to add to that cost?'" (139-40) It is in the context of such "philosophical projects" that Coetzee makes the above remark about Dostoevsky's "twists and turns of erotic abasement," which, without being pornographic in their imagery – how could they have been in the age of strict censorship in 19th-century, tsarist Russia? – are prone to drive sensitive readers into an ethical shock. As it might transpire from the brief discussion of "Stavrogin's Confession" and its critical assessment above, that text is most likely to be included in the list of such disturbing "philosophical projects" in Coetzee's reading.

³ This is an issue I address in more detail elsewhere (Reichmann, "'The only truth is silence' 123-4). For a consistent reading of *The Master of Petersburg* in the context of "Confession and Double Thoughts" see Rachel Lawlan's article (passim).

In accordance with that implication, Coetzee's own version of the Matryona narrative in *The Master of Petersburg* differs significantly from the Dostoevskian original on major points as if to highlight its nature of a "philosophical project" in a keen awareness of its ambiguities and silences, and to make an often implicit, but firm statement on the above-mentioned critical issues. In order to do so, Coetzee's metafictional prequel to Dostoevsky's novel creates, to quote Franklyn A. Hyde, a completely "counter-historical" (212) story of *Devil's* genesis. *The Master of Petersburg* features the Russian writer's return from abroad to St. Petersburg in 1869, which never really happened, and a series of equally concocted events which are to serve as his major inspiration for writing *Devils*, to be published in 1871.⁴ The reader comes to understand this by the end of the novel, if not earlier: the final chapter includes a series of drafts to "Stavrogin's Confession," again, invented by Coetzee.

In my reading, a central difference between *Devils* and *The Master of Petersburg* results exactly from Coetzee's invention of this fictitious creative process: he turns Matryosha's abuse into potential seduction at worst, into his writer-main character's fiction at best. That is, *The Master of Petersburg* is also a parallelquel to *Devils*, in which fictional Dostoevsky's imagination and therefore his drafts are inspired in Stavrogin-like manner by his desire for the fourteen-year-old daughter of his landlady, Matryona. Actually, while he is having an extramarital affair with the girl's widowed mother, fictional Dostoevsky becomes most embarrassingly aware of his forbidden desire for the daughter, which indirectly leads him to stage the fictional seduction of the girl in the draft version of "Stavrogin's Confession." At the same time, fictional Dostoevsky and Matryona re-enact Stavrogin and Matryosha's fatal story of seduction (and writing) with a difference: the sexual abuse never takes place, but even if it did, it would be explicitly a scene of seduction (*by writing*) instead of rape. As far as the Coetzeean Stavrogin is concerned, he is intent on seducing Matryona through introducing her to the most naturalistic traces of sexual intercourse, such as "the after-smell of lovemaking" (246) – indeed, through allowing her to witness it (243-4). The drafts end abruptly before his scheming yields any result. As for fictional Dostoevsky, he does the same through writing: he leaves the drafts, which describe Stavrogin's sexual adventures and manoeuvres of seduction, on his table for the girl to find so that she should be corrupted by the story of her own sexual corruption. In other words, to quote the Stavrogin of the manuscript, fictional Dostoevsky wants to "create a taste in the child" for

4 Just like the intertextual relationships between Coetzee's novel and Dostoevsky's texts, the contrast between the events in *The Master of Petersburg* and Dostoevsky's biography are also discussed by Scanlan (463-70; 476-7). To emphasise the marked difference between the historical figure and Coetzee's character, I will refer to the latter consistently as "fictional Dostoevsky" throughout the rest of the article.

sexuality (245) by exposing her to its textual representation. Coetzee's Dostoevsky and Stavrogin thus find themselves guilty of the same sin as Stavrogin in *Devils*: all intend to do or actually do the unforgivable by corrupting a child. But Coetzee's novel ends at this point – it is not even clear from the open-ended narrative whether fictional Dostoevsky ever returns to his lodgings, since he has been planning to return to his wife in Dresden for a while – and Matryona's corruption and her concomitant suicide is only a bleak, but hypothetical potential future here at worst, a purely fictional narrative at best.

Thus, *The Master of Petersburg* does not contradict the Dostoevskian original, rather makes the symbolic and metaphysical implications of *Devils* overt. By attaching Stavrogin's crime – even though as a fantasy – to the writer figure of his novel, Coetzee seems to spell out almost in Brookian-Freudian terms (*Reading for the Plot* 54) Dostoevsky's suggestion that narrative identity and writing is born out of crime and transgression. Not only that, but by evoking the entire *Devils* and more specifically Stavrogin with a very strong emphasis on the Matryona narrative and thus Stavrogin's crime, Coetzee makes a very strong claim for the centrality of that crime to Stavrogin's identity and stands up, as it were, for the reinsertion of the censored chapter into the Dostoevskian narrative. And maybe most importantly, by representing Stavrogin's crime unquestionably as seduction and as possibly (purely) fictional, Coetzee redirects readers' attention to the motivation behind it. Indeed, if one is to judge by fictional Dostoevsky's mental comments, he – the eternal gambler as he is – sins to force the hand of God and provoke divine revelation:

It is an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. With it he has crossed a threshold. Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. To corrupt a child is to force God. The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap to catch God. (249)

Because all the major male characters in *The Master of Petersburg* are involved in a process of insidious doubling (Hyde 215; Scanlan 470) and all of them contribute to the figure of the monstrous Stavrogin (Scanlan 468-9; Marais 138-9), by implication, a metaphysical quest is also a major impetus behind the sin that Coetzee's Stavrogin commits. Readers see him first as a Byronic superfluous man, fatally bored: he “loses interest, loses motive power: sits down again at the table [...] and falls into a reverie, or sprawls out, picking his nails with a knife, waiting for something to happen” (243). It is out of boredom that he joins a student circle “whose members experiment with free love” (243), and it is probably Matryona's accidental witnessing of his love-making with a member of that circle that gives him the idea to get involved in the other, much more horrible experiment. Though he

seems to be a very shallow version of fictional Dostoevsky, he spells out his motivation in explicitly Dostoevskian terms, inspired by the dark child abuser figure of *Crime and Punishment* and the Karamazovian doctrine of “everything permitted:”

He remembers Svidrigailov: “Women like to be humiliated.” [...] He asks himself why he does it. The answer he gives himself is: History is coming to an end; the old account-books will soon be thrown in the fire; in this dead time between the old and new, all things are permitted. He does not believe his answer particularly, does not disbelieve it. It serves. (244)

These lines suggest an individual at a moment of crisis, of apocalyptic expectations even. Characteristically for major Dostoevskian paradoxalists, Coetzee’s Stavrogin immediately retraces his steps when he makes a seemingly unambiguous statement, but that very gesture underpins his earlier words: he cannot believe or disbelieve in anything because he lives in a moment of historical, political and moral crisis – in a vacuum, as it were. It is such extreme moments that produce extreme choices and actions. Though less conscious of his metaphysical longings than Coetzee’s Dostoevsky, both the Stavrogin of the drafts and the novelist figure whom Coetzee creates imply a consistent reading of Dostoevskian Stavrogin’s crime in *The Master of Petersburg* as a terrifying “philosophical project” on the Russian writer’s and his fictional character’s part, which is inspired by metaphysical insecurity.

But Coetzee repeats the Dostoevskian narrative with a strong emphasis on the immanent connection between transgressive desire, crime, and writing as the reader’s seduction apparently not only to formulate his interpretation of the 19th-century classic but also to voice his own issues about writing and the writer’s responsibility. This is where “The Harms of Pornography” is a significant non-fictional intertext of the novel from another perspective, as well: it provides a common platform for discussing seduction as pornography vs. philosophical experimentation, censorship, and authorial responsibility together. What most directly calls for a reading of *The Master of Petersburg* in this context is the fact that the fictitious drafts of *Devils* are preceded by fictional Dostoevsky’s plans to write a pornographic book:

A book that would [...] be printed clandestinely [in Paris] and sold under the counter on the Left Bank. *Memoirs of a Russian Nobleman*. [...] With a chapter I which the noble memoirist reads aloud to the young daughter of his mistress a story of the seduction of a young girl in which h himself emerges more and more clearly as having been the seducer. A story full of intimate detail and innuendo which by no means seduces

the daughter but [...] makes her so doubtful of her own purity that three days later she gives herself up to him in despair, in the most shameful of ways, in a way which no child could conceive were the history of her own seduction and surrender and the manner of its doing not deeply impressed on her beforehand. (135)

This scenario is recognisably very similar to the plot and characters of the more “serious” drafts at the end – with the crude difference that Coetzee’s Stavrogin makes love to a woman in front of the peeping child instead of reading about doing so. As a matter of fact, the close connection of even these “serious” drafts with pornography is blatant: they contain explicit sexual details that are totally absent from the original Dostoevskian text. For example, Coetzee’s text describes the sensations of fictional Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin when he is making love to his partner in an awareness of being watched by the child: “Throughout, he is aware of the door open a crack, and the child watching. His pleasure is acute; it communicates itself to the girl; never before have they experienced such dark sweetness” (243-4). Through the invented creative process of *Devils* which depicts artistic endeavours to discover the depths of human evil as originating from the representation of erotic debasement Coetzee establishes in his fiction the same theoretical parallel that he draws between the two in “The Harms of Pornography” – prominently including his insistence on the thin line between them. His reworking of the Matryona narrative makes the reader’s seduction – manipulating the reader into opening up to the influence of the text – and erotic seduction in effect each other’s signifiers, or rather euphemisms. By the end of the novel it is hard to decide which one is the real unnameable horror, since potentially both have equally grave consequences,⁵ and therefore raise issues of the seducer/writer’s responsibility for their victim/readers, while positing those victims/readers as complicit in their own victimisation.

In addition, this invented creative process of *Devils* inevitably culminates in readers’ minds in the real Dostoevsky’s writing of the final version of those drafts – the actual published novel and its censored chapter – which leads on to the question of how the associated issues of censorship and authorial responsibility are addressed in *The Master of Petersburg*. In my view, Coetzee’s representation of the “pornography-free” Dostoevskian original along a continuum, as it were, with straightforward pornography, can be interpreted with the help of Judith Butler’s terms of explicit

⁵ Thus, for Derek Attridge, the death that Coetzee’s Matryona inevitable has to face in the reader’s mind, since her life continues in the Dostoevskian character’s fate beyond the covers of *The Master of Petersburg*, casts a long shadow over the entire text and largely contributes to its being a “sinister, Stavrogin-like work” (133).

and implicit censorship. On a Derridean-Foucauldian basis Butler differentiates post factum explicit censorship – a legal or authoritative ban on the publication of already existing forms of expression – from implicit censorship, a productive force that shapes expressions in the process of their creation by delineating the limits of the speakable (130). The reception history of *Devils* – including Coetzee’s rewrite – is a case study of how explicit censorship, as Butler keenly points out, often produces the diametrical opposite of its intended effect: the censored chapter on child abuse has led to the proliferation of texts on child abuse in the critical discussion of Dostoevsky’s novel. In contrast, Coetzee’s fictitious creative process of “Stavrogin’s Confession” in my reading models the mechanisms of implicit censorship. “Stavrogin’s Confession” as it was meant to be published by Dostoevsky appears as a “chastised” end-product of a three-stage process: step one is an outline for pornography, step two is the Coetzeean drafts with explicit sexual details, step three is the Dostoevskian censored chapter with its gaps and silences. This testifies to the operation of a strong internal censorship in the course of the invented creative process, which forbade Dostoevsky, as it were, to be explicit about the most horrible crime he could imagine. This implicit censorship – though it leads to silencing – is productive because it leads to the emergence of “serious” writing, a masterpiece, from pornographic beginnings. Not that the final product is the less horrible for leaving the exact description of the crime to readers’ imagination – far from it.

Coetzee’s implicit call for silence on what is too horrible to be said is something he makes explicit elsewhere with regard to the representation of torture – an issue obviously related to pornography through violence, victimisation and humiliation, among others. In fact, “The Harms of Pornography” draws other texts by Coetzee into the scope of interpretation which show the writer stopping short of representing certain horrors. As for example Coetzee points out in his often-quoted 1986 essay, “Into the Dark Chamber,” “[t]he torture room thus becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer’s fantasy, where, insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits in the performance of vileness upon the body of another” (363). It is such scenes of evil that the essay-novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) puts beyond the pale of representation. The context there is provided again by sexual abuse – this time attempted rape and the concomitant brutal violence and sadistic pleasure of the perpetrator – which the eponymous character remembers while preparing for a lecture on the representation of evil (165-6). It is an event in Costello’s life about which she has never been able to talk, but “She finds it good, it pleases her, this silence of hers, a silence she hopes to preserve to the grave. [...] It is some equivalent reticence that she is demanding [from writers on evil...]” (166). In the course of the lecture she basically repeats

Coetzee's earlier view voiced in "The Harms of Pornography" – this time in more general terms, with regard to evil, and with an explicit reference to the dangers such writing involves for both authors and readers:

I do not think one can come away unscathed, as a writer, from conjuring up such scenes [of evil. ...] That is my thesis today: that certain things are not good to read *or to write*. [...] the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places: risks, specifically, himself; risks, perhaps, all. (172-3)

Given the fact that Costello's lecture was originally Coetzee's own talk at the Nexus Conference on "Evil" in Holland, in 2002, under the heading "*The Possessed; Crime and Punishment; Guilt and Atonement*" (Attridge 195), it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the ban on the representation of certain kinds of evil is Coetzee's own, authoritative opinion in the various texts mentioned above. Which might be the case, but *The Master of Petersburg* with its ambiguities – representing and not representing the most horrible evil at the same time, as it were – testifies to a less didactic approach. It commemorates the suffering and greatness of a writer who, notwithstanding the danger of "not coming away unscathed," *does* "venture into forbidden places," "risking all." In fact, Coetzee's fictional Dostoevsky goes as close to human evil – the monstrous vision of Stavrogin emerging from his own mirror image in the final chapter – as humanly possible. Whether this costs him his own soul is a question the novel leaves open.

All in all, Coetzee seems to revisit a Dostoevskian crime scene in *The Master of Petersburg* partly to repeat the Russian writer's own comments on the interrelationship of crime (seduction) with metaphysical quest, on the one hand, and with writing, on the other, in an updated and explicit form. Read in the context of his non-fiction, the motifs of his rewrite – most prominently the inclusion of pornographic writing in the invented creative process of Dostoevsky's *Devils* – lead on to the theoretical issue of the representation of evil and the writer's responsibility which it entails. Coetzee's approach in *The Master of Petersburg* suggests the awareness and approval of what Judith Butler calls implicit censorship as the novel seems to make a call for silence on scenes of evil. However, the same text also posits Dostoevsky as a writer who does not shun the grave responsibility of writing about the darkest aspects of human nature, but manages to find a way to represent them through meaningful silences, without seducing readers into enjoying the perpetrator's sadistic pleasure. His dangerous journey "into the dark chamber," as Coetzee points out elsewhere, testifies to "the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage" ("*Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*" 123), which makes him only "distantly imitable" (124). Few people can be more distinctly aware of that than the writer of *The Master of Petersburg*.

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