

**Dostoevskii and the Human: reading the post-Siberian novels through existential phenomenology**

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I, Bilal Siddiqi, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

An underlying assumption of many commentaries on Dostoevskii is that they have something to reveal about the human condition. Studies of particular domains within Dostoevskii's inexhaustibly broad imaginative comprehension of human lived experience include, but are not limited to, the human experience of dialogue, memory, temporality, trauma, and desire. Yet what remains unclear is how Dostoevskii structures these philosophical truths about the human condition in fictional forms, and what precisely are the author's grounding notions about human existentiality.

In order to understand how truths about human existentiality are encoded into Dostoevskii's post-Siberian novels, this thesis reads him as an existential phenomenologist. I define existential phenomenology as the process of structuring and cataloguing possible ways in which humans can primordially experience the constitutive features that form the conditions for the possibility of human experience — what Martin Heidegger calls *existentialia*.

In Dostoevskii's novels, there are a plethora of epiphanic experiences that correspond to this structure. Alesha's tears of joy after his fantastic encounter with the recently buried Zosima; Myshkin's epileptic episodes; Kirillov's seizure; Shatov and Marie's shared recognition of subliminal meaning; Stepan Verkhovenski's death-bed confession; and Raskol'nikov's delirium and state of irresolution are a few prominent examples of a phenomenon that is common-place in the author's work. During these epiphanic moments, characters transpose the fundamental meaning of a particular necessary *existentialie* (being-with; being-towards-death; conscience and guilt, for example) into lived experience.

Conducting this research helps clarify Dostoevskii's literary existential phenomenology. It also rescues Dostoevskii's fiction from previous superficial existentialist

readings, which anchor Dostoevskii's 'existentialism' mainly in perverse irrationality and moral transgression.

Although Heidegger's work lays the grounds for considering Dostoevskii's later novels as implicit works of existential phenomenology, this thesis also engages with other key theorists of Dostoevskii's novels, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Nicholas Berdiaev, Emmanuel Levinas, Gary Saul Morson, and René Girard.

## Impact Statement

Within Dostoevskii scholarship, I hope the thesis has a fourfold impact. First, I hope it recovers Dostoevskii's novels from reductive existential readings. My thesis provides new grounds to reimagine Dostoevskii's own particular form of literary religious existentialism. Secondly, the thesis reconceives the materiality of the object in Dostoevskii's fiction. This could make a contribution both within the discipline, and in Materiality Studies.

Thirdly, the thesis addresses an important underlying assumption about Dostoevskii's novels: they are capable of communicating truths about human lived experience.

Commentators have been searching for the conditions of human existence in Dostoevskii's novels from the beginning. Recognising how this axiom is implicitly at play in major interpretations of Dostoevskii may help the discipline become more aware of its own interpretive practices. The prevalence of this methodological assumption in Dostoevskii studies suggests that, as literary critics attempt to 'make sense' of the author's novels, they simultaneously seek to 'make sense' of human existence itself, in and through Dostoevskii's fiction. Finally, in analysing 'epiphany' as a literary tool in Dostoevskii's fiction, and defining it in a broad inclusive manner, I indicate an additional bridge to modernism for Dostoevskii studies, where commentators may eventually trace yet another thread connecting Dostoevskii to his literary inheritors in the Western canon.

In other academic disciplines, the phenomenology of religious experience outlined in the final chapter may renew theological interest in the phenomenological treatment and translation of religious ideas. The comparison of Heidegger and Dostoevskii's existentialism may allow Comparative Studies to explore other areas of confluence between Heideggerian philosophy and literature.

The analysis offered in this thesis could have an impact on public discourse and culture. My thesis, by contrasting popular yet reductive 'existentialist' readings of

Dostoevskii with a more varied reading through existential phenomenology, offers a renewed path to understanding existentialism at large, as well as Dostoevskii's own form of literary existentialism, specifically. Long reads and articles about Dostoevskii are not only published in specialist media such as *bloggerskaramazov.com* (to which I have already contributed) and *brainpickings.org*, but also often appear in mainstream news outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. I could contribute to the discussions of Dostoevskii's fiction in popular culture by writing articles for mainstream outlets about 'Dostoevskii and the Human', and thus disseminate insights gathered in my thesis.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in these unprecedented times, when a pandemic has caused many to confront their relationship with mortality, and others to flee it even more aggressively, the insights offered in this thesis regarding the living relationship to death which all humans share in common, may prove useful. This thesis' discussion of the role of idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity in social discourses may also be relevant to the modern age where fake news, fast-diminishing attention spans, and a thirst for the 'new', have become major topics of discussion.

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## 1. Dostoevskii, Existential Phenomenology and Epiphany

Wherever readers go in Dostoevskii criticism, they find an exploration of the intricacies of human lived experience. For instance, in Nicholas Berdiaev's work, readers discover how human beings express their dialectical relationship to freedom.<sup>1</sup> Robert Louis Jackson uncovers a Dostoevskii primarily concerned with how human beings strive towards an aesthetic ideal of perfect form.<sup>2</sup> Yet, interested as both of these critics are in Dostoevskii's depiction of spiritual conversion, what underlies such religious striving in the novels is characters' finite, lived experience of their necessary interconnection with alterity.

Conversely, in studies such as Malcolm Jones' *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin*, Dostoevskii's interest in the psychological underpinnings of the darker aspects of human behaviour come into focus — Dostoevskii is able to represent how the threat of the 'abyss', of 'chaos, the pathological, the apocalyptic', are lived through in dialogic relations between characters.<sup>3</sup> In Yuri Corrigan's *Dostoyevsky and the Riddle of the Self*, Dostoevskii becomes a master of describing how characters suffering from traumatic 'unnameable psychic wounds' occupy and seek to escape haunted interior spaces. Such desire for self-erasure pushes them into debilitating relationships with others and with their own selves.<sup>4</sup>

In readings exploring the significance of memory in Dostoevskii, commentators are almost always concerned, not with simply accounting for the existence or iteration of memories within the narrative, but rather, with the human experience of memory — how

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<sup>1</sup> Berdiaev, Nicholas, *Dostoyevsky*, trans. by Donald Attwater (London: Sheed and Ward, 1934), p. 88. First written in 1921.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoyevsky's Quest for Form* (Pittsburgh, PA: Phyllis Publishers, 1978), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin: Readings In Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Preface, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Yuri Corrigan, *Dostoyevsky and the Riddle of the Self* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 49.

memories, continuously, consciously and subconsciously, shape characters' lived relationship to themselves, others, and the world.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, after Berdiaev and Mikhail Bakhtin, it is clear that ideas, in Dostoevskii's novels, are not just thought about, but lived through.<sup>6</sup> In brief, ideative, psychological, and spiritual interpretations of Dostoevskii are primarily oriented by characters' lived experience. The ways in which characters embody ideas, both unifying and chaotic; personal and cultural memory; their sense of freedom and desire for alterity, in lived experience forms the central theme of Dostoevskii's fiction. What is required then is a study that explores what Dostoevskii discloses about the existentiality of human experience itself. The path towards such a study goes through existential phenomenology.

I define existential phenomenology as the process of cataloguing ways in which human beings can primordially experience the constitutive features that form the conditions for the possibility of any human experience, what Martin Heidegger calls 'existentialia'.<sup>7</sup> In Dostoevskii's post-Siberian novels, a range of epiphanies represent such experiences of particular conditions for the possibility of human experience. A glance at Dostoevskii's major works shows how these epiphanies illuminate radically different *existentialia*. Kirillov in *Demons* (1871) has an experience of the primordial nullity manifest in the *existentialia* of

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<sup>5</sup> Diane Thompson, *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 17-19. See also: 'Dostoevsky, to designate that threshold point [...] of spiritual conversion where subliminal memory intersects with present despair, puts his characters into supernatural, fantastic, and mystical relations with time and space; that is, he uses the motif of the journey.' Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 152-53.

<sup>6</sup> Berdiaev, pp. 11-12. See also: 'We must remember first of all that the image of an idea is inseparable from the image of a person, the carrier of that idea. It is not the idea in itself that is the 'hero of Dostoevsky's works,' as Engelhardt has claimed, but rather the *person born of that idea...*' M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 69-71.

‘being-towards-death’; Raskol’nikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) undergoes existential guilt and anxiety; Alesha and Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) experience reflexive forms of being-with, or being internally other-related, an *existential* understated in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), but given fuller expression by Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis, I will also make use of the concept of ‘epiphany’. I define epiphany as a sudden illumination that is ineffable and transient, and possesses a certain noetic quality.<sup>9</sup> I argue that during moments or prolonged states of epiphany in Dostoevskii’s later novels, characters transpose the meaning of a particular necessary existential condition (being-with; being-towards-death; guilt) into lived experience. This interpretation will demonstrate that Dostoevskii’s post-Siberian novels are primarily concerned with understanding the human condition, rather than describing a transcendent, ideal world beyond the human, although the emphasis on the former need not deny the existence of the latter.

It would be helpful to note the direction of travel in this introductory chapter. I will begin by setting forth my key research questions in the following section. After this, I will summarily present the role of epiphanies in Dostoevskii’s broader oeuvre in order to contextualise my choice of the later works for this thesis. Once I have made these initial clarifications, I will seek to provide a broad definition for existentialism. I will also explore Dostoevskii’s own form of literary existentialism by considering how various commentators have perceived deep rooted existentialist themes and ideas in his fiction. I will explain why some prominent existentialist readings of Dostoevskii rely on reduced versions of

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. M. M. Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p. 64; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 215. First published in 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Definition of epiphany adapted from William James’ definition of mystical experiences. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 31.

‘existentialism’ that do not always do justice to the author’s considerable insights into the human condition.

In the next section, ‘The Ancient Quarrel’, I will seek to answer the questions, ‘How can Dostoevskii be regarded as an existential phenomenologist?’, or more broadly, ‘How can a writer of fiction be said to disclose some truth about reality?’. I will then describe Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and consider questions that emerge from this description. Finally, at the end of the introduction, I will be in a position to explore, in detail, the concept of epiphany and how Dostoevskii’s epiphanies have been interpreted. This introduction will help provide a rationale for my methodology as well as clarify key terminology that will be used in the thesis as a whole.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

At the outset, I would like to set out three key research questions and provide some initial clarifications. The first question is: What do the post-Siberian novels disclose about the nature of human existence? As I have already stated, I propose that it is possible to discover *existentialia* — necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience — encoded in the epiphanic experiences of various characters in Dostoevskii’s post-Siberian novels. Elucidating these *existentialia* as operative in Dostoevskii’s mature fiction will show how his novels provide a potential answer to the question, ‘What does it mean to be human?’. In other words, such an approach will help provide at least a partial explanation of what, in Dostoevskii’s later literary creations, it means to exist.

This leads to my second research question: In what sense is Dostoevskii an existentialist? Readers may be concerned that Dostoevskii’s fiction — clearly informed by a religious world-view — is being analysed through the lens of a philosophical system focused on existence in this world without reference to the transcendent or divine dimension of human experience.

In response to this, it would be prudent to first recognize that prominent commentators, including Bakhtin, Berdyaev and even the transcendently oriented interpretation of Jackson, have already explicitly demonstrated Dostoevskii's central preoccupation with human lived experience.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Dostoevskii was an author primarily concerned with understanding human existence. My approach throughout this thesis will be apply Heidegger's methodology of existential phenomenology to Dostoevskii's fictional works in order to elucidate Dostoevskii's own form of literary existentialism.

At the same time, I am not at all trying to say that Heidegger and Dostoevskii shared the exact same beliefs or that Heidegger's form of existentialism is the same as Dostoevskii's. I do not wish to simply stuff Dostoevskii awkwardly into a Heideggerian overcoat, but, instead, to make use of Heideggerian existentialism to shed light on *Dostoevskii's* insights into human existence and how these insights are embodied in the lived experience of characters in his novels.

Even though my approach will largely be existential-ontological in nature, this does not discount the potential presence of an unseen transcendent realm in Dostoevskii's particular vision of human existence. The thesis will elucidate a range of *existentialia*, including being-towards-death, guilt and anxiety, yet the final chapter will also propose the presence of a religious *existentiale*, manifest in the necessary rhythms of human desire, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This *existentiale* — a striving towards otherness or alterity — can be conceived as a meeting place between ontology and ethics in Dostoevskii's existentialism, and also as the potential grounds for religious belief in the human constitution itself. Although this *existentiale* will not be explained through Christian doctrine, my interpretation will help uncover and structurally outline Dostoevskii's own particular form of literary,

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<sup>10</sup> See subsection 1.2.1, 'Dostoevskii's Existentialism', in this thesis.

religious (Christian) existentialism insofar as it describes the grounds for religious belief in the always-operative human desire to strive towards alterity.

My final research question is: How do Dostoevskii's fictional narratives reveal existential truths? At a general level, it may be argued that to understand Dostoevskii's works is to understand something fundamental about human nature. Later in this introduction, I state that it is an underlying assumption in Dostoevskii scholarship that his fictional narratives are capable of representing *existentialia*. Several commentators, from Bakhtin and Gary Saul Morson, have already identified a variety of different necessary conditions for human experience encoded in Dostoevskii's novels.<sup>11</sup> Yet, readers may raise the objection that to analyse works of imaginative fiction through philosophy, or, to expect literary works to communicate philosophical truths, would be to judge literature by an inappropriate set of criteria. I provide the beginnings of an answer to this broad question of how literary fiction is capable of disclosing 'truths' — existential or otherwise — about human reality later in this introduction.<sup>12</sup>

It may also be suggested that my approach offers an artificial 'systematisation' of Dostoevskii's works of imaginative fiction, focusing on selective examples chosen to illustrate Heideggerian *existentialia*. The danger here would be one of reductionism or selective reasoning, producing a degree of distortion by picking and choosing the types of phenomena that suit my approach from the novels. My first response to this objection would be to state that every approach to Dostoevskii's insights into many different areas of human experience involves some kind of limitation of scope. No study can be said to encompass everything there is to say about Dostoevskii's imaginative fiction, and every methodology will be looking with a particular lens at specific phenomena. In this sense, biographical,

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<sup>11</sup> See section 1.3, 'Dostoevskii's Literary Existential Phenomenology' in this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> See subsection 1.2.2, 'The Ancient Quarrel' of this thesis.

psychological, theological, metaphysical, mythical or sociological readings, for instance, all involve processes of selection in their interpretive methodologies, and none can really be said to provide all-encompassing readings of Dostoevskii's imaginative fiction.

On the claim that approaching Dostoevskii through the methodology of existential phenomenology *specifically* involves an artificial 'systematisation', I would refer to my above statement suggesting that other commentators already presume Dostoevskii's fiction capable of disclosing a variety of necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience. I also ought to make clear that I do not claim my methodology to have exhausted every *existentiale* apparent in Dostoevskii's mature works. In other words, this is not a closed 'system'. I merely recognise that the post-Siberian works are capable of revealing truths about human existence and identify some rather prominent ones that subsist therein. Various other *existentialia* could be identified in the future by other interpreters and this would be a development of a line of interpretation in Dostoevskii studies that precedes this thesis.

### 1.1.1 The Wider Oeuvre

As I have already stated, there are *existentialia* encoded into Dostoevskii's mature fiction in epiphanic experiences. But what can be said of Dostoevskii's wider oeuvre? Why limit this study, largely, to the four major post-Siberian novels? Are there not epiphanies in the pre-Siberian works? If there are, do they also communicate *existentialia*? How does Dostoevskii's use of literary epiphanies evolve from the pre-Siberian to the post-Siberian periods?

Although I do not bring the concept of 'epiphany' more concretely into the discussion until section 1.5, I can, at this stage, state that I take 'epiphany' to mean a sharp, sudden burst of noetic insight that is ineffable, transient, and engenders a feeling of passivity in the subject, as if they were in the grips of a superior power.<sup>13</sup> Although there is a range of epiphanic

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<sup>13</sup> James, p. 31. See footnote 9.

experiences in the pre-Siberian works, as readers shall see, they do not yet appear to convey *existentialia* — necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience. Instead, they reflect a varied content, often connected primarily to the characters' own subjectivity: to their relationship to nature; to *eros*; or else to an indeterminate sense of horror assailing them as if from the depths of their unconscious. A brief overview of some of the epiphanies in the pre-Siberian works will help contextualise the role of epiphanies across the broader oeuvre and, perhaps, also explain the choice of the post-Siberian epiphanies as the focus of this thesis.

As early as *Poor Folk* (1846), readers may notice the presence of epiphanic experiences. In a long letter to Makar, Varvara recounts childhood memories of her contemplative relationship to nature. Even reflecting on these memories in the present has a strange epiphanic effect on her, as if she is being held by a superior power:

In my memories there is something I find inexplicable, something which absorbs me so instinctively and so powerfully that for several hours at a stretch I am oblivious to all that surrounds me and forget everything, everything that is in the present.<sup>14</sup>

Varvara's absorption in these childhood memories makes her temporarily oblivious to the present. This implies a sense of passivity characteristic of many epiphanies. Yet, readers may note that, rather than delivering some new insight, the experience appears to have the opposite effect in that it allows her to 'forget everything'. This suggests that this act of remembrance is primarily a means of escape from consciousness, from all that surrounds her in the present.

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<sup>14</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Poor Folk' in *Poor Folk and Other Stories*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 1-130 (p. 95), *PSS*, 1:83. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the PSS citation.



Nonetheless, this episode does suggest that, even in his earliest works, Dostoevskii is aware of the powerful, formative influence of childhood memories on human consciousness — this becomes a recurring theme in his work. Varvara remembers how she immersively contemplated the changing rhythms of nature as a child. She remembers nature’s enervating and refreshing power,

The distant expanses grew dark; everything seemed to drown in the mist, and yet all that was close to was sharply defined, as if cut by a chisel [...] I would become lost in contemplation and listening — I would feel wonderfully happy!<sup>15</sup>

Yet she also recalls nature’s ability to inspire her fear.

In a long, wide, noisy flock, the birds hurtling after them with wild, penetrating cries, turning the sky black as they covered it across. I would grow afraid and then I would seem to hear someone’s voice whispering: ‘Run, run, child, don’t delay; terrible things will happen here in a moment, run, child!’ A sense of horror would grip my heart, and I would run and run until my breath gave out.<sup>16</sup>

Varvara’s childhood relationship to nature may be read as comparable to Myshkin’s ‘long forgotten memory’<sup>17</sup> from his first year in Switzerland, where he feels a sense of his own separation from nature, and Markel’s nature-based epiphany in *The Brothers*

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Poor Folk’, pp. 95-96, *PSS*, 1:83.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Poor Folk’, p. 96, *PSS*, 1:84.

<sup>17</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 446, *PSS*, 8:351. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

*Karamazov*, where he, conversely, senses his own unity with the natural world in their shared striving towards alterity.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the difference between Varvara's nature-based epiphany, on the one hand, and Markel and Myshkin's epiphanies on the other, is that the latter two appear to evoke some insight, perhaps only allegorically in Myshkin's case, about the broader human condition. Markel's epiphany certainly delivers a noetic insight into human nature as a whole. Perhaps Varvara's also achieves something like this, but it does appear to be more subjectively inclined, as she apprehends the strange and broad ways in which nature can impress itself upon her soul, yet does not seem to rise from this towards articulating anything more specific about humanity.

There is another quality in Varvara's epiphany that strongly prefigures epiphanies that Prince Myshkin undergoes in *The Idiot*. This is the epiphany's prophetic quality — its ability to foretell impending catastrophe. In Varvara's epiphany, this quality manifest itself as a threat and a warning, issuing from a mysterious, seemingly hallucinated voice that whispered, 'Run, run, child, don't delay; terrible things will happen here in a moment, run, child!'. Later in the letter, Varvara confesses to another premonitory 'conviction' that continues to trouble her in the present: 'You know, I have a sort of conviction [*ubezhdenie*], a kind of certainty [*uverennost'*] that I shall die this autumn.'<sup>19</sup> Thus it seems that Varvara does appear to have a hint of a premonitory consciousness, afflicted by foreshadows of impending catastrophe.

Readers shall see that I interpret Myshkin's epileptic consciousness in *The Idiot* as thoroughly premonitory as well. Myshkin experiences a range of prophetic or premonitory epiphanies foretelling certain catastrophes that come to pass over the course of the

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<sup>18</sup> *PSS*, 14:261-63. See subsection 5.2.1 of this thesis for a brief comparison of Myshkin and Markel's epiphanies. Incidentally Varvara's epiphany also bears comparison with Dostoevskii's own childhood memory described in *A Writer's Diary*, and mentioned in this thesis in section 5.2.2., 'Restorative Memory'.

<sup>19</sup> 'Poor Folk', p. 97, *PSS*, 1:84.

narrative.<sup>20</sup> This is relevant to the discussion in this section since such premonitions are indeed widespread already in the pre-Siberian works.<sup>21</sup> Although the predictions are less precise in the pre-Siberian iterations than they are in *The Idiot*, readers may want to know, summarily, whether there is a broader kinship between these experiences across the oeuvre, and why there are so many of them in Dostoevskii's novels.

James Rice makes clear that Dostoevskii, as early as 1846, already suffered from 'various nervous symptoms' connected with his epileptic condition. Such symptoms included signs of illness such as the premonition of a seizure.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is, perhaps, not surprising that Dostoevskii's early literary characters also experience premonitions. Unlike these earlier premonitions, Myshkin's epileptic premonitory consciousness reflects a much more detailed

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<sup>20</sup> See section 2.4 of this thesis.

<sup>21</sup> e.g. 'During the service I was attacked by a sense of terror — a kind of premonition [*predchuvstvie*] of the future.' *Poor Folk*, p. 44, *PSS*, 1:45; 'All Mr Golyadkin's presentiments [*predchuvstviia*] had been fully realized. Everything that he had feared and that he had foreseen had now happened in reality.' Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Double*, trans. by Hugh Aplin (Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics, 2014), p. 53, *PSS*, 1:143. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation; 'He had a waking dream of a mysterious, unknowable future; when an inexpressible hope fell on his soul like a reviving dew; when he wanted to scream with ecstasy; when he felt that his flesh was powerless under such a weight of impressions, that the very thread of existence itself was in danger of snapping.' Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'The Landlady' in *Poor Folk and Other Stories*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 131-214 (p. 152), *PSS*, 1:278. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation; 'It seemed as if all that had weighed on him during his life in myseterious, intangible torments; all that had deluded and tortured him in dreams from which he had fled in horror, protecting himself with a lie; all that he had had presentiments of [*predchuvstvoval*], but had been too scared to face — all suddenly became crystal clear to him'. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Netochka Nezvanovna*, trans. by Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 68. Kindle ebook, *PSS*, 188. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

<sup>22</sup> James L. Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), pp. 4-7.

model of epileptic symptomatology.<sup>23</sup> I do not focus on Myshkin's premonitory episodes primarily for this reason, but instead, to understand how his object-inspired premonitions reflect human possibility's inextricable interconnection with the material world. Nonetheless, the pre-Siberian literary premonitions can still be read as precursors to Myshkin's much more detailed ones in *The Idiot*. This is because all these literary premonitions share in common a significant trait — they foretell impending catastrophes.

Premonitions of catastrophe impart a certainty onto future events that can be compared to what is undergone by a condemned man as he awaits the fulfilment of a death sentence. This motif is, of course, of importance in *The Idiot* and, as I suggest in chapter 4 of this thesis, forms an imperative aspect of the extended epiphanic experience undergone by Raskol'nikov in *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>24</sup> It would be natural to presume that Dostoevskii's preoccupation with the idea of a person living under the threat of a death sentence — his fascination with near-death experiences, and with morbid instances of death paradoxically intermixing with life — was triggered by his mock-execution just before he was exiled to Siberia. Yet, the pre-Siberian works show that Dostoevskii was, in fact, already immersed in this theme in his early works.

I could refer to *The Landlady*, where Katerina looks at Ordynov 'like someone who has been condemned to death and expects no pardon'.<sup>25</sup> I could cite the grotesquely comic gesture mentioned in *Mr Prokharchin* (1846). As the title character dies, 'he articulated no

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<sup>23</sup> Rice, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> See opening paragraph of chapter 3, 'Death and Immortality in Dostoevskii's *Demons*' for Myshkin's description of a man living under a death sentence, and all of chapter 4 on *Crime and Punishment* for how Raskol'nikov's experience can be thought of as akin to living under a death sentence, particularly section 4.2.1.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Landlady', p. 174, *PSS*, 1:194.

sound, but winked in precisely the way a head, still warm and bleeding, having just bounced from the executioner's axe, is said to wink'.<sup>26</sup>

Instead, I will address an image from *The Double* (1846):

His situation at this moment resembled the situation of a man standing over a terrible precipice when the ground beneath him is breaking away, has already lurched, already shifted, is swaying for the last time, falling, dragging him off into the abyss, but at the same time the unfortunate man has neither the strength nor the firmness of spirit to leap back, to take his eyes off the yawning chasm; the abyss is drawing him in, and finally he jumps into it himself, himself hastening the moment of his own destruction.<sup>27</sup>

As readers shall see in chapter 4, there is much that this image of living death shares in common with the central defining motif in *Crime and Punishment*, and indeed a strikingly similar metaphor is used to characterise Raskol'nikov's consciousness in that novel.<sup>28</sup>

From *Poor Folk* onwards, characters also undergo experiences of extraordinary emotional intensity. These intensities manifest themselves during fantastic episodes in waking life; in dreams; visions; hallucinations and in climactic episodes preceding loss of consciousness. In *Poor Folk*, Varvara recalls an epiphanic episode from her childhood, at a particular point of crisis in her life.

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<sup>26</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Mr Prokharchin' in *Poor Folk and Other Stories*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin: 1988), pp. 215-248 (p. 243), *PSS*, 1:258.

<sup>27</sup> *The Double*, p. 51, *PSS*, 1:142.

<sup>28</sup> See subsection 4.2.1 of this thesis.

I do not know how it was — I cannot remember — but at the agonizing moment of sleep's struggle with wakefulness a terrible vision, a monstrous dream visited my confused head. I woke up in horror. The room was in darkness, the night-light was going out; suddenly the whole room was bathed in stripes of light, which at one moment flashed across the wall and at the next disappeared entirely.<sup>29</sup>

Varvara's hallucination bears almost all the traits of an epiphany — it is a transient, ephemeral experience, gripping the subject with a sense of passivity caused by its occurrence in a liminal space between wakefulness and sleep. Yet, as appears to generally be the case with the pre-Siberian epiphanies, the noetic quality remains unclear. Varvara responds to the episode by growing 'dreadfully afraid'. She is attacked by 'a sense of horror' and anguish. Ultimately she lets out an 'involuntary shriek' born of her 'agonized terror'.<sup>30</sup>

There are several comparable experiences of terrifying emotional intensity, often accompanied by visions, or hallucinations, in the pre-Siberian works.<sup>31</sup> *The Landlady* (1847) is almost entirely filled with such nightmarish visions of terror.<sup>32</sup> This short story reads like a

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<sup>29</sup> 'Poor Folk', p. 34, *PSS*, 1:37.

<sup>30</sup> 'Poor Folk', p. 34, *PSS*, 1:37.

<sup>31</sup> 'He spent the entire night in some sort of half-sleeping, half-waking state, turning over from side to side [...] moaning, groaning, falling asleep for a minute, waking up again a minute later — and all this was accompanied by some strange anguish, vague recollections, shocking visions — in short, by everything unpleasant that one could possibly find' *Double*, p. 114, *PSS*, 1:184; 'No, this was not like the music I later came to hear. They were not the notes of the violin, but the sound of a terrible voice that was resounding through our room for the first time. Either my impressions were incorrect or delirious, or else my senses were so thrown by all that I had witnessed that they were prepared for frightful, agonizing impressions — but I am firmly convinced that I heard groans, the cries of a human voice.' *Netochka Nezvanovna*, p. 63, *PSS*, 2:184.

<sup>32</sup> 'He lit a candle and a moment later in his mind's eye he saw a vivid image of a weeping woman riven by a mysterious tenderness and horror, suffused with tears of ecstasy or childish remorse [...] his eyes grew misty and fire seemed to shoot through all his limbs [...] the ecstasy was superseded by

series of nightmares, and almost the entire narrative appears to take place on epiphanic thresholds. As Ordynov recognises while recovering from illness, once again, in this liminal state between wakefulness and sleep, ‘the thought flickered through his mind that he had been condemned to live in a sort of long and endless dream, full of strange, fruitless anxieties, struggles and sufferings.’<sup>33</sup> Indeed much of the action in the novel takes place in ‘Koshmarov’s Tenements’,<sup>34</sup> where Ordynov is residing. This name is derived from the Russian word for ‘nightmare’ [*koshmar*].

Noting how widespread these nightmarish, epiphanic experiences of terror are in the pre-Siberian works, it appears that whereas the *post*-Siberian epiphanies generally provide the characters with noetic insight, many (though not all) of the analogical experiences in the *pre*-Siberian works remain incomprehensible to characters, inspiring in them instead an unbounded sense of terror, as the epiphanies preserve their abyssal inscrutability and indeterminateness.

There are epiphanies in the pre-Siberian works which appear to deliver some kind of noetic insight concerning love, but unlike the post-Siberian epiphanies in *The Brothers Karamazov*,<sup>35</sup> for example, or Shatov’s shared epiphany with Marie in *Demons*,<sup>36</sup> the epiphanies inspiring a sense of love in the pre-Siberian works often appear to be more amorous in nature — more to do with *eros* than *agape*.

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impotent rage’. ‘The Landlady’, p. 140, *PSS*, 1:269; ‘Katerina screamed, as though she had woken from oblivion, from a nightmare, from some terrible fixed hallucination.’ ‘The Landlady’, p. 198, *PSS*, 1:311; ‘He had an obscure sense that his illness was suffocating him, but cold despair had settled in his soul, and all he could feel was a dull pain that cudgeled him, tormented him and sucked his breast with its fangs.’ ‘The Landlady’, p. 207, *PSS*, 1:316.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The Landlady’, p. 152, *PSS*, 1:277.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Landlady’, p. 162, *PSS*, 1:285.

<sup>35</sup> See chapter 5 of this thesis.

<sup>36</sup> See subsection 3.4.2 of this thesis.

To start with, I refer to the presence of a gesture in *The Landlady* that is repeated in *The Brothers Karamazov* — a pillow being placed under a character's head while they sleep. In *The Landlady*, Ordynov's love interest places the pillow under his head. Ordynov feels that 'he wanted to thank whoever it was, he wanted to take this hand, place it against his parched lips, drench it in tears and kiss it, kiss it for all eternity'.<sup>37</sup> By way of comparison, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, readers do not know who places the pillow under Dmitri's head and the gesture provokes an epiphany which evokes in him a noetic understanding of universal guilt and responsibility for all suffering.<sup>38</sup>

Later in the narrative of *The Landlady*, Ordynov experiences an epiphany, once again, on the borders of sleep and wakefulness. Ordynov goes through a series of different sensations. He finally hears his love interest, Katerina's voice, as if it were a *bacchic* song. Rather than evoking universal brotherhood, the sonorous voice arouses Ordynov's own desires. Her voice appears to him,

As though it concealed and tenderly cherished the restless torment of insatiable, repressed desire, desperately hidden in a languishing heart; then once more it overflowed in nightingale-like trills and, trembling and burning with a passion that was now uncontainable, flooded into a veritable sea of ecstasy, a sea of mighty resonances, limitless as the first moment of bliss.<sup>39</sup>

The epiphany continues in the same vein, stoking Ordynov's desires, passions, yearnings, sending him into 'a limitless sea of unbridled love' where he hears, for instance,

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<sup>37</sup> 'The Landlady', p. 148, *PSS*, 1:275.

<sup>38</sup> *PSS*, 14:456.

<sup>39</sup> 'The Landlady', p. 188, *PSS*, 1:303.



‘the first vow of a mistress’, ‘the first blush on her face’, and ‘the lust of a Bacchante’.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, there is a strong erotic element in this epiphany and it supports one of my guiding notions in this section, which is that epiphanies in the pre-Siberian novels often have more to do with the individual’s subjectivity — their repressed fears and desires — than with the broader conditions of human experience, with *existentialia*.

In *Netochka Nezvanovna* (1849), the main character also has a more erotically tinged epiphany as her peculiar love for the prince’s daughter, Katya, is born as she first gains sight of her beautiful face.

From the moment I saw her, a feeling of happiness like a sweet premonition filled my soul. Try to imagine a face of idyllic charm and stunning, dazzling beauty; one of those before which you stop, transfixed in sweet confusion, trembling with delight; a face that makes you grateful for its existence, for allowing your eyes to fall upon it, for passing you by. [...] She smiled at my gesture, and my frail nerves ached with a sweet ecstasy.<sup>41</sup>

Thus here, too, the reader can perceive that the epiphany has more to do with Katya’s *particular face*, and not the compassion or beauty concealed in all faces, for instance. It is tinged with eroticism, as their entire relationship is, and speaks more to the main character’s own amorous feelings than to a universal truth about the human condition.

There is a genuine epiphany in the pre-Siberian works that appears to gleam with a general noetic quality. This experience is undergone by Arkadii in *A Weak Heart* (1848). Arkadii stands looking at the Neva, at ‘the smoky frozen thickness of the distance, which was

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<sup>40</sup> ‘The Landlady’, p. 188, *PSS*, 1:303.

<sup>41</sup> *Netochka Nezvanovna*, p. 81, *PSS*, 2:197.

suddenly flushed crimson with the last purple and blood-red glow of sunset'.<sup>42</sup> He reflects on the environment, how nature interacts with the signs of a busy civilisation in Petersburg's urban surroundings — horses, hurrying people, roofs on either side of the river. As Arkadii watches over this emerging vista, he reflects,

It seemed as if all that world, with all its inhabitants strong and weak, with all their habitations, the refuges of the poor, or the gilded palaces for the comfort of the powerful of this world was at that twilight hour like a fantastic vision of fairy-land, like a dream which in its turn would vanish and pass away like vapour into the dark blue sky.<sup>43</sup>

This epiphany is an ephemeral, ineffable experience, communicating something to Arkadii, and gripping him with a 'powerful, overwhelming sensation he had never known before'.<sup>44</sup> At the end of it, he senses that he has had 'a clear vision into something new'.<sup>45</sup> This epiphany may appear more substantial to readers than the others under discussion in this section since it seems to communicate something 'new' about Petersburg society, about the transiency of culture, about humankind's busy, passing, constantly transformative sojourn on earth, filled as it is with suffering, and inequality. It also suggests the reality he sees before him is a fantastic kind of reality, soon destined to vanish and pass away.

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<sup>42</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'A Faint Heart' in *White Nights and Other Stories*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 156-99 (p. 198), *PSS*, 48. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

<sup>43</sup> 'A Faint Heart', p. 198, *PSS*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Later in life, after returning from Siberia, in a feuilleton entitled ‘Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose’,<sup>46</sup> Dostoevskii lends biographical authority to this epiphany by claiming that he personally had this vision at the beginning of his literary career, and that the experience was a pivotal moment for him as an artist. Joseph Frank suggests that this ‘imaginary transformation’ of St Petersburg embodied, for Dostoevskii, ‘a fusion of the fantastic and the real’ that gave ‘wings to his imagination’.<sup>47</sup> Frank also claims that this vision on the Neva ‘provides a penetrating glimpse into Dostoevsky’s pre-Siberian literary evolution’ and that this vision, ‘in slightly different forms’ continued to nourish Dostoevskii’s imagination ever since.<sup>48</sup> Thus, I can infer that epiphanies did play a significant role in the evolution of Dostoevskii’s creative art, perhaps broadening his own imaginative capacities, and inspiring him to see through the world into its unseen grounds, into that which gives it life and significance.

As a literary epiphany, Arkadii’s vision indeed appears to be a movement forward from the ones encountered in *Poor Folk* and *The Landlady*, for instance, insofar as it seeks to articulate something about the human condition, and bring into view a ‘clear vision into something new’.<sup>49</sup> However, it cannot be said that it communicates a specific *existential*. As is clear from Dostoevskii claiming the epiphany as his own later in life, the experience still appears to have more to do with Dostoevskii’s own subjectivity — with inspiring his creative imagination and justifying the labours of his craft — than with necessary conditions for human life, though the vision now seems to be formally striving to articulate something akin to a truth about humanity in general.

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<sup>46</sup> F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990), 19:69.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 298.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> ‘A Faint Heart’, p. 198, *PSS*, 48.

Overall, it appears that Dostoevskii's use of epiphanies, particularly in the form of dreams, visions, hallucinations, is quite widespread and extends well beyond the limits of the major post-Siberian novels. However, the epiphanies that I focus on appear to have evolved from the experiences encountered in the pre-Siberian works. Apart from proving significant in terms of the individual psychology of the character — referring to their repressed fears and desires — the post-Siberian epiphanies usually offer some kind of noetic insight into the human condition as a whole.<sup>50</sup> However, I have not yet shown how Dostoevskii's fiction actually communicates such truths about human existence in novelistic form. In order to further clarify this, I will now attempt to explicate Dostoevskii's own form of literary existentialism.

## 1.2 Existentialism

Existentialism can be encapsulated in a fundamental philosophical axiom: At the most fundamental layer of the human, 'existence precedes essence'. As Heidegger states, 'The essence of Dasein<sup>51</sup> lies in its existence'.<sup>52</sup> If I ask, 'what is a human being?', I may receive

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<sup>50</sup> I should clarify however that tracing a most general outline of Dostoevskii's evolving use of literary epiphanies in his broader oeuvre does not mean that my primary concern is with questions of chronology. I am not, for instance, claiming that Dostoevskii came to insights in a logical sequence, in that, he uncovers a particular *existentiale* in *Crime and Punishment* that evolves into a more sophisticated collection of *existentialia* in *Demons* and so on. His novels are not developmental works of philosophy in this manner. Instead, each of the works manifests different *existentialia*. Thus, I have not thought it necessary to order my interpretations of the novels chronologically. Instead, I proceed in a broadly narrative form, seeking an order suited to the presentation of *existentialia*, rather than one designed to make any specific claims for the chronological evolution of Dostoevskii's use of literary epiphanies in the post-Siberian novels.

<sup>51</sup> Readers can take 'Dasein' to refer to a human being. It literally translates as 'there to be', with 'da' meaning 'there', and 'sein' translated as the infinitive form of 'being', 'to be'. The phrase is commonly translated into English as 'being there'. Heidegger uses the term 'Dasein' partially to critique Post-Cartesian forms of idealist subjectivity which presume an autonomous subject whose mind is made up of logical categories, which synthesize the chaos of the world into forms of unified phenomena

definitions such as a bipedal mammal, or as homo sapiens, a distinct species within the animal kingdom. This would provide an ‘essential’ — anatomical or biological — categorical definition of the human. But does this reveal what it means to be human?

For existentialists, the fundamental question is not ‘what’ a human being is, but about the way in which he/she is. The dictum ‘The essence of Dasein lies in its existence’ means that existence, a lived relation to the world, precedes, grounds and makes possible any essential, categorical understanding of a human being as an abstract entity or a being corresponding to some ideal form.<sup>53</sup> For if humans did not first exist, in Heidegger’s specific use of the word, they would not have been able to produce the natural sciences or mathematics.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the essence of human reality is not the atom, or the molecule, or pure rationality, nor ideal form, harmony, or beauty, understood abstractly and independently of human involvement. Instead, the grounds of human reality are contained in lived experience. This is the defining principle of ‘existentialism’. A human being, for Heidegger, is not simply a collection of logical categories, synthetic *a priori* or otherwise, correlated with an object made up of such-and-such elements, possessing such-and-such determinate properties. Like the anatomical or biological definitions, such an approach cannot reach the grounds of the human.

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intelligible to human consciousness — a subject-object dualism in a mind-dependent reality. ‘Da’ (there) ‘sein’ (being), instead of referring to the *cogito* or ‘I’ — the thinking ‘subject of idealist philosophy, refers to a unified phenomena where self and world are inseparably woven together. The ‘subject’ is a being ‘there’, affected by and immersed in the world. Though I do not deal with this philosophical debate further in the thesis, in chapter 2, ‘Existential Materiality’, I shall demonstrate that in Dostoevskii’s novels as well, subject and world are inextricably connected in this way.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

### 1.2.1 Dostoevskii's Existentialism

At the very core of Dostoevskii's fiction there is, first and foremost, an exploration of human existence. Several prominent commentators have recognised this impulse running through his work.

Bakhtin's Dostoevskii comes close to Heidegger's existentialist axiom when he states, with regard to Dostoevskii's characters, that 'We see not who he is, but how he is conscious of himself; our act of artistic visualization occurs not before the reality of the hero, but before a pure function of his awareness of that reality'.<sup>55</sup> For Bakhtin, Dostoevskii was primarily concerned with 'revealing personality in actual life'.<sup>56</sup> Like Heidegger, Bakhtin's Dostoevskii seeks to understand the human being not in terms of 'what' they are, but 'how' they are, or in the way in which they exist.

Jackson also recognises that Dostoevskii presents an existential view of human reality where truth can only be apprehended in the movement and struggle of existence.<sup>57</sup> Berdiaev, who articulated, before Jackson and Bakhtin, Dostoevskii's concentration on human existence, states that the novelist 'was anthropological and anthropocentric to an almost inexpressible degree: the problem of man was his absorbing passion'.<sup>58</sup> For Berdiaev, the investiture of all reality into the spiritual life of the character in Dostoevskii aims at overturning the everyday conception of the human as something mathematically determinable. 'Man must not let himself be turned into a part of a machine. Dostoevsky always had a very exalted idea of personality, which, indeed, was fundamental to his conception of the world and with the notion of "person"'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Jackson, *Quest for Form*, preface, xi.

<sup>58</sup> Berdyayev, p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Human nature cannot be rationally ‘accounted for’. There is something in personality or spirit that exceeds such quantification. In Dostoevskii’s fiction, *Notes from Underground* most directly addresses this idea.<sup>60</sup> Through the voice of the main character, Dostoevskii ridicules the idea that human nature can be ‘straightened out’ by reason. He attempts to refute the contemporary rationalist idea that once human beings have understood their fundamental nature in abstract universal propositions concerning their rights and true functionality, they will stop willing or living irrationally in accordance with their impulses and desires.<sup>61</sup> In contrast to this viewpoint, Berdiaev sees in Dostoevskii the idea that, ‘Man’s whole business is to prove to himself that he is a man and not a cog-wheel.’<sup>62</sup> Human existentiality evades my grasp when I seek it in a mathematical formula meant to lay bare the rational and moral laws that ultimately regulate and govern human behaviour. Instead, the human is in the lived experience of life. This is what Berdiaev presents as the inner spiritual life of the human being, which precedes and grounds any mathematical equalization of the human.

Undoubtedly there is some truth to Berdiaev’s recognition of this critique of rationalist approaches to personality in Dostoevskii’s fiction. This narrative is also reflected in existentialist readings of Dostoevskii by commentators such as Lev Shestov, Paul Nuttall and Walter Kaufmann. These readings ground themselves in an anti-rationalist approach to life, where reason is opposed to willing, and take this to represent the core of Dostoevskii’s

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<sup>60</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. by Michael Katz (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), pp. 19-20, PSS, 5:114. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the PSS citation.

<sup>61</sup> Dmitry Pisarev, ‘The Realists’ in *Russian Philosophy*, ed. by J. M. Edie, J. P. Scanlan and M. B. Zeldin, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1976), 2:82.

<sup>62</sup> Berdyaev, p. 53.

existentialism.<sup>63</sup> To be sure, the underground man's insistence that man is not an 'organ stop'<sup>64</sup> or Dmitrii Karamazov's exclamation that 'man isn't a drum!',<sup>65</sup> provide insight into Dostoevskii's insistence on the intrinsic and sacred value of personhood and freedom. However, over-emphasis on this argument can present other problems.

Shestov, a contemporary and close friend of Berdiaev, also made use of Dostoevskii's novelistic critique of rationalist thinking. Shestov's essay on Dostoevskii and Nietzsche,<sup>66</sup> originally published in 1903, is perhaps one of the first prominent 'existentialist' readings of Dostoevskii's work.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Shestov's Dostoevskii left a noteworthy impression on European culture. Ksenia Vorozhikhina recognises that his ideas 'made a significant contribution to the intellectual atmosphere in France and contributed to the rise of a philosophy focused on the problems of human existence, or existentialism.'<sup>68</sup> Vorozhikhina and others state that the author's ideas influenced existentialist thinkers such as Georges Bataille, Albert Camus, the early G. Marcel and D. H. Lawrence amongst others.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Nuttall, *'Crime and Punishment': Murder as a Philosophical Experiment* (Edinburgh: Sussex University Press, 1978), p. 73. I elaborate a little more on this critique of Nuttall in the chapter on *Crime and Punishment* later in the thesis.

<sup>64</sup> *Notes from the Underground*, p. 23, PSS, 5:117.

<sup>65</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. by Ignat Avsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 579, PSS, 14:414. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the PSS citation.

<sup>66</sup> Lev Shestov, 'Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy', in *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, trans by Bernard Martin and Spencer Roberts (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969), pp. 141-322. First published in 1900-03.

<sup>67</sup> David Patterson, 'The Unity of Existential Philosophy and Literature as Revealed by Shestov's Approach to Dostoevsky', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 19 (1979), 219-31 (p. 220).

<sup>68</sup> Ksenia V. Vorozhikhina, 'Lev Shestov's Ideas in the French Philosophical and Cultural Context', *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 55 (2017), 364-75 (p. 372).

<sup>69</sup> Vorozhikhina, p. 372; Marina F. Bykova, 'Lev Shestov: A Russian Existentialist', *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 55 (2017) pp. 305-09 (p. 306).



Shestov sees concealed, in Dostoevskii's fiction, the author's personal desire to encounter true 'reality' by escaping the constraints of rationalist, idealist or positivistic philosophical thought, through acts of individual will. Idealist philosophy, both moral and metaphysical, seeks to account for, negate, and overcome the existence of cruelty, either through the promise of eventual harmony in brotherly love,<sup>70</sup> or metaphysical harmony built through the conquest of the real by universal reason.<sup>71</sup>

Shestov self-professedly builds on literary critic, sociologist, and political reformist, Nikolai Mikhailovskii's interpretation of Dostoevskii as a master of depicting the psychological intricacies involved in human cruelty.<sup>72</sup> Yet, whereas, in *A Cruel Talent* (1882), Mikhailovskii saw in Dostoevskii's fascination with cruelty a reflection of the author's inner voyeuristic depravity, Shestov interprets it as a path to a deeper apprehension of reality, and thus, as a route towards overcoming the limits of rationalist, utopian, moral thought.

If all this is so, then it means that the idea of humanity also, which was born among free people, has no right to pillory cruelty and reproach it for its dark, penal origin, but must instead yield to its humble opponent all the countless rights and advantages which it has thus far enjoyed in the world.<sup>73</sup>

Shestov sees any attempt to impose moral values or principles on human life as hypocritical. These ethical systems, seemingly 'resplendent, beautiful, and eternal' on the

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<sup>70</sup> Lev Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, pp. 194-95.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99; Nikolai Mikhailovsky, *A Cruel Talent: An Essay on Dostoevsky*, trans. by Spencer Cadmus, Jr. (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978).

<sup>73</sup> Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, p. 201.

surface, are actually despotic, exclusionary and contain within themselves untold ‘horrors’.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the practice of cruelty by Dostoevskii’s egoistic characters is more honest than systems that encourage virtue and suppress the inherently nasty nature of reality. Shestov, like many other existentialist readers of Dostoevskii, creates an opposition between all moral ‘values’ and egoistic self-affirmation and selfishness, manifest in a love of cruelty.

And only when there is no longer any real or imaginary hope of finding salvation under the hospitable roof of positivist or idealist doctrine will people abandon their everlasting dreaming and emerge from the semidarkness of their limited horizons, which has hitherto gone by the celebrated name ‘truth,’ [...] Then, perhaps, they will understand why Dostoevsky and Nietzsche abandoned humanism for cruelty.<sup>75</sup>

Shestov seeks the ‘apotheosis of cruelty’.<sup>76</sup> This means that the highest value in Dostoevskii’s fiction becomes self-preservation: ‘In other words: find your task, find your cause, not in the doctoring of our illnesses, but in looking after your own health. Look after yourself — only after yourself.’<sup>77</sup> Such a reading is perverse for a number of reasons. First, it is doubtful whether an opposition between all moral or ‘rational’ values and cruel, selfish action actually does succeed in overcoming the limits of rational thinking. Instead, cruelty only performs the deconstructive function Shestov sees in it parasitically. It is only in relation to the moral values it seeks to subvert, that cruelty gains this affirmative meaning. Thus, cruelty is inextricably linked to that which it seeks to overcome. It is doubtful that the veneration of violence that Shestov calls for will be able to truly escape the grips of that

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

which it seeks to negate — cruelty's entire significance, in Shestov's framework, is tied to the dominance and prevalence of the moral values it opposes.

Secondly, looking at Shestov's argument less abstractly, it becomes apparent that his insistence on the moral or ontological significance of cruelty, leads to puzzlingly obtuse conclusions about what Dostoevskii's novels really mean and how the actions of key characters within them are to be interpreted. Shestov flatly insists that 'there is no difference between Ivan Karamazov's words and those of Dostoevsky himself'.<sup>78</sup> He rejects Alesha's responses to Ivan with insults: 'this infant's importunate and monotonous babbling [...] bothers us very little'.<sup>79</sup> Shestov again fails to see the distance between Dostoevskii, the author, and his characters when discussing the underground man: 'Dostoevsky tells his own story in *Notes from the Underground*'.<sup>80</sup> He also suggests that Raskol'nikov's real tragedy does not lie in his decision to murder and transgress the law for his own selfish or utilitarian purposes, but, as Raskol'nikov himself thinks for the majority of the novel, 'in the fact that he realized he was incapable of such a step'.<sup>81</sup> He further claims that 'Raskolnikov is no murderer; he is guilty of no crime'.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Shestov's perverse affirmation of cruelty leads to misreadings of Dostoevskii's novels.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 171. Further evidence of Shestov entirely rejecting Dostoevskii's conscious intention with regards to his creation, the underground man, is widespread in Shestov's writings. e.g. 'Most people only saw, and only see today in this little book [*Notes from the Underground*] a "scandalous revelation". [...] Dostoevsky, it is true, was himself partly responsible for this interpretation and suggests it in the note which he has written at the head of the work. And he may have done this in honesty and sincerity.' Lev Shestov, *In Job's Balance: A collection of essays*, trans. by Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 65. First published between 1923-29.

<sup>81</sup> Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, p. 214.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Such readings must reject Dostoevskii's own biographical comments about immortality, love and the value of giving oneself wholly to others, as well as the moral messages espoused by Zosima and Alesha; the speech at the stone in *The Brothers Karamazov* and the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*. Shestov accounts for the existence of these moral passages and biographical values by regarding them as Dostoevskii's attempt to deal with the horror of recognising the truth of his own insight into cruelty.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, Shestov rejects or perversely reinterprets the significance of what Dostoevskii himself says in and outside his novels. He misreads Dostoevskii's anti-heroes as founts of truth and wisdom, and regards their acts of grave cruelty and selfishness — in murder; violence; exclusive self-affirmation and the pursuit of one's own will — as evidence of their wisdom.

Having noted these absurdities, I should nonetheless also consider Shestov's contribution to Dostoevskii studies in the context of his own time. Apart from his original contribution to 'existentialist' interpretations of Dostoevskii, already mentioned earlier, his approach is also important for psychological studies of Dostoevskii's fiction. As Shestov himself suggests, 'The first gift that Europe gratefully accepted from Russia was Dostoevsky's "psychology," i.e., the underground man, with his various subspecies, the Raskolnikovs, Karamazovs, and Kirillovs.'<sup>84</sup>

I have outlined how Shestov perverts Dostoevskii's conscious intention, by reading the explanatory note for the underground man, the hagiographic expositions of Zosima and

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<sup>83</sup> 'He [Dostoevskii] himself dreads to think that the "underground," which he had depicted so vividly, was not something completely alien to him, but something kindred, his very own. He himself was frightened by the horrors that had been revealed to him, and he harnessed all the powers of his soul to protect himself from them, with anything at all, with even the first ideals he came across. Thus were created the characters Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov. Thence also the frenzied sermons that fill his *Diary of a Writer* to overflowing. All this is merely to remind us that the Raskolnikovs, Ivan Karamazovs, Kirillovs, and other characters of Dostoevsky's novels speak for themselves and have nothing in common with their author.' *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Alesha Karamazov's pious nature, as expressions of Dostoevskii's personal guilt in the face of his horror at recognising his own insight into the revelatory power of cruel and wilful actions. Although such a reading may appear blunt, or obtuse, there is no doubting that Shestov's recognition of unconscious biographical intent written into Dostoevskii's fiction is a pioneering insight for psychological readings of the author's work. As Maria Ogden recognises, 'traces of Freud's discovery of the unconscious'<sup>85</sup> can be found in twentieth-century French philosophy and literature. Since Lev Shestov introduced this line of thinking into French philosophy,<sup>86</sup> I recognise that Shestov's insight into the unconscious, articulated through Dostoevskii's fiction, were a profound building block for psychological readings of Dostoevskii, and perhaps for psychology itself as well.

Clearly, Shestov does have a valid point here. Dostoevskii's physical illnesses and spiritual malaises (which were deeply interconnected) ought not to be simply disregarded as extraneous to his novels. For example, as James Rice notes in *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*,

Entire volumes have been written about *The Idiot*, a novel dominated by a hero with epilepsy, without ever mentioning the author's own illness and specific symptoms, and without exploring the phantasmagorical, mythical, and real complexities of Prince Myshkin's medical condition.<sup>87</sup>

The line between the biographical and the seemingly universal truths depicted in Dostoevskii's novels is often thin and easily blurred. Yet, while Rice acknowledges the

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<sup>85</sup> Marina G. Ogden, 'Facing the absurd: On Lev Shestov's angel of death', *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*, 21 (2019) 5-21 (p. 9).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Rice, xiv.

cruelty of Dostoevskii's characters as a symptom of their disorders, and thus informed by Dostoevskii's own personal experience of mental illness,<sup>88</sup> he does not see such acts of cruelty as a cure for a general spiritual or existential malaise, as Shestov does.

It is now clear that Shestov, 'never takes the artists' statements as dogmas, and [maintains] an implicit scepticism about the relevance of conscious intentions'.<sup>89</sup> Yet, at the same time, Shestov presumably would not want his own philosophical writings to be interpreted through the same method. I infer this on the basis of George Kline's observation that 'Shestov never bared his own soul, never made his own private sufferings a matter of public record'.<sup>90</sup> Kline is even more unequivocal later in the article: 'As we have seen, *all* of Shestov's writings are reserved and in no way confessional.'<sup>91</sup> Thus, what is to prevent commentators from suggesting, in Shestov's own fashion, that the author's writings actually manifest a subconscious desire to overcome his own sense of deep disillusionment with his previously held ideals,<sup>92</sup> and uncover a new ideal where none immediately presents itself? In other words, if I argue in Shestov's manner, he could appear to be desperately seeking an ideal to replace the one he has lost, by imbuing meaninglessness with supreme meaning. I do not insist on this interpretation, but simply wish to point out how psychology can cut both

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<sup>88</sup> Rice, p. 252.

<sup>89</sup> James M. Curtis, 'Shestov's Use of Nietzsche in His Interpretation of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 17 (1975) 289-302 (p. 289).

<sup>90</sup> George L. Kline, 'Skepticism and faith in Shestov's early critique of rationalism', *Studies in East European Thought*, 63 (2011) 15-29 (p. 20).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Shestov consistently makes the case that what is required to uncover the deeper levels of reality is first an abandonment of one's own ideals. E.g. 'We have got into the realm of the unnatural, of the eternally and essentially fantastic, and if we want to see anything, we must abandon all those methods and procedures which previously gave a certainty, a guarantee to our truths and our knowledge.' Shestov, *In Job's Balance*, p. 59.

ways in Shestov's case as well, and there is a cost in not taking seriously the explicit statements of an author regarding her/his own work.

I conclude this section on Shestov by returning to his main focus: the desire to overcome 'rationality' through egoism and violence. In this path, there is always the danger that, as one seeks to uncover the deeper depths of reality and become a 'god', one may end up actually being transformed into a 'wild beast',<sup>93</sup> wilfully cruel, selfish and sadistic. Yet, existentialist readings of Dostoevskii have been rooted in this idea. Nuttall's endorsement of Svidrigailov as a more existentially 'free' character, and the true hero of *Crime and Punishment*, demonstrates how his explicitly existentialist interpretation leads to similarly obtuse conclusions.<sup>94</sup> Such readings tend to be vulnerable to critique.

Instead, my approach to uncovering Dostoevskii's existentialism will largely avoid this pitfall by placing, at the core of existentialist philosophy, not the opposition between restrictive rationality and 'free' willing, but instead, an ontological axiom: 'existence precedes essence'. Though I recognise that, in Dostoevskii's fiction, truth lies not in the logical proposition but in lived experience, I do not state that cruelty or violence is the true path to 'freedom'. In this way, my focus will not have at its centre an eternally recurrent refrain to the underground man's violent resistance to reason, and instead, will seek to understand what a variety of characters' primordial lived experiences of *existentialia* disclose to them about the human condition. Indeed, the central mistake of prior existentialist readings lies in their conflation of Dostoevskii's critique of rationalist discourse with the need to venerate cruelty or violence. Existential phenomenology will thus provide a radically new reading of Dostoevskii, one that diverges at its very root from the approaches of the existentialist commentators surveyed above.

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<sup>93</sup> Shestov, *In Job's Balance*, p. 71.

<sup>94</sup> Nuttall, p. 66.

### 1.2.2 The Ancient Quarrel

Approaching Dostoevskii through the lens of existential phenomenology will help overcome outdated and inadequate representations of Dostoevskii's existentialism and add to readers' understanding of what the novels disclose about the human condition. Yet taking Dostoevskii as a literary existential phenomenologist may raise a further question: In what sense can it be said that Dostoevskii's fiction is capable of disclosing the 'truth' about reality? I have already summarily explained how existential phenomenology can be seen to be at work in Dostoevskii's fiction, but such a question will allow for a broader debate, regarding literature's ability to provide genuine knowledge about reality.

The question of the relation between the poets and the philosophers is sometimes referred to as 'The Ancient Quarrel'.<sup>95</sup> This refers to Plato's original exclusion of the poets from his perfectly just city in *The Republic*.<sup>96</sup> The argument states that poets are best defined as imitators, rather than interrogators of the truth. Poets make forgeries, artificial copies, mere reflections of the visible world. Yet the visible world is itself an imitation of an ideal world of forms. Thus, the poet creates imitations of imitations, and is therefore far removed from the truth.<sup>97</sup> As Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm explain,

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<sup>95</sup> Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, eds., *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 1; Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> Extracts and arguments from this subsection have already been published in the introduction to Bilal Siddiqi and Sarah J. Young, 'Rethinking Dostoevskii: Literature, Philosophy, Narrative', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 99, 1 (2021), 32-40.

<sup>97</sup> Plato, "The Republic", trans. by G. M. A. Grube, C. D. C. Reeve in *Complete Works*, ed. by John Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 971-1223 (p. 1202).



Unlike philosophy, Socrates argued, literary representation is misleading: it is a third remove from the forms, a representation of a reality that is already itself a representation, and it is therefore condemned to the realm of mere opinion, rather than truth.<sup>98</sup>

Literature tends toward deception, fantasy, artificiality. It appears destined to function only as an instrument of aesthetic pleasure or, perhaps, as a tool for moral persuasion. Literature is thus presumed to be unable to play a role in the reader's discovery of 'truth' about the world or human nature.<sup>99</sup> The broader question addressed in this discussion of Dostoevskii's fiction is whether literature can have anything to do with the 'truth'.

How does literature [...] as a kind of mimetic activity offer access to the truth — if indeed it does? What does literature contribute to knowledge — if indeed it does make such a contribution — given the fact that it is a mimetic practice? [...] Is the concept of truth warranted in relation to it, and if so how?<sup>100</sup>

These ancient questions have thrown up a myriad of answers. Bernard Harrison refers to literature's humanist tradition and attempts to create a method of literary interpretation, grounded in Wittgensteinian philosophy, that demonstrates how literature can provide cognitive insight into the human condition, which can be provided by no other means.<sup>101</sup> Cora Diamond, Stephen Mulhall and others have explored the contribution literature makes to

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<sup>98</sup> Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, 'Ancient Quarrels, Modern Contexts: An Introduction' in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel*, pp. 1-16 (p. 9).

<sup>99</sup> Cascardi, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>101</sup> Bernard Harrison, *What is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 57.

moral knowledge.<sup>102</sup> Richard Rorty states that ‘Philosophy occupies an important place in culture only when things seem to be falling apart — when long-held and widely cherished beliefs are threatened. At such periods, intellectuals reinterpret the past in terms of an imagined future.’<sup>103</sup>

Rorty is, of course, referring here to the deconstruction and transformation of what is taken to be ‘the truth’ over the course of human history. He cites a variety of examples: When cynicisms arose about ‘prayer and priestcraft’, ‘Plato and Aristotle found ways for us to hold on to the idea that human beings, unlike the beasts that perish, have a special relation to the ruling powers of the universe’.<sup>104</sup> Rorty refers to Copernicus and Galileo as supplanting Aquinas and Dante, as well as Spinoza and Kant turning Europe’s ‘love of God’ into a ‘love of Truth’. He also mentions Marx and Mill in the context of democratic revolution and industrialisation. Thus, philosophy plays a historical role in the pursuit of knowledge, specifically when old intellectual certainties about the world or human nature die, or are negated, and new ideas are required to replace them.

Of course, no one would doubt that Dostoevskii was living through a time of great intellectual and metaphysical upheaval.<sup>105</sup> The Westernizers such as Vissarion Belinskii and Alexander Herzen; the Slavophiles such as Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevskii; the rational egoists, such as Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Dmitrii Pisarev, as well as the radical religious thinkers such as Vladimir Solov’ev and Nikolai Fedorov all, during Dostoevskii’s literary career, waded into a discussion about human nature and what future humanity will look like. In other words, Dostoevskii lived in a time when the ‘Russian soul’ was up for

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<sup>102</sup> Mulhall, *Wounded Animal*, pp. 1-18; Cora Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 1 (2003), 1-26.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 73.

<sup>104</sup> Rorty, p. 73.

<sup>105</sup> Alex De Jonge, *Dostoevsky and the Age of Intensity* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 4.

debate, a time of intellectual crisis, when, as Rorty suggests above, ‘things seem to be falling apart’.

Authors such as Turgenev, Tolstoi and Dostoevskii also took part in these debates, often directly through their fiction. Dostoevskii’s literary works acted as a rebuttal to the formal arguments of his contemporary philosophers. Famously, *Notes from the Underground* (1864) was intended as a response to Chernyshevskii’s ideas in *What Is To Be Done?* (1863).<sup>106</sup> It is also suggested that Pisarev, who wrote an article ridiculing the notion that Raskol’nikov could be identified with the radicals of his time,<sup>107</sup> nonetheless allegedly wept when first reading *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>108</sup> Thus, not only did Dostoevskii’s fictional characters require published intellectual rejections from the radicals of the time, his novels could, and indeed did, cut his contemporary Russian philosophers to the quick, provoking emotional responses in them as they came into contact with the truths about reality Dostoevskii was presenting in fictional form. Thus, it is perhaps not difficult to claim that Dostoevskii’s fiction performed the job that philosophy claims for itself: helping to enunciate a future historical direction for Russian ideas about what it means to be human. He made a contribution that helped expand the intellectual and imaginative horizons of Russian thought.

However, the influence of Dostoevskii’s fiction on the history of ideas cannot just be limited to Russian thought. By prefiguring many of the central preoccupations of twentieth-century existentialist philosophy in his fictional texts, Dostoevskii appears to have succeeded in articulating a sense of human nature that would dominate European thought in the century following his demise. Dostoevskii’s ideas emerged, through his fiction, before all modern

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<sup>106</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 291-93; James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 57-60.

<sup>107</sup> Pisarev, D. I. 'Bor'ba za zhizn', <[az.lib.ru/p/pisarew\\_d/text\\_0200.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/p/pisarew_d/text_0200.shtml)> [accessed 12 Jan. 2020].

<sup>108</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: Miraculous Years, 1865-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 100-101.

existentialists barring Søren Kierkegaard. Thus, Dostoevskii made a founding contribution to existentialism, and as I intend to show in this thesis, to existential phenomenology. Here too, then, Dostoevskii's fiction influences the development of philosophical ideas about the nature of 'reality'.

However, my task is not to chart Dostoevskii's place in intellectual history. Literature wrestles with big questions concerning reality by embedding ideas into fictional narratives, and embodying them in the journeys of literary characters. Great literature can widen the reader's imagination and transform their conceptions of themselves and their real worlds. Formal philosophical argument is thus not the only path to perceiving truths concerning human shared reality. As Anthony Cascardi states,

Literature makes its claims to truth through the imagination and the emotions, and not directly by [...] argument — or, we may infer, by just making statements that conform to facts [...] If the writer's insights into character are true, and if the imagined world is convincingly drawn, then literature may have the power to move its readers emotionally to *recognize* what is true, rather than simply to *know that* it is true.<sup>109</sup>

### 1.3 Dostoevskii's Literary Existential Phenomenology

Although the idea of literature participating in the historical unfolding of truth may provide part of the answer to the question 'How can literature tell the truth?', it still does not address the issue of how literary fiction can engage in existential phenomenology. To be sure, I have already summarily described my overall methodology in this regard above, but the question still stands: how can literature, the art of imitation, reveal anything genuinely true about the foundations of reality? As readers shall see, several prominent commentators on

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<sup>109</sup> Cascardi, p. 33.

Dostoevskii already presume his fiction capable of depicting fundamental truths about the human lived experience of reality. In my specific case, the question becomes, how can Dostoevskii's fiction disclose 'existentialia', the necessary conditions of human experience?

As I have said, phenomenology seeks to examine Dasein's lived experience of the world, and discover various conditions for the possibility of human existence. By way of analogy, space and time, for Immanuel Kant, are the conditions for the possibility of experience.<sup>110</sup> They cannot be described by looking at the natural materials that make up any entity nor the properties that the entity possesses, but instead constitute the condition for the possibility of encountering any entities in the world at all. In the next subsection, I will describe these specific *existentialia* as they are represented in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The rest of my thesis will then explore how these *existentialia* are given expression in Dostoevskii's fiction.

However, before this, I reemphasise that many highly influential commentators on Dostoevskii implicitly assume that he is an existential phenomenologist. They do so, of course, without naming 'existential phenomenology' as such. Nonetheless, their interpretations take for granted that Dostoevskii's fiction is capable of presenting and thus disclosing necessary truths about human lived experience.

Mikhail Bakhtin can indeed be regarded as a kind of existential phenomenologist, uncovering, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (1989), the nature of the lived experience of the idea or the word.<sup>111</sup> Speech does not solely refer to the impersonally definable semantic content of expressed words, unaffected in

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<sup>110</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 163-64. First published 1781.

<sup>111</sup> 'The expression of a performed act from within and the expression of once-occurrent Being-as-event in which that act is performed require the entire fullness of the word: its content/sense aspect (the word as concept) as well as its palpable-expressive aspect (the word as image) and its emotional-volitional aspect (the intonation of the word) in their unity.' Bakhtin, *Philosophy of the Act*, p. 31.

significance by the expressive act of the speaker. It is instead a lived experience of the meaningful, coloured by the character's emotional-volitional response to, or their particular accent on, or their voicing of, the living word or idea.<sup>112</sup> As Bakhtin states,

Dostoevsky's ideology knows neither the separate thought nor systemic unity in this sense. For him the ultimate indivisible unit is not the separate referentially bounded thought, not the proposition, not the assertion, but rather the integral point of view, the integral position of a personality. For him, referential meaning is indissolubly fused with the position of a personality... Dostoevsky — to speak paradoxically — thought not in thoughts but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices. He tried to perceive and formulate each thought in such a way that a whole person was expressed and began to sound in it.<sup>113</sup>

In this sense, Bakhtin is exploring the phenomenology of discourse and meaning-construction through Dostoevskii's novels. He seeks to breathe life into the dead proposition, presumed equal to itself in significance without reference to its speaker's act of voicing. Dostoevskii's novels appear to represent real human life by manifesting the deeper existentiality of discourse as well as the interpenetration of self and other in one's consciousness and in acts of communication with others.<sup>114</sup> Internal other-relatedness, and

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<sup>112</sup> 'In the mouth of another person, a word or a definition identical in content would take on another meaning and tone'. Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 55.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>114</sup> On this second point, see Bakhtin, 'Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book', the introduction to the 1961 edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 'To be means to communicate [...] To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*.' Italics in the original. Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 287.

arguably ‘discourse’ in the sense that Bakhtin intends it, as an embodied experience that is a prerequisite for meaning-construction, are *existentialia*. They are necessary conditions for finite human experience.

Gary Saul Morson’s Dostoevskii also appears to be somewhat of an existential phenomenologist. Morson recognises the underground man’s rage against what he calls ‘logarithmic time’.<sup>115</sup> He reads the underground man as rebelling against the dictates of a determinism that seeks to mechanize the human spirit, and thus destroy ‘unpredictability and [...] eventness and life’. Through his interpretation of Dostoevskii, Morson is uncovering the necessary temporal conditions for any human experience to be possible. He calls this temporal *existentialia* ‘open temporality’.

As Morson succinctly states, ‘we are human only insofar as time is open’.<sup>116</sup> This is indeed a central axiom for Morson’s entire oeuvre and could be seen as a guiding idea underpinning much of his discussion of Dostoevskii. What it means is that the human being’s existential experience of temporality reflects that time is not pre-determined — it is always open — and that there are always a variety of genuine possibilities, which can lead to different outcomes. In other words, ‘in life there are always loose ends’.<sup>117</sup> More than simply an observation that is sometimes true, sometimes not, Morson sees this as a necessary condition of human life and freedom, though human beings are free to misunderstand it.

Morson wants to understand how human beings experience time in everyday life. To orient his question, he does not turn to theory but, like other existential phenomenologists, to the everyday, to the ‘ordinary and unsophisticated view’, in order to understand what it

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<sup>115</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Gary Saul Morson, ‘The God of Onions: “The Brothers Karamazov” and the Mythic Prosaic’ in *A New Word on ‘The Brothers Karamazov’*, ed. by Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), pp. 107-24 (p. 107).

<sup>117</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 39.

discloses about the human experience of time. ‘Above all, [Morson’s study] is concerned with the human dimension of time. I am interested in the relation of temporalities to how people live and think about their lives.’<sup>118</sup> Dostoevskii comes into the picture insofar as Morson believes him exceptionally capable of providing ‘finely wrought picture of open time’ in literature.<sup>119</sup> Thus, Morson sees the real existentiality of time rendered in literary form in Dostoevskii’s novels. In other words, Morson’s Dostoevskii is an existential phenomenologist, trying to express his characters’ lived experiences of open and closed temporalities and accurately represent the nature of time in real life.

Readers can therefore see how commentators implicitly presume that Dostoevskii’s novels can reveal fundamental truths about human reality. Bakhtin and Morson’s theories suppose that we can discover real-life *existentialia* by reading Dostoevskii’s fiction. In this way, I have indicated how Dostoevskii perhaps already is unwittingly read as an existential phenomenologist, seeking to reveal necessary truths about human existence through his fictional narratives.<sup>120</sup>

The idea that Dostoevskii’s craft is capable of revealing existential truths in fictional form serves to remind readers how naturally interdisciplinary existentialism is. Jean-Paul Sartre, Rainer Maria Rilke, Albert Camus all make use of literary forms to disclose existential

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>120</sup> If the reader requires further examples of this phenomenon in Dostoevskii studies, in the introduction to a *Slavonic and East European Review* cluster, Sarah J. Young and I refer to at least three new commentaries published in the collection, which all implicitly presume that to understand Dostoevskii is to understand some necessary truth about human life. Bilal Siddiqi and Sarah J. Young, ‘Rethinking Dostoevskii’, pp. 32-40. The commentaries I mention are: Lynn Ellen Patyk, ‘The Dark Side of Dialogue: Dostoevskian Provocation and the Provocateurs Karamazov’; Denis Zhernokleyev, ‘Dostoevskii, the Feuilleton and the Confession’; Vadim Shkolnikov, ‘Dostoevskii and the Birth of the Conscientious Terrorist: From the Underground Man to *Underground Russia*’. Full references to each of these articles are included in the ‘Works cited’ at the end of this thesis.



truths.<sup>121</sup> Kierkegaard did not shy away from literary discourses and forms either in his philosophical works.<sup>122</sup> Walter Kaufmann pondered at existentialism's interdisciplinary nature and compared how differently the reader may respond to Kierkegaard and Dostoevskii's forms of existentialism:

Kierkegaard confronts us as an individual while Dostoevsky offers us a world. Both are infinitely disturbing, but there is an overwhelming vastness about Dostoevsky and a strident narrowness about Kierkegaard. If one Søren Kierkegaard comes from Kierkegaard and plunges into Dostoevsky, one is lost like a man brought up in a small room who is suddenly placed in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean.<sup>123</sup>

Building on this insight in his introductory remarks, Kaufmann goes on to directly ask: 'could it be that at least some part of what the existentialists attempt to do is best done in art and not philosophy?' I have absolutely no desire to 'supplant' philosophy with literature as such a question appears to encourage readers to seek to do. Yet, the fact that existentialism is a philosophy concerned primarily with the potential disclosure of human nature in *lived experience*, rather than through formal argument, suggests that literature gains an advantage

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<sup>121</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Books, 2000). First published in 1938; Rainer Maria Rilke, '*Sonnets to Orpheus*' with '*Letters to a Young Poet*', trans. by Stephen Cohn (Manchester, UK: Caracnet Press Limited, 2000). First published in 1923; Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. by Sandra Smith (London: Penguin, 2013). First published in 1942. See also: 'Sartre's novel [is] virtually unique as a work of fiction: the fact that it can scarcely be understood without a prior understanding of a work of philosophy — L'Être et le Néant — to which it stands in a symbiotic relationship that is so close as to make the two almost a single work.' Bernard Harrison, *What is Fiction For?* p. 25.

<sup>122</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, trans. by Edna Hong, Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). First published in 1843.

<sup>123</sup> *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1968), p. 14.

over philosophy in being able to present characters embodying, or ‘living through’, as Bakhtin might say, existentialist ideas over the course of their narrative journeys.

Kaufmann’s question thus really asks about how the form of the inquiry impacts the presentation and dissemination of the truths it intends to uncover. Though there is much to say on this, since it would take readers too far beyond the remit of this thesis, I shall limit myself to simply presenting the difference through an example.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger takes pains to formally describe the nature of Dasein’s internally socialized relation to others — the *existentiale* of ‘Being-with’. Heidegger articulates the formal structure of this *existentiale* by making assertions such as, ‘Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein’s Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with’.<sup>124</sup>

Heidegger’s goal in this passage is to provide a philosophical formulation that precisely describes Dasein’s lived experience of its internal other-relatedness, or its ‘Being-with’. Now, if this formal description is compared with one of Raskol’nikov’s ‘microdialogue[s]’,<sup>125</sup> as Bakhtin calls them, it may be argued that Dostoevskii’s fiction perceives the same truth. However, Dostoevskii approaches existentialist insights not with philosophy’s insatiable desire for definition, but seeks instead to present said insights in an embodied context in artistic images.

I contrast Heidegger’s formal definition of ‘Being-with’ with a passage that presents Raskol’nikov’s never-ending interior monologue, dialogically penetrated by the voices of other characters, as they subsist within his own consciousness. In this passage, Raskol’nikov is reflecting on a letter from his mother informing him that his sister, Dunia, intends to enter

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<sup>124</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>125</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 74.

into a loveless marriage with Luzhin, a wealthy government official, in order to gain financial security for herself and especially her brother, Raskol'nikov:

And Mother? But this is all about Rodia, her precious Rodia, her firstborn! How could one not sacrifice even such a daughter for the sake of such a firstborn son? Oh, you dear, prejudiced hearts! No, I don't suppose we'd even refuse Sonechka's destiny! [...] But have you weighed up your sacrifice, both of you, all the sacrifice you're making? Have you? Are you equal to it? Is it worthwhile? Is it sensible? Do you know, Dunechka, that Sonechka's fate is in no way worse than yours with mister Luzhin? 'There can be no love here', writes Mama. But supposing that there not only can't be love, there can be no respect either [...] I don't want your sacrifice, Dunechka! I don't want it, Mama! It'll never happen while I'm alive, never, never! I won't accept it!<sup>126</sup>

Though neither his mother nor his sister is present, here Raskol'nikov argues with them in his own mind. Their direct words are re-accented in Raskol'nikov's interior monologue and interrogated by questions that he puts to them and presumptions he makes about their deeper motives for the 'sacrifice' they intend to offer on his behalf.

In other words, Heidegger's own insights — written over fifty years after *Crime and Punishment* — are here described in a fleshed-out or embodied context, presenting the reader, not with an immediately articulable definition of 'being-with', but with an artistic image that, perhaps, reminds them of their own internal voices, peopled as they are with others' words and thoughts. These artistic images disclose without defining and their powers of revelation

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<sup>126</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by Nicolas Pasternak Slater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 40-41, *PSS*, 6:38. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

are of an altogether different register and produce a different effect on the reader than the one induced through philosophical formulation.

It is not for me to say which is more effective in helping readers perceive the truth of Dasein's internal other-relatedness. However, even this single artistic image — Raskol'nikov's microdialogue in action — is able to evoke emotional responses in readers, and cause them to reflect on what Raskol'nikov is going through. Raskol'nikov's internal chattering can thus demonstrate what an embodied experience of 'Being-with' actually looks and feels like.<sup>127</sup>

This subsection has been included within the thesis partially to clarify the grounds of my interpretation, but also because, the case could be made that Dostoevskii has not yet been recognised as meriting a central position in contemporary renditions of this ancient debate concerning literature and philosophy. Although there are extraordinary and varied interpretations connecting Dostoevskii's novels to the real-world insights of psychology, philosophy, theology, politics, amongst other disciplines, it is worth explicitly recognising how studies on Dostoevskii often presume that to understand the author's fiction is to understand truths about human shared reality encoded in them. This would seem like a fruitful area in which to take Dostoevskii studies in order to bring it towards a more explicit consciousness of itself as a literary discipline and to shed light on its often distinctively interdisciplinary interpretive methodologies.

#### **1.4 *Existentialia*: The 'Phenomena' of Phenomenology**

I have stated that Bakhtin and Morson's readings of Dostoevskii can be reinterpreted as seeking to identify real-life *existentialia* articulated in the novels. These elements provide a

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<sup>127</sup> In chapter 5, on desire in *The Brothers Karamazov*, I will explore how Dostoevskii's final novel reflects the existentiality of human internal other-relatedness, as well as a necessary inner striving towards alterity, through characters' embodied experience of desire.

robust framework for interpreting the post-Siberian novels. Similarly, for Heidegger, the true ‘phenomena’ of phenomenology are the fundamental existential structures that make any lived human experience possible.<sup>128</sup> Heidegger’s task is to bring these hidden phenomena, which are always there invisibly in every human experience, to light in an ontological structure. It will give readers an idea of what existence is. This is what Heidegger calls fundamental ontology.

Since ‘existence’ — the precognitive way in which Dasein<sup>129</sup> necessarily comports itself in the world and towards everything within it — is self-evidently a prerequisite for any other scientific, mathematical or historical inquiry into the nature of Being, it maintains an ontological priority over them. In other words, in order to understand the nature of human life, one must first understand human existentiality: ‘Therefore *fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can take their rise, must be sought in the *existential analytic of Dasein*.’<sup>130</sup> Fundamental ontology will not describe what human beings are ‘made up of’, but the structures for the Being of the entity that exists. Phenomenology is not the science of ‘what is?’, but the science of ‘how’ the ‘what’ *is*.

In Division I of *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes a variety of *existentialia* conditioning human existence. In brief, the *existentialia* include ‘worldhood’; ‘being-with’; ‘being-oneself’; ‘state-of-mind’; ‘understanding’; ‘discourse’; ‘falling’; ‘anxiety’; ‘conscience’ and ‘being-towards-death’. The fundamental unity of these *existentialia*, Heidegger designates as ‘care’.

‘Worldhood’ [*Weltlichkeit*] as an *existentialia* reveals that behind Dasein’s everyday understanding of the world as a collection of separate entities existing in space, lies a more

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<sup>128</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>129</sup> For a definition of ‘Dasein’, see footnote 51 in section 1.2, ‘Existentialism’.

<sup>130</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 34.

fundamental praxis-based engagement.<sup>131</sup> All objects that Dasein encounters in the world exist in a pre-existing referential totality where each object is connected to other objects, ultimately ordered in accordance with the needs, wishes, desires, functional relations of the human being. In this sense, the hammer is related to nail, which is related to wood, which is related to the house, which is a dwelling place for Dasein.<sup>132</sup> Objects exist as an arrangement of ‘equipment’ [*Zeug*],<sup>133</sup> and not as separate objects made of such and such elements, consisting in such-and-such properties. In Heidegger’s familiar procedure, such a ‘thematic’ or abstracted understanding of the object is predicated upon the existential (praxis-based) relation to it.<sup>134</sup>

‘Being-with’ [*Mitsein*] is a fundamental *existentiale*, like worldhood. This capacity constitutes human beings as ‘with-beings’. Even in solitude, Dasein is with others. ‘Being-with’ does not imply the occurring together of several separate human beings, fully independent and not interpenetrating into one another’s consciousnesses. Instead it suggests a fundamental interconnectivity between self and the other, who is always present, even when Dasein is alone.<sup>135</sup>

‘Being-oneself’ [*Selbstsein*] implies that human beings are fundamentally concerned about their own future possibilities. In each case, one’s own individual existence ‘matters’ for oneself. Even though humans as ‘with-beings’ are internally dispersed into others, in each case, Dasein’s own ‘Being’ is always an issue for it.<sup>136</sup> When considering questions about

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<sup>131</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 92.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>133</sup> Macquarrie and Robinson point out that although the word ‘zeug’ has multiple meanings including ‘tool’ and ‘implement’, Heidegger uses it predominantly as a collective noun so that he can say that there is no such thing as ‘an equipment’. *Being and Time*, p. 97.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

what life means, or what it should be like, or simply trying to decide whether to have Chinese or Indian food tonight, Dasein is concerned about its own future possibilities. This is another fundamental existential condition of experience.<sup>137</sup>

‘State-of-mind’ [*Befindlichkeit*]<sup>138</sup> refers to what is generally understood as Dasein’s capacity to have ‘moods’. Dasein always has a mood. This is why Dasein can answer a question like, ‘how are you?’. Even a dull boredom or a feeling of emptiness are distinctive types of mood that Dasein possesses.

Moods reveal the fact that Dasein has been thrown into a world that it did not choose. ‘Thrownness’ [*Geworfenheit*] is a fundamental characteristic for Dasein. Human beings do not choose to be born, nor do they create their ‘world’ bit by bit after birth. A newly born baby does not attribute original names to objects for the first time, such as baby clothes, nappy, breast, and then arrange them into referential totalities ultimately finding their meaning in the infant’s particular needs. Instead, Dasein is thrown into existence, and comes into a ‘world’ that has already been arranged into certain structures, which the young Dasein them immediately partakes in, and pursues its possibilities within. Mood reveals precisely that Dasein did not create the world, that it did not bring itself into existence, but instead ‘finds’ itself always already thrown into it. Thrownness reveals to Dasein that though it did not choose to be born, the world and its possibilities still matter to it.<sup>139</sup>

‘Understanding’ [*Verstehen*] indicates human beings’ ability to engage coherently with the world. The understanding is a faculty which precedes any axiomatic knowledge

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>138</sup> Literally ‘the state in which one may be found’ or perhaps ‘foundness’. This term is commonly translated as ‘state of mind’ or ‘attunement’, but neither translation brings out the important connotation of ‘finding’ oneself. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 172.

<sup>139</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 329.

gained from the world. It is essentially the basis from which any theoretical knowledge arises.<sup>140</sup>

‘Falling’ [*Verfallen*] is Dasein’s basic, everyday state in the world.<sup>141</sup> As a human being pursuing possibilities in a shared world, Dasein ‘loses’ itself to a public understanding of human beings. This public understanding allows Dasein to turn away from its own existential being.<sup>142</sup> Dasein exists in a tranquillized sense, where its identity is splayed onto the collective ‘they’ of public intelligibility. Thus, Dasein’s absorption in everyday dealings with the world and with other humans, allows it to forget itself and interpret its being, instead, in a fallen manner.

‘Anxiety’ [*Angst*],<sup>143</sup> for Heidegger, refers both to a distinctive epiphanic experience that particular human beings can have, as well as to a constant state-of-being that all human beings, actively or passively, always possess, as a condition of experience. In this second sense, anxiety is an *existentiale*. All human beings are anxious deep down in their Being. This does not mean that everyone is symptomatically anxious in a medical sense, but that even when Dasein is not exhibiting signs of overt anxiety, it is still conditioned by a deeper, pervasive anxiety. This is because, in everyday life, human beings, ‘falling’, are able to lose themselves to a public understanding of the world. Dasein thus understands itself in terms of its career, its everyday dealings with the world and its relationships with others. In this state, human beings are able to turn away from their ownmost fundamental Being. In this ‘turning away’, Dasein flees in the face of its inner anxiety: ‘in turning away from it, it is disclosed

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>143</sup> While ‘angst’ is normally translated as ‘anxiety’ in the Post-Freudian context, it can also be captured by the word ‘dread’, ‘uneasiness’, or ‘malaise’. Perhaps this breadth in definition implies that angst can refer both to a distinctive state of ‘dread’ or ‘anxiety’, or a more general, pervasive sense of moral or mental ill-being; a ‘malaise’, that all people carry.



“there”<sup>144</sup>. In the habitual and everyday avoidance of anxiety, the all-pervasive prevalence of anxiety is also disclosed.

In an everyday sense, anxiety avoidance manifests itself not only in idle talk, and curiosity, but also in fear. Fear is always a fear-of something. Dasein is afraid of not being able to make mortgage payments, of not advancing in its career, of not finding a suitable partner to accompany it unto death. All these fears indicate the existence of a deeper anxiety, which is not concerned with particular possibilities that may or may not come to pass. Instead, anxiety is about Dasein’s very being-in-the-world itself. In an authentic, primordial experience of anxiety, a human being is unable to understand themselves in terms of their everyday worldly fears and comportments. All that is left over is an anxiousness about Dasein’s very Being-in-the-world. ‘That about which anxiety is anxious reveals itself as that in the face of which it is anxious — namely, Being-in-the-world.’<sup>145</sup>

‘Conscience’ [*Gewissen*] is also an *existentiale* that bears a close relation to anxiety and falling. As an *existentiale*, conscience does not refer to what is normally understood as ‘conscience’, namely a moral voice that guides human beings in accordance with societal norms and behaviours. Instead, this everyday experience of conscience conceals a more primordial ‘guilt’ [*Schuld*] that subsists within Dasein.<sup>146</sup>

In certain epiphanic experiences, Dasein is able to hear an authentic call of conscience. In this experience, a human being can come to understand not their guilt for this or that particular immoral action, but the guilt of having to exist in the first place. This foundational guilt stems from the fact that human beings did not choose to be born, yet must lead the life they have been thrown into. ‘Although it has not laid that basis itself, it reposes

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<sup>144</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 229.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

in the weight of it, which is made manifest to it as a burden by Dasein's mood.'<sup>147</sup> Dasein must continue to live, despite not being the cause of itself. This sense of 'not being there' at its own beginning — of not being self-originating — comes to the fore in primordial 'guilt'. It is a notness, or guilt, that is existentially constitutive for human life. In other words, human beings are 'Guilty!' in their very being.

Finally, 'being-towards-death' [*Sein zum Tode*]<sup>148</sup> is an *existentiale*. Human beings generally misperceive death, in order to avoid the sheer individuality of one's own death. Through collective, public life, human beings share in a common understanding of death as something that happens to 'people' without truly recognising that it will happen to them too. In this way, instead of acknowledging that I will die, Dasein says, 'one dies'. Even though this constitutes a misunderstanding of the 'phenomenon' of death, it provides a more palatable orientation towards it. In this state, Dasein actively tries to forget the individuality and certainty of its own eventual non-being. Thus, 'being-towards-death' is an existential state that human beings are always in.<sup>149</sup>

These different *existentialia* which, as co-foundational, form the basis of human existence in *Being and Time* are the object of fundamental ontology. They constitute the necessary conditions for the possibility of any human experience.<sup>150</sup> It is important to remember that, for Heidegger, all these *existentialia* are 'equiprimordial' [*Gleichursprünglich*], that is co-originary and co-fundamental. In this sense, human beings

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>148</sup> For further clarification, *Sein zum Tode*, or 'Being-towards-death', can be distinguished from *Zu-Ende-Sein*, which Macquarrie and Robinson translate as 'Being-at-an-end'. The latter term signifies the actual moment of demise, the point at which Dasein no longer is, whereas *Sein zum Tode* is an existential state that Dasein always inhabits in existence. This is because as long as Dasein is, it lives with a conscious or latent awareness of its own finitude.

<sup>149</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 299.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

exhibit all these *existentialia* at all times as long as they exist. Dasein cannot be said to be conditioned by one particular *existentiale* and not others in any given human experience. They are always co-present in a fundamental unity.

This is the unity Heidegger designates in the technical term ‘Being-in-the-world’ [*In-der-Welt-sein*]. ‘Being-in’ [*In-Sein*] refers to the *existentialia* state-of-mind, understanding, and discourse, ‘world’ [*Welt*] refers to the referential totalities of equipment that human beings exist within. Insofar as Dasein is thrown into the world, manifest in its state-of-mind, and directed towards future possibilities, evident in its capacity for understanding, the entire human existential constitution can be shown to be woven together in this term, ‘Being-in-the-world’.<sup>151</sup> The name Heidegger gives to this unity is ‘care’ [*Sorge*].<sup>152</sup> Care is the unity of all

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> This word and concept are difficult to translate and define in *Being and Time*. In English, ‘care’ can have connotations of having a concerned attitude to others, or treating others with tenderness or special attention. Actually these are only specific modes of ‘care’ in Heidegger’s sense. Rather than referring, in particular, to ‘kind’ actions, ‘care’ expresses the unity of Dasein’s existential constitution, and reflects its capacity to comport itself meaningfully in the world and with others. It names a dominant *existentiale* that unifies and expresses all other *existentialia* within itself. It is the meaning of existence. Heidegger uses the terms ‘*Sorge*’ (care), ‘*Fürsorge*’ (‘solicitude’), and ‘*Besorgen*’ (‘concern’) in *Being and Time*. As the etymology would suggest, these are indeed connected concepts, and each of them, rather than referring specifically to a moral way of relating to others, point to the broader capacity to understandingly comport oneself in the world. Generally ‘*Fürsorge*’ is used in *Being and Time*, to refer to Dasein’s capacity to comport itself towards other Daseins, ‘*Besorgen*’ refers to Dasein’s concerned dealings with equipment, and ‘care’ refers to the unity of the existential constitution, and Dasein’s general capacity to be ‘there’, existing in the world: ‘Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care [*Sorge*], Being-alongside the ready-to-hand could be taken in our previous analyses as *concern* [*Besorgen*], and Being with the Dasein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as solicitude [*Fürsorge*].’ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 237. [Also see footnotes in *Being and Time*, p. 83 for ‘*Besorgen*’ and p. 157 for ‘*Fürsorge*’] Heidegger appears to deliberately leave the concept of ‘care’ ambiguous. Since ‘care’ refers to human existentiality as a whole, it is difficult to provide a more exact definition. Regardless, for my purposes, the fact that it is intended to constitute a unity of all *existentialia* is the key point to bear in mind.

the above *existentialia*. ‘Dasein’s Being reveals itself as care.’<sup>153</sup>

#### 1.4.1 Living the Meaning of Being

In everyday life, Dasein is conditioned by *existentialia* without being aware of itself as conditioned. However, Heidegger states, there are lived experiences where Dasein can break through to its deeper existentiality in certain extraordinary ways.<sup>154</sup> Whereas earlier, I described the existential conditions for possibility which each Dasein *is* at all times, now I refer to particular ways in which Dasein can encounter these existential conditions in a more fundamental sense. In other words, Dasein can live the meaning of Being.

It is not enough to simply ‘know’ that human beings are structured according to such-and-such existential categories. Heidegger rejects any ‘categorical’ understanding of Dasein as primarily determinative. Since existence precedes essence, existential phenomenology demands possibilities of primordial disclosure of existential structures in lived experience, rather than through abstract thinking: ‘The kind of Being which belongs to this disclosedness [*Dasein*] is constituted by state-of-mind and understanding. Is there in Dasein an understanding state-of-mind in which Dasein has been disclosed to itself in some distinctive way?’<sup>155</sup>

As I have already mentioned in the preamble, epiphanies constitute the distinctive state through which characters in Dostoevskii’s fiction can access *existentialia*. I provide a more detailed discussion of epiphany later in this introduction.<sup>156</sup> In this subsection, however, I summarily describe how, according to Heidegger, Dasein can access its deeper existentiality in lived experience.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>154</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991), p. 33.

<sup>155</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 226.

<sup>156</sup> See section 1.5, ‘Epiphany’, of this thesis.

For Heidegger, the route to accessing a fundamental understanding of Dasein's existentiality turns out to be the state-of-mind or mood of 'anxiety'.<sup>157</sup> In everyday life, Dasein is absorbed in the world. It forgets its fundamental nature and instead distracts itself from its dealings in the world and with others. In anxiety, however, this possibility of avoiding its own existentiality is stripped away from Dasein.

This is because anxiety, unlike other emotions such as fear, elation, anger, has no direct object. It is something that strikes as if out of nowhere. Anxiety is not really anxious 'about' a particular human possibility. It is in fact 'about' nothing. The non-relational nature of anxiety strips away the world and its distractions, leaving over only the empty remainder — Dasein, who is still 'there' in anxiety, trying to make sense of this experience, but unable to do so in terms of the world. Thus, all that is left over is man's capacity to pursue, though without a world in which he can pursue.

The inability to meaningfully comport oneself in the world in anxiety means that Dasein is confronted by something resembling a living death. The nullity of such an experience is, for Heidegger, a primordial disclosure of the possibility of not 'being-there', of Dasein's radically individuated, and ever-possible death. Such an experience reveals Dasein's existentiality, its Being as a thrown 'potentiality-for-being' and allows it to live the meaning of Being.<sup>158</sup>

In this thesis, 'anxiety' and important related Heideggerian *existentialia*, namely 'Being-towards-death' or 'guilt', come to the fore in my interpretations of *Demons* and *Crime and Punishment*. However, these themes are also evident in Dostoevskii's broader post-Siberian oeuvre. They can be found in Ippolit's attempted suicide and Myshkin's recollections concerning the temporal experiences of people awaiting execution in *The Idiot*

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<sup>157</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 233.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

(1868-69), for example. It is also quite feasible to suggest that Ivan Karamazov too suffers from existential guilt in a call of deeper conscience during his conversation with the devil. Thus, there is a broad correlation apparent between the *existentialia* of anxiety and guilt and the epiphanic states undergone or retold by a variety of characters in Dostoevskii's later novels.

I have already stated that Morson and Bakhtin read Dostoevskii as depicting real-life *existentialia* in his fiction. Yet both these commentators also find in Dostoevskii's fiction artistic images depicting experiences where characters live the meaning of Being. Morson presents the possibility of living the meaning of open temporality by fostering a sense of the middle realm of different genuine possibilities, which could have occurred but did not, and acting with an understanding of the 'unavailability of final answers' as Konstantin Levin does in *Anna Karenina* or by gaining a 'belief in small acts of prosaic goodness, in ordinary decency guided by neither theory nor religious visions but by practical reason' as Zosima espouses in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example.<sup>159</sup>

Bakhtin identifies a range of related *existentialia* in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 'Dialogue', for instance, is a necessary condition of human life for Bakhtin:

To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end [...]  
Everything in Dostoevsky's novels tends toward dialogue [...] Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 269; *A New Word*, pp. 108-10.

<sup>160</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 252.

To this could be added the ideas of freedom and unfinalizability,<sup>161</sup> which are also *existentialia*, and even the broader idea of polyphony, which Bakhtin defines as a plurality of independent and unmerged voices that cannot be reduced to a single ideological denominator.<sup>162</sup>

When Bakhtin identifies these concepts at play in Dostoevskii's novels, he is describing the necessary conditions of human existence, as Dostoevskii depicts them, even though characters do not identify them in such terms. All these *existentialia* are related to one another — polyphony requires dialogism and unfinalizability to resist the tendency towards closure and univocity of meaning. These are indeed the dominant *existentialia* in Bakhtin's Dostoevskii, and they are lived through in the environment of the novels, which is marked by characters' dialogicity and unfinalizability in their polyphonic interactions with others.

However, Bakhtin also recognises particular carnivalesque events in Dostoevskii's fiction where 'life [is] drawn out of its usual rut' and reveals something fundamental about the human condition.<sup>163</sup> Berdiaev, before Bakhtin, had already sensed that Dostoevskii was a Heraclitan thinker: 'There was a dash of the spirit of Heraclitus in him: everything is heat and motion, opposition and struggle.'<sup>164</sup> Heraclitus opposes the idea that there is a single self-subsistent substance at the origin of all things, insisting instead that things are in a constant state of transformational flux.<sup>165</sup> This is why Plato presents Heraclitus as saying that one can

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<sup>161</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, pp. 271-72.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>164</sup> Berdyaev, p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> Daniel Graham, 'Heraclitus', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://iep.utm.edu/heraclit/>> [accessed 28 May 2020].

never step in the same river twice.<sup>166</sup> Heraclitus, like Heidegger, Bakhtin and Dostoevskii, implies that change, transformation and becoming are at the core of human life.

The transformational flux underpinning human life is precisely the *existential* disclosed in the carnivalesque event in Dostoevskii's fiction, according to Bakhtin.

The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king [...]. Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world — the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal.<sup>167</sup>

Bakhtin makes it unequivocally clear that this is an actual condition of life, 'a living sense of the world, expressed in the concretely sensuous forms [...] of the ritual act', or that this carnivalesque impulse allows 'the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves'.<sup>168</sup> Thus, the carnival is a transposition of an existential condition of real human life into literary form.

It expresses 'the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position.' It can be taken as a necessary consequence of finitude. The cycle of birth and death, and the process of creative transformation, transposed into artistic form in the spirit of the carnival, underpin and often undermine the produced forms of structure and order in human life. Bakhtin appears to argue that, in the rituals of the carnival in real-life, and in their depiction in literary form in carnivalesque scenes in Dostoevskii's novels, participants are

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 124.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-24.



living the meaning of this *existentiale*, expressing the ‘joyful relativity’ and constantly transformative power underlying reified forms of human life.

Although Caryl Emerson and Corrigan have already identified the reductive nature of Bakhtin’s characterisation of the carnival,<sup>169</sup> I am not seeking to demonstrate the validity of Bakhtin’s concept, but to show how some of the most prominent commentators on Dostoevskii are also, implicitly, interpreting Dostoevskii through a methodology that shares much with existential phenomenology. Though their projects are very different from my own, their approaches demonstrate the robust and flexible ways in which existential phenomenology can be applied to Dostoevskii’s fiction, and suggest that Dostoevskii is indeed seeking to identify the myriad conditions making up human life, as well as presenting artistic images within which characters primordially experience these conditions.

One of the central differences from my approach is that each of these thinkers, including Heidegger, appears to take a particular, or a small collection of, *existentialia* for the whole. Morson’s work is centred around the concept of ‘open temporality’ and this is the key *existentiale* he uncovers in Dostoevskii. Arguably all of Bakhtin’s identified *existentialia* follow from the dialogic nature of human life. In the following subsection, I explain that Heidegger’s prioritisation of the *existentiale* of the ‘ahead-of-itself’ in the experience of anxiety, also appears to do damage to the presumed equiprimordiality of *existentialia* in the human constitution.

I do not insist that the *existentialia* identified in Dostoevskii’s fiction over the course of this thesis is a comprehensive list. Indeed, I am very much open to the possibility that there is a range of other insights into the fundamental human condition in the novels that have not yet even been considered or imagined by commentators, including myself. But I do insist that

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<sup>169</sup> Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 164-167; Corrigan, pp. 111-14.

these *existentialia* ought not to be reduced to a single dominant *existentiale* that contains and defines them all. Instead they ought to be considered to be co-originary in the human constitution. In this way, existential phenomenology can be regarded as a methodology with much further potential for understanding Dostoevskii and other implicitly existentialist works of literature that may work in a similar vein.

#### 1.4.2 Equiprimordiality

In ‘care’, Dasein is ‘ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-a-world’. In this term, Heidegger has merged various *existentialia*: understanding projection is captured in the ‘ahead-of-itself’; being-oneself and mood are represented in Being ‘in’; thrownness or state-of-mind in the ‘already’ and worldhood in ‘world’. These *existentialia* are inter-existent and inter-dependent. They are co-foundational and thus contain no hierarchy within themselves in terms of the Being of human beings. ‘Care’, in this sense, represents the unity of human existence. ‘Care’ gains its primarily philosophical justification from the phenomenal reality of human beings insofar as, in the human constitution, all *existentialia* are co-originary.

If the entire human existential constitution, ‘care’, is revealed in anxiety, it ought to follow that no particular *existentiale* possesses a hierarchically superior or ‘more fundamental’ place than the others: all ought to be ‘equiprimordial’ or co-fundamental in the experience of anxiety, as I have stated above. However, even when ‘care’ is initially explained, and the equiprimordiality of various *existentialia* is emphasized, it is clear that the ‘ahead-of-itself’ or Dasein’s projective capacity for pursuing its possibilities in the world gains priority. ‘Yet the primary item in care is the “ahead-of-itself” and this means that in every case Dasein exists for the sake of itself. “As long as it is”, right to its end, it comports itself towards its potentiality-for-Being.’<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 279.

By ‘ahead-of-itself’, Heidegger means that human beings are always directed towards some future possibility. This is observably true insofar as there does not appear to be any human activity that does not involve some kind of future directedness. Even in meditation, where I decidedly attempt to stop ‘thinking’ about the future, and escape the pervasiveness of my own ‘stream-of-consciousness’ thought, I am still consciously attempting to get to the point of not thinking futurally. Thus, even the attempt to not think futurally implies a directedness towards a particular future possibility.

Heidegger’s justification for the priority of the ‘ahead-of-itself’ appears to be that it is a fundamental *existentiale*, without which there could be nothing else. But could Dasein project understandingly towards its future possibilities if the world did not ‘matter’ to it in a mood? Could Dasein project into the future if it were not *equally* thrown into the world? Should anxiety, where the world, in a sense, disappears, be conceived as the fundamental truth of worldhood? Does recovering one’s ‘ownmost’ possibility do justice to Dasein as internally other-related, or as ‘being-with’? Does not equiprimordially, which is, by definition, the co-fundamentality of *existentialia* preclude the possibility of regarding one as determinative for all the others?

Heidegger structures the experience of anxiety in this overdetermined manner because he has already proclaimed the priority of certain *existentialia*. Thus far, I have only focussed on the priority of the ‘ahead-of-itself’, yet there is another *existentiale* that maintains a particular priority. This is the *existentiale* of ‘being-oneself’, which Heidegger often refers to as ‘mineness’ [*Jemeinigkeit*].<sup>171</sup> This *existentiale* is the first one Heidegger mentions, and it is clear that it possesses a certain fundamentality. Heidegger states that Being-with objects and with other Daseins is grounded in the fundamental mode of Being-one’s-Self.<sup>172</sup> In other

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<sup>171</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 68.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

words, although Dasein is existentially always in a 'world', and is there 'with' other Daseins, even when they are not there, Dasein's relation to the world and to other Dasein's is primarily grounded in its 'mineness', or its 'Being-one's-Self'.

Like Reiner Schürmann and Simon Critchley, John Richardson recognises the priority of 'mineness' in *Being and Time*. Richardson suggests that authenticity 'may well seem too self-centred an ideal.' He laments that Heidegger gives little attention to more satisfying relations to others, 'not to love or friendship, for example'.<sup>173</sup> Schürmann and Critchley go much further. They argue that Heidegger's emphasis of 'mineness' and 'futurity' or 'projection' indicate a fundamental affinity with National Socialism.<sup>174</sup>

In this context, as avid readers of Heidegger, Schürmann and Critchley wish to recover the philosopher's work and re-claim it in the name of a less diabolical politics. The authors insist that they achieve this through Heidegger's own work.<sup>175</sup> That is, they do not use some external criteria by which to re-evaluate Heidegger, but re-interpret *Being and Time* in a way that is plausibly evidenced by the text itself. They do this by changing the 'accent' on the fundamental experience of one's own Being. Rather than placing the emphasis on futurity and projection, Schürmann and Critchley place the emphasis on thrownness.<sup>176</sup>

Thus, developing Schürmann and Critchley's line of reinterpretation, using Dostoevskii's novels, I wish to pose the possibility that there exist other distinctive routes, apart from the one offered by anxiety, through which Dasein can gain attestation of its existentiality. In these other experiences, a variety of *existentialia* can establish their 'priority' within an equiprimordial framework, just as the capacity of the 'ahead-of-itself' and

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<sup>173</sup> John Richardson, *Heidegger* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 168-69.

<sup>174</sup> Reiner Schürmann and Simon Critchley, *On Heidegger's 'Being and Time'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 139.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

‘mineness’ do as a result of anxiety. I do not say that Heideggerian anxiety is impossible, but that there may be a wider range of paths to primordial experiences of existential phenomena than are presented in *Being and Time*. In each of these attestations, an equiprimordiality is maintained at the same time as a priority for a particular *existential* is established.

It is such a polyphonic arrangement of epiphanic experiences of *existentialia* that Dostoevskii, years before Heidegger, perceived: the possibility of living one’s own Being, but living primarily a particular aspect of it. I call it polyphonic insofar as these various epiphanies, none of which can be reduced to each other in ontological meaning, suggest a ‘multi-voiced’<sup>177</sup> work, where a variety of centres are not reduced to a single common denominator. There is no ‘master’ *existential* like ‘care’ unifying the features. The only unity they enjoy is that each of them is reflected in the rhythms of human life itself.

Such presumed equiprimordiality of *existentialia* in Dostoevskii’s form of phenomenology does not mean that a particular *existential* will not establish a priority in terms of its moral quality, but that in ontological terms, each *existential* remains irreducible to others. Since all *existentialia* are co-foundational, Dasein can have attestations of its internal other-relatedness or ‘being-with; its ‘being-towards-death’; ‘guilt’; ‘open temporality’. In other words, in Dostoevskii’s existential phenomenology, Heideggerian anxiety, and the primordial confrontation of mortality it evokes, is but one of the many possible types of epiphanic attestation available to human experience.

### 1.4.3 Threshold Moments

As has already been mentioned a few times, primordial experiences of *existentialia* occur in ‘epiphanies’. In many ways, ‘epiphanies’, in the sense that I use the term, can be seen as a form of, what Bakhtin calls, ‘threshold moments’. These moments concentrate

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<sup>177</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 42.

action at ‘points of crisis, at turning points and catastrophes, where the inner significance of a moment is equal to a “billion years,” that is, when the moment loses its temporal restrictiveness’.<sup>178</sup> Essentially, Bakhtin regards threshold moments as indicating the possibility of ‘life taken out of life’.<sup>179</sup> Living on the threshold, characters are neither entirely in historical time, nor entirely beyond it. The threshold experience is a liminal experience, as the Latin roots of the word ‘liminal’ (*limen*, *limin* or ‘threshold’) suggest.

What I am describing is a limit-experience. It is a mode of revelation. It allows for ‘the creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth’.<sup>180</sup> Dreams, visions, seizures, premonitions, shared moments of recognition, delirious wanderings allow characters to glimpse at that which underlies life. However, since these visions appear in liminal spaces, the revelations are enveloped in an atmosphere of ‘unfinalizability’. Readers remain unsure whether to regard them as instances of genuine disclosure or simply the erroneous byproduct of mental illness and delusions. In other words, such moments do not reflect a settled truth, as they carry characters into the realm of the seemingly fantastic.

This thesis argues that in threshold moments, characters come into contact with deeper existentiality. They experience the possibility of a world entirely governed by the particular *existential* that has gripped their personality during the narrative and in the epiphanic moment itself. Alesha experiences the possibility of a world governed by Dasein’s ‘being-with’; Kirillov, one dominated by ‘being-towards-death’. In epiphanic time, characters gain a momentary revelation of an aspect of life that nonetheless appears to them to be all of life. In this sense, in epiphanies, especially what I call ‘ecstatic’ epiphanies, life becomes ‘an

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<sup>178</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 149.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

unclosed whole of life itself, life poised on the threshold'.<sup>181</sup> It attests to the possibility of wholeness in each aspect of life, thus overflowing its own limits in the moment.

The whole also remains 'unclosed' insofar as it does not end time. The character never actually 'transcends' life. He/She experiences instead a moment in life indicating the possibility of contact with the grounds of life. Although characters sometimes occupy epiphanic states for extended periods of time, as Raskol'nikov does in *Crime and Punishment*, usually, time spent on the threshold does not end narrative time. Characters must enter onto the threshold from narrative time and, more often than not, return from the threshold back into narrative time. Epiphanies do not conclude a character's development, they do not mark a point where characters, now completely aware of the meaning of Being, stop striving further for the truth. Such a state of self-completion would imply the end of processual existence.

Finite human time is fundamentally incompatible with such consummation, as an end to narrative time implies an end to life. In other words, threshold moments, or epiphanic states, though revealing primordial truths about human life, still ultimately maintain the human being who experiences them in a state of 'noncoincidence with himself',<sup>182</sup> in an unfinalizable state essential to finite human existence. I will now further delineate the concept of epiphany, and explore its significance in Dostoevskii's post-Siberian oeuvre, after a brief note explaining the grounds for assuming the comparability of Dostoevskii's existential phenomenology with the Heideggerian project in *Being and Time*.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 63. I define what I mean by 'ecstatic' epiphanies in the second half of this introduction below.

<sup>182</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, pp. 116-17.

#### 1.4.4 Note on Dostoevskii and Heidegger

At this point it might be pertinent to raise the question of the comparability of specifically Dostoevskii's fiction and Heidegger's philosophy. For Heidegger, existential truths are revealed not only through philosophy and in lived experience, but also in myth, poetry, art and architecture.

As mentioned previously, 'care' is one of the most significant concepts in *Being and Time*, serving to unify all the various *existentialia* in the work. Heidegger uses a Latin fable from Hyginus to introduce and explain the concept of 'care'. He translates this fable in *Being and Time*. The fable is about gods — 'Care', 'Jupiter', and 'Earth' — giving life to humankind. It begins with 'Care' crafting or shaping a human being out of earthly material. 'Jupiter' provides the being with spirit and 'Earth' furnished the matter [clay] that 'Care' used to shape the human form. Each of the gods lays claim to the created being. Saturn turns arbiter and decides:

Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at its death; and since you, Earth, have given its body, you shall receive its body. But since 'Care' first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives.<sup>183</sup>

Allegorically, the fable does not locate the source of human life originally in body or mind/spirit, but instead it takes 'man as compounded of body (earth) and spirit [...], in care this entity has the "source" of its Being'.<sup>184</sup> 'Care', which forms the entity, gives expression to the unity of the *existentialia* conditioning human experience — the 'shape' of Dasein's

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<sup>183</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 242-43.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.



experience. It is the ‘source’ of human concerned engagement in the world, of human life. Dasein’s praxis-based human comportment towards possibilities in the world is what makes any abstract conceptualization of a subject-object or mind-body dualism possible in the first place. Heidegger argues that the existence of this ancient fable ‘make[s] plain that our [Heidegger’s] existential Interpretation is not a mere fabrication, but that as an ontological “construction” it is well grounded and has been sketched out beforehand in elemental ways’.<sup>185</sup>

In other words, the ancient fable suggests that ‘care’ is deeply embedded in Dasein’s existential life itself, and therefore has appeared before in ‘elemental ways’ over the course of human history. In this case, it was sketched out in the form of a myth. Heidegger’s interpretation of this myth provides one of the grounds for his conceptual elaboration of what ‘care’, in existential terms, is. This emphasizes both that myth is capable of communicating philosophical truth in itself, and that Heidegger uses myth hermeneutically in his philosophy.

In later Heidegger, not only myth, but the poetry of Hölderlin, the paintings of Van Gogh, ancient Greek architecture and indeed Heidegger’s own poetry are used as examples of art within which, in Heidegger’s words, there is a ‘happening of truth’<sup>186</sup> as historical-existential truths reveal themselves to human aesthetic experience. Without going into detail about the specific philosophical conclusions in later Heidegger, which bear little relevance to my project, it is clear that Heidegger’s use of art to reveal fundamental existential truths demonstrates that, in his view, aesthetic works are capable of giving expression to truths disclosed in philosophy. This raises the fundamental question, if certain types of poetry, art,

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>186</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ in *Basic Writings*, trans. by David Krell (Cornwall: Routledge, 2007), pp. 139-212 (p. 167).

sculpture, architecture and even myth can all reveal fundamental existential truths, then why not also prose?

In fact, Heidegger does refer to prose at a crucial point in *Being and Time*. Precisely when he is explaining the existential phenomenon of Being-towards-death, Heidegger states in a footnote that Tolstoi's story, 'The Death of Ivan Il'ich' (1886), accurately presents the 'phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having "someone die"'.<sup>187</sup> This demonstrates once again that prose, like the other art forms discussed above, is also capable of revealing the existentially determinative phenomena that underlie daily human life.

From the above, it can already be seen that Heidegger suggests that art is capable of communicating fundamental philosophical truth. In later life, Heidegger's own philosophy became more poetic because of poetry's said capacity for philosophical revelation. I have also shown that he believed literature specifically to be capable of illustrating and deconstructing fundamental existential phenomenon.

Finally, I should mention that I am not claiming that Dostoevskii was a dominant, or even an important, influence on *Being and Time*. Heidegger held Dostoevskii in high regard, had read some of his work and, by some accounts, had a picture of Dostoevskii on his desk.<sup>188</sup> There are other connections that, briefly, merit mention. In a later edition of his early writings, Heidegger cites Dostoevskii as one among a 'small, selective enumeration' of authors who acted as 'stimuli' for his development between 1900 and 1914.<sup>189</sup> Although, in a letter dated 28 August 1918, Heidegger also asks his wife, Elfride, to send him a copy of *The*

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<sup>187</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 495.

<sup>188</sup> Ulrich Schmid, 'Heidegger and Dostoevsky: Philosophy and Politics', *Dostoevsky Studies*, 15 (2011), 37-45 (p. 37).

<sup>189</sup> George Pattison, *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 62; Martin Heidegger, *Frühe Schriften. Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978-forthcoming), 1:56. (Translation from Pattison).

*Brothers Karamazov*,<sup>190</sup> there appear to be no references to Dostoevskii's fiction in Heidegger's philosophical writings. However, Heidegger does highly praise and recommend Dostoevskii's *political* writings to Elfride in a letter dated 28 July 1920.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, in the 1940 lectures on European nihilism, Heidegger offers an extended quotation from the foreword Dostoevskii wrote for the printed version of his 1880 speech on Pushkin.<sup>192</sup> Certainly, it is strange that, despite citing Dostoevskii as a formative influence, Heidegger does not refer to the Russian author more often in his writings. However, readers may also be aware that Heidegger famously avoided mentioning important influences in his writings — the under-citing of Kierkegaard's writing in Heidegger's oeuvre being a prime example.<sup>193</sup>

I provide this historical information only for very general contextualisation. I wish to make clear that I am not claiming that Heidegger was influenced by Dostoevskii's fiction, or that they are trying to say the same thing. I do identify some critical correlations in ideas between Heidegger and Dostoevskii's most celebrated works, while, at the same time, insisting that their specific forms of existentialism are not identical. With regards to these correlations, I subscribe to a theory of polygenesis. I assume that in distant parts of the world, in different time-periods, similar philosophical or literary expressions can be produced, without necessitating a direct, causal relationship between the texts. Apart from these thematic correlations, the question of their biographical similarities — ethno-national, religious, or otherwise — is not one that this thesis seeks to address, and doing so would take readers in a direction not at all relevant to my work.<sup>194</sup> Instead, my aim, throughout this

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<sup>190</sup> Pattison, p. 70.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 66; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. by F.A. Capuzzi, ed. by D. Farrell Krell, 4 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 4:3-4.

<sup>193</sup> Pattison, p. 67.

<sup>194</sup> Indeed, this could also mark an important difference between Ulrich Schmid's work, on the connections between Heidegger and Dostoevskii, and my own. In Schmid's article, he correctly

thesis, is to make use of Heidegger's philosophical methodology of existential phenomenology in order to better understand Dostoevskii's own form of literary existentialism.

#### 1.4.5 Why Heidegger?

Although I have now established the formal compatibility of Heidegger's *philosophy* and Dostoevskii's *fiction*, readers may still question why I have chosen Heidegger ahead of other existentialist thinkers. The core reason is that Heidegger provides the most philosophically rigorous model of existential phenomenology available. No other thinker presents as broad a catalogue of *existentialia* or as thorough a methodology for discovering them in everyday human experience as Martin Heidegger.

In brief, Heidegger's methodology in *Being and Time* involves outlining various necessary conditions of human experience; hermeneutically discovering their self-evidence in Dasein's everyday life; and articulating various ways in which Dasein can primordially live through these *existentialia* in privileged moments of authenticity (during epiphanic experiences, as I call them). Heidegger's project, therefore, provides readers with a clear blueprint of what the practice of existential phenomenology consists in. Since his

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identifies biographical parallels between Dostoevskii and Heidegger's thinking on ideological, and cultural-historical matters. In this context, he presents their shared endorsement of native soil nationalism, with respect to their own nations. Thus, Schmid's article is principally concerned with the personal views of the two writers, rather than interpreting their philosophical or fictional works. Although Schmid suggests that the writers' ideologies seep through quite definitively into the works, he does not interpret the works themselves. Thus Schmid's article presents the manner in which Dostoevskii and Heidegger understood their roles as articulators of national destiny, and as cultural commentators exploring the nature of 'uprootedness' in certain circles in their respective societies. Indeed, by seeking to present these authors as similar in this fashion, there is always the danger that the differences in their outlook may be suppressed in favour of making more localised comparisons. In contrast to Schmid, my thesis has a distinctly existential focus. Thus, Heidegger's endorsement of Dostoevskii's personal political ideology possesses, at best, a very tangential relevance here.

methodology is so explicitly articulated, and rigorously followed throughout the text, it is easier to verify whether another thinker is engaging in a similar practice.

In this subsection, I shall briefly consider other existentialist figures in order to contextualise the choice of Heidegger for this project. It is worth noting already that, since Heidegger is the founding father of this discipline, his thinking influenced almost all the other existentialists mentioned in this subsection. His originary position in the discipline, perhaps, is another reason why Heidegger's philosophy may be the most appropriate opening route into existential phenomenology.

One of Heidegger's most famous inheritors was Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Time* heavily influenced Sartre.<sup>195</sup> Yet Sartre's project appears to take a distinctly different direction than his predecessor's. As is clear from Sartre's lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), he is primarily concerned with developing an explicitly 'atheistic existentialism'.<sup>196</sup> Sartre cites the Heideggerian idea of existence preceding essence but does so primarily in order to justify a glorification of humanity's power of will in an age stripped of the illusion of God.

Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, ed. by John Kulka, trans. by Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 22.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

Sartre is much more interested in existentialism as an ethic that venerates the human above the idea of the divine. In my view, this is not Heidegger's primary aim, even in *Being and Time*. The existential analytic of *Dasein* seeks to uncover a fundamental ontology of human existence, and is only secondarily concerned with developing an ethics of authenticity. Even then, this ethic does not make any explicit judgements about whether one ought to believe in God or not. Indeed, such a question never becomes a central topic of discussion in *Being and Time* and no prescription whatsoever is outlined in this regard, in the entire work. Needless to say, Heidegger would not agree with the assumption that, since existence precedes essence, 'we have no choice but to rely on our instincts'.<sup>198</sup> Nor did Heidegger, later in life, agree with the simplistic inversion of Platonic metaphysics that Sartre's ethic appears to advocate for.<sup>199</sup> In this sense, although Sartre attempts to align his 'atheistic existentialism' with Heidegger's existential phenomenology, the latter's task, even in *Being and Time*, is very different from Sartre's.

Sartre's philosophy appears centrally preoccupied with doing away with God. He cites a rather misleading 'quotation' from Dostoevskii in support of this aim.

Dostoyevsky once wrote: 'If God does not exist, everything is permissible.' This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on — neither within or without. [...] In other words, there is no determinism — man is free, man is freedom. If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>199</sup> Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Krell, pp. 213-266. It is worth noting that, at this point in his career, Heidegger is transitioning into a very different form of philosophy, and his various objections to Sartre here can be seen as building the justification for the turn in his own work.

orders that can legitimize our conduct. [...] Neither do existentialists believe that man can find refuge in some given sign that will guide him on earth; they think that man interprets the sign as he pleases and that man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man.<sup>200</sup>

Although Sartre's quotation captures the gist of Ivan Karamazov's central axiom in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is worth pointing out that nowhere in the novel is this exact phrase cited. Setting this somewhat facetious point aside, it is clear that Sartre is championing Ivan Karamazov's perspective on the metaphysical question of God's existence and what it ought to entail for human ethics. Sartre's position is encapsulated in the advice he claims to have given a young student facing an ethical dilemma: 'You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world.'<sup>201</sup> It thus seems that Sartre's philosophy is, like Ivan Karamazov's ethic, advocating that, in the absence of God, and any valid transcendental signifier, all is permitted, and human beings are to embrace their autonomous wills and become creative authors of their own fate. Perhaps another way to put it would be that he is seeking to discover Ivan's 'man-God'.<sup>202</sup>

For the above reasons, it ought to be clear why Sartre's philosophy cannot provide an appropriate methodology through which to understand Dostoevskii's novels. The partiality of his philosophy, indicated in his 'atheistic existentialism' and his endorsement of Ivan Karamazov's perspective, suggests that he would not be able to supply as broad a framework as Heidegger's fundamental ontology of Dasein in *Being and Time* does, nor would Sartre's

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<sup>200</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 28-29.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>202</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 813-14, *PSS*, 15:83.

specific nihilistic ethics prove a suitable context for a mature and nuanced understanding of Dostoevskii's fiction.

Another famous existentialist worth mentioning here is Albert Camus. Like Sartre, Camus' existentialism seeks an ethics for a post-ethical age, for a world beyond consolation, beyond transcendently verifiable values and meaning. Camus desires a perspective from which it is possible to live truthfully in a universe stripped of its comforting illusions and hopes for redemptive truth.<sup>203</sup>

Camus' existentialism recognises that there is a 'wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart'.<sup>204</sup> Modernity, specifically, is marked by an intense recognition of the absurdity of humanity's relation to the world, which comprises of, on the one hand, an irrepressible human desire for meaning (a 'wild longing for clarity'), and, on the other, a senseless and irrational world.<sup>205</sup> In other words, the modern feeling of the absurd, for Camus, is produced by this discordance between humanity's impulse to strive for meaning, and its burgeoning awareness of the world's meaninglessness.

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost

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<sup>203</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 7. First published in 1942.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>205</sup> 'But never, perhaps, at any time has the attack on reason been more violent than in ours.' Ibid., p. 17. In support of this argument, Camus cites a range of modern thinkers including Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Shestov, Scheler and others in this passage.



home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.<sup>206</sup>

Camus finds that, although several modern minds have attempted to think the limits of the rational by bringing forth images of the absurd, they have all also sought, in one way or another, to transcend the fundamentally absurd nature of the world, through some palliative measure — hope; subjectivity; negation and repossession of the absurd quality inherent in existence. For Camus,

The important thing [...] is not to be cured, but to live without one's ailments.

Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition.<sup>207</sup>

Camus wants to find a way to continue 'living in that state of the absurd'.<sup>208</sup> He does not wish to leap beyond the absurd into a comforting meaningfulness, but 'to remain on that dizzying crest – that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge'.<sup>209</sup>

Camus discovers something like this in Dostoevskii. His interest in Dostoevskii is longstanding. Not only does he provide a detailed interpretation of Kirillov's suicide, he also staged a theatrical version of *Demons* in the 1950s.<sup>210</sup> In Kirillov's suicide, Camus senses 'the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 7. See also: 'The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.' Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 30. See also, 'Knowing whether or not one can live without appeal is all that interests me.' Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. iii.

absurd secret in all its purity'.<sup>211</sup> His only caveat with regards to Kirillov is that the character's decision to commit suicide is another attempt to escape the absurdity of the world. Nonetheless, he states that, 'probably no one so much as Dostoievsky has managed to give the absurd world such familiar and tormenting charms'.<sup>212</sup> Ultimately, though, Dostoevskii too falls short of Camus' challenge — Dostoevskii fails to remain on the 'dizzying crest' of the absurd insofar as his faith in immortality and the promised hope for redemption, written into Alesha's words in *The Brothers Karamazov*, negate the absurd.<sup>213</sup> As Camus puts it, 'Thus again, Kirillov's pistol rang out somewhere in Russia, but the world continued to cherish its blind hopes. Men did not understand "that"'.<sup>214</sup>

In brief, what Camus seeks to find in literature or in philosophy is an 'absurd ascesis'<sup>215</sup> — a way to live that conforms to the innate absurdity of the world. Though aspects of Dostoevskii can be productively read in this light, it would once again not afford readers the breadth of discussion possible through Heideggerian existential phenomenology. His reading of Dostoevskii is better informed than Sartre's. His conclusion that Dostoevskii's novel 'is not an absurd work [...] but a work that propounds the absurd problem'<sup>216</sup> could perhaps be the foundation of a coherent reading of Dostoevskii — one that would recapitulate, or add something to Shestov's well-established image of Dostoevskii, for instance. However, this thesis attempts to understand a diverse range of *existentialia* evident in Dostoevskii's fiction. In this context, Camus' framework may prove limiting as it would reduce my focus solely to *existentialia* that attest only the shadows of the 'absurd' in Dostoevskii.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

Sartre and Camus aim to imagine ways to live in a world stripped of God's meaning. I now turn to more religiously inclined existentialists. I can start with Paul Tillich, who was a contemporary of Sartre and Camus. It was during Tillich's time working on the theology faculty in Marburg University, where Heidegger's influence loomed large, that he first encountered and struggled against Heideggerian philosophy. Later in life, Tillich reflected on Heidegger's influence: 'It took years before I became fully aware of the impact of this encounter on my own thinking. I resisted, I tried to learn, I accepted the new ways of thinking even more than the answers it gave'.<sup>217</sup>

As Tillich's self-observation suggests, there is nuance to his relationship with existentialism. Although he accepts the 'new ways of thinking' existentialism reveals, he does not necessarily agree with the conclusions, or the 'answers', it provides. Apart from *Being and Time*, it is also important to note that influential existentialist works, such as Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), formed the intellectual context of the times in which Tillich must have been planning some of his most significant contributions to existentialism, including *Courage to Be* (1952). The intellectual and creative contexts of the times are particularly significant for Tillich, who was a Christian Apologist.

As an apologetic rather than kerygmatic theology, answering the contemporary situation, Tillich's theology must speak to man in both *existential* (from the

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<sup>217</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, ed. by F. Forrester Church (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 262. Cited in Daniel J. Peterson, *Tillich: A Brief Overview of the Life and Writings of Paul Tillich* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2013), p. 27.

ontological analysis of human existence related to Being) and *existentiell* (what affects man personally in his concrete life) terms.<sup>218</sup>

In other words, Tillich's systematic apologetics sought to analyse the human situation in contemporary society, and provide answers to the existential and spiritual questions that were emerging therein.

Indeed, Tillich felt that there was an important role for the theologian of culture to play in his own time.

Tillich began to explore what he characterised as a general malaise or sense of emptiness that had come to dominate parts of mid-twentieth century America and Europe. This development, he argued, was the result of a massive cultural transition occasioned by the unspeakable calamities of the previous decade as well as the emerging threat of atomic warfare.<sup>219</sup>

According to Tillich, a 'sacred void'<sup>220</sup> had opened up in society following the horrors of the Second World War. Theologians must adapt to the situation, and to the new modes of thinking (including existentialism) that were giving voice to this 'void' emerging in parts of Western consciousness.

Thus, for Tillich, existentialism fulfilled an important need of the times. It 'analysed the predicament of man and his world, and thereby has helped to rediscover the classic Christian

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<sup>218</sup> Thomas F. O'Meara, 'Tillich and Heidegger: A Structural Relationship', *Harvard Theological Review*, 61, (1968), 249-261 (p. 253).

<sup>219</sup> Peterson, p. 27.

<sup>220</sup> Peterson, p. 27 & Oswald Bayer, 'Tillich as systematic theologian', in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 18-36 (p. 32).

interpretation of human existence'.<sup>221</sup> By interpreted Dasein in terms of human finitude, anxiety, absurdity, meaninglessness as the thinkers mentioned earlier had done, existentialism had touched upon the feeling of 'emptiness, loss, and despair'<sup>222</sup> that emerges from recognition of humankind's separation from God.

Separation is indeed a condition of human existence for Tillich. 'The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself.'<sup>223</sup> Yet, for Tillich, a person can, by recognising the anxiety and seeming meaninglessness at the core of existence, re-establish a relationship with God, with the one from whom the individual has been estranged. Thus in spite of the threat of meaninglessness, its recognition in modernity opens up the possibility of recovering meaning. What is required for this recovery is a particular form of courage. This is the courage of one who senses the meaninglessness of life, and yet, 'is able to say 'yes' to life'.<sup>224</sup>

From the above, readers may sense that Tillich does indeed have much to offer to Dostoevskii criticism. There could be important parallels to recognise between Tillich's thought and Dostoevskii's, and Tillich's Christian-existentialist narratives could perhaps produce fruitful readings of the successful and unsuccessful conversion narratives in Dostoevskii's novels. However, it may also be apparent that Tillich cannot be simply categorised as an existentialist.

O'Meara suggests there are two central questions that occupy Western scholars of Tillich: 'whether Tillich is a theologian or a philosopher' and 'whether he is an existentialist,

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<sup>221</sup> O'Meara, p. 251.

<sup>222</sup> Peterson, p. 36.

<sup>223</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 2:44. Cited in Peterson, pp. 92-93.

<sup>224</sup> Peterson, p. 95.

an idealist, or, perhaps, both.<sup>225</sup> Some commentators suggest that despite his interest in existentialism, Tillich remains an essentialist: ‘Tillich remained above all an Idealist, a philosopher of spirit and meaning, and of the self-relation of the Unconditioned.’<sup>226</sup> Although the debate concerning the classification of Tillich’s work is too broad and deep to be carried out in full here, it is at least clear that the relationship between Tillich and existentialism is complex, and it is not at all a straightforward association to make. Thus, even though there may be room for further comparative study of Tillich’s philosophical theology and Dostoevskii’s fiction, such a work would perhaps not constitute a reading of Dostoevskii’s fiction through the lens of existential phenomenology. There is no doubt, at least, that a reading of Dostoevskii through Tillich would produce quite a different thesis than the one set forth in this work, and would likely be much more theological than existential-phenomenological, at its core.

I also briefly turn to Martin Buber. I am not sure whether it would be appropriate to categorise Buber as an existentialist. Although he is often termed to be one, he rejected the label himself.<sup>227</sup> The style of this work is clearly more poetic and aphoristic than straightforwardly philosophical and the methodology used is not existential-phenomenological in nature. At some level, it could perhaps be argued that the ‘I-Thou’ relation Buber identifies is intended as an *existentiale* — a necessary condition of human

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<sup>225</sup> O’Meara, p. 249.

<sup>226</sup> Christian Danz, ‘Tillich’s philosophy’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 173-189 (p. 186). See also, Bayer: ‘Tillich sees himself as being led towards ‘the boundary of idealism’, but he does not cross this boundary despite his simultaneous commitment to the truth of existentialism. This commitment, however, is not strong enough to place the identity premises, and with them essentialism, in any serious doubt.’ Bayer, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 30.

<sup>227</sup> Sarah Scott, ‘Martin Buber’, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/buber/>> [accessed 28 Jun. 2021].

experience.<sup>228</sup> For this to be true, the ‘I-Thou’ relation would have to be operative in every human experience. In this case, even when the Self perceives the other not as a ‘Thou’ but as a thing, or an ‘It’, a ‘Thou’ lies hidden, unperceived in this objectified relation.<sup>229</sup> Perhaps the *existentiale* Buber identifies is not the ‘I-Thou’ but the idea of *relation* itself. It appears to be the case that every human experience appears to involve a relation for Buber. ‘There is no I taken in itself, but only the I of the primary word I-Thou and the I of the primary word I-It.’<sup>230</sup>

Regardless, what is clear is that Buber is primarily concerned with the Self’s dialogic relation to otherness or alterity in its various spheres.<sup>231</sup> The reason that I have not included Buber in this thesis is that this is already a very important idea in Dostoevskii studies. In this thesis, I make use of Bakhtin, Girard and Levinas, all of who were deeply influenced by Dostoevskii, and indeed explored their own philosophical ideas through Dostoevskii’s fiction, either by writing entire commentaries on Dostoevskii or by importing key themes and leitmotifs from his fiction directly into their own philosophy. Levinas’ philosophy is also explicitly engaged in conversation with Heidegger’s, and therefore makes a keener interlocutor for Heideggerian ideas. In brief, there was no need to include Buber in this thesis as much complex theoretical work concerning the Self’s dialogic relation to others has already been deeply embedded into Dostoevskii studies as a whole.

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<sup>228</sup> ‘In each Thou we address the eternal Thou.’ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3. First published in 1923.

<sup>229</sup> ‘If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I-Thou to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things.’ Buber, p. 4.

<sup>230</sup> Buber, p. 1.

<sup>231</sup> Buber, p. 3.

## 1.5 What is Epiphany?

The most primordial layers of human life in Dostoevskii's novels are revealed in moments or states of epiphany. 'Epiphany', derived from the Greek '*epiphainesthai*', meaning to 'appear' or 'come into view', refers to moments of sudden and significant insight.<sup>232</sup>

Matthew McDonald defines epiphany as a 'sudden, abrupt and positive transformation that was profound and enduring'.<sup>233</sup> This appears to be the most universal definition of epiphany, correlating well with the original Greek sense of '*epiphainesthai*', and fitting well with William James' four traits of mystical experiences. Epiphanies are 'momentary experiences of transcendence',<sup>234</sup> in McDonald's terms. He also includes a table collating the most salient characteristics of epiphanies explored in the field of humanistic psychology. These traits are an antecedent state of anxiety; suddenness of the experience; a sense of personal transformation; illumination/insight; meaning making and its enduring nature.<sup>235</sup> The epiphanies I concern myself with manifest each of the above traits to varying degrees, although the sense of personal transformation is rarely a happy one for Dostoevskii's characters.

James identifies the key traits of what I term 'epiphanic' and what he terms 'mystical' experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). They include ineffability, transiency, passivity and a noetic quality. This 'mystical' (epiphanic) experience, for James, is ineffable because it is difficult to articulate. This quality makes these experiences 'more

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<sup>232</sup> Matthew McDonald, 'The Nature of Epiphanic Experience', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 48 (2008), 89-115 (p. 91).

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.



like states of feeling' than theoretical knowledge.<sup>236</sup> Epiphanies are transient; they are passing sensations. They involve passivity, which means that, during the experience, one feels held by 'a superior power'. Finally, they possess a 'noetic quality', in that the experience provides some insight; it signifies a disclosure of primordial reality.

Adapting James' definition in this way may raise the question: what is the difference between epiphanies and mystical experiences? This is primarily a theological question and beyond the remit of my thesis. However, I can provisionally state, largely through inferences drawn from James, Ninian Smart and Vladimir Lossky's book on mysticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church, that whereas a 'mystical experience' carries connotations of a moment of union with divinity reached through a deliberate process or practice, an epiphany, in this thesis, is intended simply to refer to a moment that possesses the four traits mentioned above.

Mystical experiences are nominally associated with the practice of mysticism. Smart identifies the rituals and practices involved in a variety of different mystical practices, which largely appear to aim at a relationship with God through the negation of the material world.<sup>237</sup> Lossky suggests that in the Orthodox Church, mystical experiences 'can only be gained in prayer and by prayer'.<sup>238</sup> I infer from this that, perhaps, mystical experiences can be classified as types of epiphanies — insofar as they are characterised by ineffability, transiency, passivity and possess a noetic quality — but not all epiphanies are mystical experiences. This is because the moment of epiphanic revelation does not necessitate a deliberate practice and can emerge, as if out of nowhere.

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<sup>236</sup> James, pp. 380-81.

<sup>237</sup> Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner, 1984), pp. 352-53, 386, 418, 443-44.

<sup>238</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. by members of the Fellowship of St Albans and St Sergius (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 1991), p. 209.

Furthermore, Lossky recognises that mysticism is of central importance to the Eastern Church — that there is no ‘sharp distinction’ between mysticism and theology, and that mysticism is ‘theology par excellence’ in the Eastern tradition.<sup>239</sup> Since the epiphanies I refer to communicate varied insights into human existence, and do not always foster a sense of union with God, many would not find a place in the mystical tradition of the Orthodox Church. I want to avoid conflating these epiphanies with what Orthodoxy refers to as mystical experiences. James’ decision to label such experiences ‘mystical’ notwithstanding, it is clear that he is describing ‘moments’ or longer periods, where a witness experiences a transient feeling of sensed presence and gains an ineffable noetic disclosure. His definition is sufficiently broad to include all the epiphanies I have in mind in this thesis.

An epiphany is traditionally regarded as a form of religious experience. However, ‘religious experience’ can be defined quite broadly.<sup>240</sup> The breadth of the concept allows for the inclusion of epiphanies articulated in both religious and humanist language ranging from Buddhist and Christian experiences to those of Emerson and Tolstoi, as long as they involve a perception by the individual of ‘whatever’ they consider to be ‘divine’.<sup>241</sup> Ninian Smart adopts a similarly broad understanding of religious experience, stating that it involves ‘some kind of ‘perception’ of the invisible world’, or a perception of a visible entity as a manifestation of the invisible world.<sup>242</sup> Although ‘invisible world’ suggests otherworldliness, Smart’s definition could hypothetically include a primordial experience of ‘invisible’ realms underpinning the world, such as a special kind of perception of inner subjectivity or of the conditions of reality. This is what allows Smart to touch upon existentialism in his book, and

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<sup>239</sup> Lossky, p. 9.

<sup>240</sup> William James defines it as ‘The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude as far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever is divine’. James, p. 31.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>242</sup> Smart, p. 15.

state that the ‘experiential’ dimensions of religion can manifest itself in the works of those who have rejected religious doctrines.<sup>243</sup>

Endorsing Smart’s presumption that the human-centred epiphanic experiences described in existentialist philosophy can also be regarded as religious experiences, I can here summatively indicate Heidegger’s connection with epiphany, as I have defined it above. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes certain epiphanic experiences that light the path to a more ‘authentic’ life, in tune with Dasein’s deeper existentiality. These experiences include attestations of Being-towards-death; a call of conscience; anxiety; and the moment of vision [*augenblick*].<sup>244</sup> These ‘epiphanies’ fit James’ definition well: They are noetic states not disclosed through theoretical reasoning but in lived experience. They are transient. In them, Dasein is in the grips of Being itself, as it disclosing itself to Dasein. Thus, there is an element of passivity in them. They are ineffable — the call of conscience, for instance, communicates through a deafening silence, and anxiety, discloses through a feeling of emptiness or nothingness.<sup>245</sup> Finally, Heidegger’s epiphanies, though not aiming at God, do disclose necessary truths about shared human existentiality and give readers an insight into the ‘invisible world’ that underpins and makes human life possible.

### 1.5.1 Modernist Epiphanies

In the previous subsection, I recognised that my broad definition of epiphany encompasses both religious and humanist experiences. Yet, it appears that, for Morris Beja, it is precisely this question of ‘content’ — whether the epiphany concerns human subjectivity or divinity — that makes these experiences radically incommensurate. Beja, writing about the significance of literary epiphanies in twentieth-century fiction, builds on James Joyce’s

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 573.

<sup>244</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 233, 310-11, 315.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

definition of the concept from his novel *Stephen Hero* (1944), to orient his study. Beja's adapted definition of the modernist epiphany is as follows: 'I would call it a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind — the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it.'<sup>246</sup>

Beja also notes that, for Joyce, the experience is transient and ephemeral — the 'most delicate and evanescent'<sup>247</sup> of phenomena. On the surface, Beja's modernist epiphanies appear to share common ground with James' mystical experiences. However, Beja starkly distinguishes traditional 'mystical' epiphanies, such as visions of God or visitations from heaven, which imply a sense of union with divinity, from modernist epiphanies concerned primarily with the subjectivity of the subject.<sup>248</sup> This is indeed his central dividing line between traditional and modernist epiphanies for Beja — whether they are rooted in and give expression to a deity or human personality. Unlike in James' definition, where 'passivity' played a role, for Beja, epiphanies need not be interpreted as a moment where 'an external divine force reveals the truth'. Instead the emphasis is squarely on the consciousness of the perceiving subject.<sup>249</sup> The mind or imagination produces emotionally, psychologically or physiologically inspired insight in the modernist epiphany. The human definitively becomes the source of epiphanic revelation.<sup>250</sup>

Beja points to a variety of examples of dream-epiphanies, produced by ordinary objects, works of art, a snatch of talk overheard on the street, a gesture or a 'memorable phase of the mind itself' in modernist fiction. At a content level, Beja wants to draw attention to the

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<sup>246</sup> Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1971), p. 18.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

historical shift in the meaning of literary epiphanies from those concerned with broad universal truths, to subjective experiences inspired by the perception of existential minutiae: everyday objects, or the ‘details of reality’.<sup>251</sup> Beja finds such epiphanies in the works of Marcel Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe as well as authors from the latter half of the twentieth century.

In fact, there is a range of epiphanies inspired by everyday objects, conversations, artworks in Dostoevskii’s fiction as well. Diane Thompson identifies a handful of them in *The Brothers Karamazov*. She likens what she refers to as ‘shared epiphanies’ in Dostoevskii, where, ‘a dialogic relationship between two people whose uttered words and inner feelings come into a rare harmonious focus on the basis of shared, subliminal recognitions’ to modernist or Joycean epiphanies.<sup>252</sup> Such shared epiphanies include Grushen’ka Svetlova and Alesha’s ‘spiritual peripety’ inspired by the account of a remembered, metaphorical ‘onion’; Alesha’s speech at Il’iusha’s funeral, and Dmitrii’s epiphanic conversation with the coachman Andrei on the way to Mokroe. These epiphanies meet the Joycean definition of an epiphany as an ephemeral and passing sensation, inspired by a patch of conversation or an object. Indeed, Thompson directly cites Joyce’s definition: ‘James Joyce describes an epiphany as “the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached, the object is epiphanised”’.<sup>253</sup>

Nonetheless, Thompson recognises that her examples from Dostoevskii ultimately aim at articulating a sense of the divine. Dostoevskian epiphanies, for Thompson, are always the manifestation of a divine being.<sup>254</sup> But perhaps distinguishing traditional from modernist

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>252</sup> Thompson, p. 109.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid; James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (London: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1969), pp. 216-18.

<sup>254</sup> Thompson, p. 109.

epiphanies primarily by noting their source in human subjectivity or divine objectivity occludes what these literary epiphanies share in common.

Though Beja's study does not engage in depth with Dostoevskii since it focuses on modernist works, he points out that Dostoevskii, while recognising potential physiological reasons for epiphanic experience, does not rule out the possibility of divine inspiration because of this:

Dostoyevsky sees no reason why an experience may not be both of the body and of the soul, why a known physiological source for an illumination [e.g. Myshkin's epilepsy] should in any way rule out a sacred source as well. Although the precise religious significance of Dostoyevsky's moments of revelation remains ambiguous [...] he is a reminder that, despite a general secular trend, not every nineteenth-century writer concerned with moments of intense new understanding disregarded God as their possible source.<sup>255</sup>

Thus, Beja too sees Dostoevskii as occupying a transitional point between the traditional and modernist epiphany.

Beja appears to be referring to Myshkin's description of his own ecstatic epiphany — a prodromal aura<sup>256</sup> the character experiences in the moment before his seizure. Myshkin questions whether the moment, however powerfully suggestive of divine inspiration and the presence of a 'higher existence', could actually be nothing more than a physiological

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<sup>255</sup> Beja, p. 43.

<sup>256</sup> Epileptologists describe such an experience as an 'epileptic *aura*, the classic sensory symptom which directly precedes unconsciousness and convulsions, or in some cases can replace the convulsive seizure.' Rice, p. 83.

byproduct of his ‘illness’ — epilepsy.<sup>257</sup> Myshkin’s ‘dialectic’<sup>258</sup> here, causing him to remain uncertain whether the experience is ultimately physiological and bodily, or divinely inspired and ‘psychic’, was certainly experienced by Dostoevskii himself.

As Rice suggests, Dostoevskii, like Myshkin, would often pit ‘his own fleshy being against his sublime spirituality’ with regards to his own illness: ‘Dostoevsky himself was deeply uncertain whether his elaborate aberrations were “psychic” or “merely mechanical,” reflecting controversy in the epileptology of his last decades.’<sup>259</sup> Thus, if the dividing line between the classical and the modernist epiphany rests solely on whether the experience is divinely inspired or an emanation of the particular individual’s subjectivity, then Dostoevskii is a borderline case, since this question of ultimate ‘source’ is never fully resolved for Dostoevskii himself, and the ambivalence is reflected in his characterisation of Myshkin’s epileptic epiphany.

If I set aside this question about the source of the experience, Dostoevskii’s literary epiphanies have more in common with modernist ones than appears to be the case at first glance. While such a question is beyond the scope of the current thesis, in chapter 2, where I deal with existential materiality, there are also a variety of epiphanies in Dostoevskii’s novels inspired by the existential minutiae of everyday life that remain perfectly intelligible without reference to divinity. To be sure, I will also identify epiphanies communicating religious and even apocalyptic themes through the everyday object, but the diverse types of materialist epiphanies in Dostoevskii suggest his literary use of this device informs and influences its modernist variant.

Another way to connect Dostoevskii’s epiphanies to modernist ones would be through a recognition of their common emphasis on memory. Beja recognises that modernist

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<sup>257</sup> *Idiot*, p. 234, *PSS*, 8:188.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> Rice, p. 85.

epiphanies can often evoke a Proustian sense of the past recaptured. He sees this in the work of Virginia Woolf:

Virginia Woolf realized how, in the ‘perfect rag-bag of odds and ends’ of which our memory is the seamstress, ‘the most ordinary movements in the world... may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments’ [...] Thus Clarissa by performing such a commonplace act as doing her hair, experiences sensations similar to the ones she had felt many years before, and these sensations lead to a complete recapture of the past — significantly, a past which itself had contained a moment of revelation.<sup>260</sup>

As Beja recognised in Woolf’s *Clarissa*, just as her epiphany leads to a ‘complete recapture’ of a past which itself ‘had contained a moment of revelation’, so too in Dostoevskii, epiphany often relies on precisely this potential in personal memory. This is indeed widespread in Dostoevskii and perhaps does not require retelling here. I address some ideas connected with the role of memory in chapter 5 of this thesis.

For now, I can refer to Robin Feuer Miller who recognises the role of conscious and subliminal memory in epiphanies in Dostoevskii.<sup>261</sup> Characters reiterate the noetic insight transmitted to them through several major and minor epiphanies that they undergo over the course of the narrative. The memories return to characters in moments of crisis and form the basis of renewed epiphanies. Dostoevskii himself remembers and recapitulates, and therefore, reinterprets and reiterates, a revelatory memory from his childhood. He recounts his memory and his epiphanic remembrance of this childhood memory in Siberian prison, in an account of the peasant Marei in *A Writer’s Diary* (1873-1881).

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<sup>260</sup> Beja, p. 136.

<sup>261</sup> Miller, *Unfinished Journey*, p. 152.



This memory originally comes back to him when he feels he is beginning to despise his violent inmates in prison. As he recapitulates this remembrance of a sacred childhood memory, late in life, in *A Writer's Diary*, he directly describes the process of taking memories and refining them, improving them over the course of time.<sup>262</sup> This demonstrates how the author was personally aware of the iterative role of personal memory in conversion experience, and thus, through a series of epiphanies. As Miller states of the peasant Marei saga, 'Dostoevsky's visionary work is chiseled out of memory in all its form — conscious, liminal, subliminal, and above all, as has already been seen at length, memory that has been artistically transformed.'<sup>263</sup>

Thompson largely focuses on collective, cultural memory as a creative capacity. 'Every culture consists of memories, coded survivals of past experience preserved in an enormous variety of forms, from memories, monuments and works of art, to social customs, rituals and traditions, what Lotman and Uspensky broadly call 'texts'.<sup>264</sup> Thompson states that this reservoir of cultural memories constitute a system of affirmative memory. Creative memory is constantly reinterpreting or prefiguring old codes into new 'texts', and, in this way, forming a historical chain of shared religious meaning perpetuating itself through time. Indeed, in many of Thompson's shared epiphanies, referred to just above, what is remembered by the participants in the moment of revelation are shared cultural memories. Grushenka's fable of the onion forms one such memory, for example. Dmitrii is also saved by his memory of Dr Herzenstube's simple act of kindness. 'Both Grushenka and Mitya have

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<sup>262</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, trans. by Kenneth Lantz, 2 vols. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 1:351-55, *PSS*, 22:46-50. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

<sup>263</sup> Miller, *Unfinished Journey*, pp. 152-53.

<sup>264</sup> Thompson, pp. 4-5.

been saved from a potential criminal act by latent childhood memories which acquired a salvational function at a moment of extreme crisis.<sup>265</sup>

Thus, if readers do not focus solely on whether the epiphany is of divine or human origin, they shall find deeper parallels between the Dostoevskian and the modernist epiphany than at first appeared. The paths to tracing such a line of influence could very plausibly go through the materialist epiphanies we explore in chapter 2 or the common emphasis on personal and cultural memory in the epiphanies presented in chapter 5.

On the other hand, there are also more traditional epiphanies in the post-Siberian novels. The ‘glorious, earth-shaking moment[s] of revelation’<sup>266</sup> that, Beja suggests, are not really what he understands epiphanies to be, are also conspicuous in Dostoevskii’s novels. Alesha’s vision in ‘Cana of Galilee’; Kirillov’s apophatic moment of nullity before suicide; Zosima or Markel’s epiphanies in *The Brothers Karamazov* are all instances of such ‘earth-shaking’ revelation.

I call this form of epiphany ‘ecstatic’. The term signifies a state where one is in the grips of powerful and overwhelming forces. The subject is momentarily taken out of him/herself, as in the Greek ‘*ekstasis*’ (ἔκστασις). Even here, it is possible to read some of these epiphanies without direct reference to divinity or another world, though I do not see this as the main point of contention when it comes to understanding the content of epiphanies in Dostoevskii. Instead, as I have mentioned, my study will be oriented by what each of these epiphanies disclose about the nature of existential reality here on Earth. At times, this can include an exploration of the nature of religious experience, which can also be interpreted from the perspective of human existentiality.

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>266</sup> Beja, p. 17.

### 1.5.2 Epiphany as a Literary Tool

Epiphany as a literary tool can serve several functions. Three prominent ones include the bringing together of key themes; structuring and organising narratives and key scenes; and inspiring a sudden sense of growth in the reader.

Beja recognises that epiphany, as a literary tool, facilitates Joyce's portrayal of the underlying richness of apparently trivial incidents; his structural reliance on key scenes of revelation; his emphasis on recollection; the setting-forth of his leitmotifs and a collation of his key themes in certain intense epiphanic scenes or events. He goes so far as to claim that the main themes of the Daedalus-Bloom novels are 'carried forward chiefly through climactic epiphanies.'<sup>267</sup>

In a separate analysis, Beja comments on Pound's 'imagist poems', mentioning *In a Station of the Metro* as a key example. Beja explains how Pound's intellectual and emotional investment into an instant of time in the poem 'gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art'.<sup>268</sup> In this sense, the aesthetic function of epiphanic art is to trigger a sensation quite like an epiphany in the reader.

Elizabeth Dalton, writing on Dostoevskii's *The Idiot*, also stresses how the emotional response of the reader to the epiphany is significant. For her, the author seeks to awaken an emotional attitude in the reader that allows them to access their own unconscious or primordial drives. It is a movement from the ego to the 'unconscious reverberations in the id'.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Beja, p. 93.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>269</sup> Elizabeth Dalton, *Unconscious Structure in 'The Idiot'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 35.

Dalton's commentary explores the role of epileptic fits in Dostoevskii, episodes which can also be read as epiphanic material. She notes the structural importance of these epileptic episodes in *The Idiot*:

The action of the novel seems headed constantly towards hysteria and frenzy. The characters themselves lose control of their emotions frequently, as in the wild behaviour of Nastasya [...]. Myshkin's epileptic seizures are the culmination of this pervasive tendency towards loss of control. To understand the novel, it is necessary to take account of these phenomena within the book itself and of their effects on the emotions of the reader.<sup>270</sup>

In this sense, for Dalton, epiphanic episodes in Dostoevskii's novels, where the individual seems possessed by a force beyond their conscious selves, hurtling towards loss of control can have an aesthetic impact on the emotions of the reader, presumably triggering their own sense of loss of control and bringing them closer to the psychic forces at work within their own unconscious id.

By contrast, Herbert Tucker highlights the importance of interpretation — by character, writer and reader — in a literary epiphany. Since it is essentially an experience 'underdetermined in origin and indeterminate in significance' it subsists as a 'moment glowing with genuine, though imprecise, meaning'.<sup>271</sup> Analysis thus requires the character, writer and reader to participate in determining the meaning of the epiphany by examining the pattern of the life of the character it illuminates. He marks the distinction between a character

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>271</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, 'Epiphany and Browning: Character Made Manifest', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1208-21 (p. 1210).

and a reader's interpretation by stating that for the character or 'apprehending consciousness', the epiphany intimates the meaning of life, but to the reader or the 'observer of a consciousness', it may signify the meaning of a life. The reader has an active and differentiated role in interpreting the literary epiphany, although all seek to set the momentary event within a larger design that makes it illustrative.

## 1.6 Perspectives on Epiphany in Dostoevskii

### 1.6.1 Reading Beyond the Ethical

Several readers of Dostoevskii see a binary moral opposition between visionary, epiphanic experiences and processual life in the author's work.<sup>272</sup> Morson puts this point clearly:

Dostoevsky hesitated between two very different, if not contradictory, alternatives to the theoretical mind-set of the intelligentsia and he found a way to reconcile them only in *The Brothers Karamazov*. One alternative is pure faith, to which one clings in spite of all 'opposite proofs.' It leads to ecstatic visions and eschatological hopes. The other alternative that appears repeatedly in Dostoevsky's novels and essays is eschatology's temperamental opposite: the belief in small acts of prosaic goodness, in ordinary decency guided by neither theory nor religious visions but by practical reason.<sup>273</sup>

Actually, this reading is not wrong, especially if Dostoevskii is read as primarily trying to convey an answer to the moral question, 'How do I live a good life?'. In this context, it is undoubtedly true that many characters who have ecstatic visions —

<sup>272</sup> Predrag Cicovacki, *Dostoevsky and the Affirmation of Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 149.

<sup>273</sup> Morson, *A New Word*, p. 108.

Raskol'nikov, Kirillov, for instance — do not live particularly commendable lives. However, it can also be noted that Alesha, Markel and Zosima, some of the most important advocates of prosaic goodness in Dostoevskii, also have ecstatic epiphanies, and thus appear to subvert the dichotomy between the two.<sup>274</sup>

Putting this point aside, it may also be asked whether the ethical question is really Dostoevskii's central preoccupation. Is he fundamentally concerned with explaining 'how to live a good life' or does he instead seek to understand the human condition in its prosaic goodness as well as its necessary chaos and fragmentation? In a letter to Nikolai Strakhov, Dostoevskii, discussing Turgenev's article, 'The Execution of Tropmann' (1870), chastises the author for turning his eyes away from an execution scene.<sup>275</sup> He argues that Turgenev's reaction betrays that, in the face of all the suffering of the world, he is principally concerned with his own peace of mind. He also references the quotation from Terence, 'homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto' or 'I am human: I regard nothing human as foreign to me'.<sup>276</sup>

Jackson points out that Dostoevskii's critique of Turgenev may not do justice to the nuances of his opponent's position on this issue.<sup>277</sup> Yet Jackson recognises that Dostoevskii objects to Turgenev's 'turning away' at the most crucial moment of the execution because such an action institutes a separation between the lower instincts of the crowd — their

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<sup>274</sup> Morson also appears to acknowledge that epiphanies in *The Brothers Karamazov* do not support the idea that ecstasy and prosaic goodness are mutually exclusive. In the quotation cited at the beginning of this subsection, Morson states that Dostoevskii 'found a way to reconcile them [the ecstatic and prosaic alternatives to the theoretic mind-set of the intelligentsia] only in *The Brothers Karamazov*'. Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky's Letters*, trans. by David Lowe, 5 vols. (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1990), 3:260, PSS, 29.1:125-26 (9 June/28 May 1870). Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the PSS citation.

<sup>276</sup> Joseph McAlhany, 'Crumbs, Thieves, and Relics: Translation and Alien Humanism', *Educational Theory*, 64 (2014) 439-61 (p. 439).

<sup>277</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 50-51.

demonstration of humanity's 'attraction to violence, crime, ugliness, evil'<sup>278</sup> — and the more sensitive, purer intuitions of an enlightened Turgenev. In other words, Turgenev's sentiments in the article betray the author's 'deep-seated disgust with the crowd and his instinctive need to separate himself'<sup>279</sup> from the violence they are all bearing witness to together.

By turning away, Turgenev fails to see that he too possesses this same lust for violence within himself, even if it manifests itself in a more refined or repressed form. Thus, the central point is that Turgenev seeks to deny the persistence, within his own constitution, of the darker instincts of humanity: 'At the moment Tropmann loses his head, Turgenev's narrator averts his face from the sight. The symbolism of both occurrences is identical: a separation from the human condition.'<sup>280</sup> If an ethical reading, such as Morson's or Thompson's, sees solely error, and not also primordial aspects of human existentiality, conditioning all humankind in Dostoevskii's darker literary epiphanies, perhaps these readings too 'turn away', in a sense, when confronted with the powerful rhythms of chaos and fragmentation in the novels?

'Turning away', in this context, means understanding the darker epiphanies solely in terms of what they are not. If the content of the visions and dreams of characters in Dostoevskii is disregarded simply because they do not reflect a sense of open temporality as prosaic goodness does, then readers will have to pass over what these epiphanies really communicate in and of themselves about *all* humanity. Error, or divergence from a univocal ethical truth (open temporality as prosaic goodness) becomes the central principle of individuation. The darker epiphanies are understood in terms of what they are not, rather than what they substantively are.

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., pp. 44 and 51.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

Morson appears to suggest, since such darker epiphanies testify ‘to obsession and reflect [...] illness of body, mind, and spirit’,<sup>281</sup> their experiences ought to be understood mainly as misperceptions of temporality. Myshkin’s epileptic visions in *The Idiot* are ultimately illusions because they are the deluded product of his neurological disorder, reflecting ‘illness of body, mind, and spirit’. Similarly, reading Raskol’nikov in *Crime and Punishment* from the perspective of open temporality, readers will be unable to understand what the epiphanic process he undergoes throughout the novel, communicates in itself about reality. Instead, his experience is simply understood as a misperception of time, as Raskol’nikov is trapped by his sense of ‘hypothetical time’.<sup>282</sup> In effect, what is learnt from Raskol’nikov’s experience throughout the course of the novel is that ‘there is no alibi for attentiveness to the real present and near future’.<sup>283</sup> As such, the moral idea in the epilogue becomes the meaning of the entire novel.

To be clear: I agree with Morson that Raskol’nikov’s experience does not reflect a moral or healthy way to live one’s life. I also agree that prosaic goodness is one way of formulating the proper ethical orientation in Dostoevskii’s oeuvre, a subject I explore in chapter 5. However, this is not all there is to these characters’ epiphanies. Raskol’nikov’s terrifying ordeal — the intense spiritual and existential torment he undergoes after he has committed the murder — is not simply a warning about what can go wrong when Dasein forgets about time. It can also be conceived as an attestation of certain ontological conditions underlying human experience, namely existential guilt and anxiety.

As I have said, though I do at times explore the ethical connotations of epiphanies, when it comes to understanding their diverse content in Dostoevskii, ontology precedes ethics. In this context, readers may object that I have included too broad a range of

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<sup>281</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 167.

<sup>282</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, pp. 226-27.

<sup>283</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 227.



experiences — both religious and irreligious — in this category of ‘epiphanies’, and seek a justification for this seeming largesse in the way of a uniform content-based definition of an epiphany. Yet I suggest that the question, ‘Epiphanies of what?’, is the wrong one to ask: I am not seeking an epiphany expressing only and exclusively the ethically good impulse in opposition to the ethically immoral or amoral one. Instead, I seek a broader range, disclosing the diverse, necessary ontological conditions of human experience.

Like Morson, Thompson appears to commit herself to an ethical reading of epiphany. For Thompson, Dostoevskii’s novels are polyphonic but, especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is only one dominant voice, which is the voice of Christ. Christ is the ‘cantus firmus’. In this sense, all voices in the novel which are not in accordance with the voice of Christ are not understood on their own terms. Christ ‘is the sole, completely autonomous voice [...] All the other parts are only relatively independent since, while interacting with each other, they are all variously imitating that voice’.<sup>284</sup>

Though there is no doubt that this is true in ethical terms, such an interpretation again puts ethical meaning above ontology, and therefore sees error as the main principle of individuation between these experiences: they are defined solely based on their distance from Christ. Although this may be true of *The Brothers Karamazov*, if I apply Thompson’s reading to the wider oeuvre, the darker epiphanic experiences of Raskol’nikov and Kirillov, for instance, would convey nothing apart from their separation from the religious experience of characters such as Sonia in *Crime and Punishment* or, perhaps, Stepan Verkhovenskii at the end of *Demons*. In themselves, Kirillov and Raskol’nikov’s experiences would have no other meaning apart from their grave moral errors. Again, I do not deny that they are in error morally, but I seek the ontological, rather than the ethical, meaning of these experiences. In effect, this means reading the epiphanies non-teleologically. It will require that I do not

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<sup>284</sup> Thompson, pp. 70-71.

interpret the significance of epiphanies by the consequences that result from them, but instead, from what they are communicating about the nature of human existence in themselves.

### 1.6.2 Hankering After Intensity

Alex De Jonge states that Dostoevskii's form of realism was concerned with probing the 'deep-structure of his age': Dostoevskii was not writing the history of the nineteenth century, 'but its mythology'.<sup>285</sup> De Jonge's historico-literary commentary seeks to provide a rationale for why Dostoevskii focuses so centrally on 'intense experiences', which include what I call epiphanies. De Jonge states that eighteenth-century man 'had an essentially stable, integrated world-view, built on stereotypes of harmony, permanence and whole meanings'.<sup>286</sup>

Although he acknowledges that the eighteenth century was not a 'golden age of universal happiness', he nonetheless insists that it possessed a sense of cosmic and social wholeness, which was stripped away by industrialisation and the loss of divine belief in the nineteenth century. Dostoevskii's fiction responds to this loss by turning to intense sensation: 'modern man turns to sensation, to intensity of experience, as a process that is self-justifying. Strong feelings come to act as a substitute for meaning.'<sup>287</sup> According to De Jonge, many central characters in Dostoevskii aspire to the 'intensest possible moment', making this quest the *summum bonum* of Dostoevskii's cosmically disharmonious world.<sup>288</sup>

In the highest manifestations of these 'super-privileged moments', characters experience a kind of '*paradis artificiel*',<sup>289</sup> through which they are momentarily transported

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<sup>285</sup> De Jonge, p. 2.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

from the reality of the nineteenth century into instants of ‘white hot intensity’.<sup>290</sup> Such moments include experiences as broad as the gambler’s anticipated surge of intensity, Kirillov’s suicide, and Myshkin’s epileptic experiences of ‘pseudo-mystic ecstasy and oneness’ among various others.<sup>291</sup> Myshkin’s moment of sensed presence before the onset of a seizure, and Kirillov’s deathly final moments can indeed be considered as ‘epiphanies’, in my sense: they are transient and ineffable experiences involving a level of passivity, and offering some kind of noetic disclosure. However, these experiences remain ‘artificial’, according to De Jonge, since they seek to satisfy a metaphysical longing for harmony ‘by means of sheer sensation’.<sup>292</sup> De Jonge sees such characters as part of an intensity cult, building on the escapist and dualistic tendencies of the Romantics, and speaking the truth of their age’s desire to overcome the loss of meaning through sensation. Notably, they always fail, as their dissatisfaction with a reality stripped of meaning leads them to misperceive morally ambiguous intense sensations as experiences of metaphysical wholeness.

As with Morson and Thompson in the previous section, I must insist that De Jonge too is right in his own way. But, again, like the other two, De Jonge, perhaps much more aggressively than Morson, also sees error as the only principle of individuation between these intense experiences. Although he recognises potentially authentic experiences of metaphysical harmony in Alesha’s vision in the Cana of Galilee chapter and Zosima’s dying brother, Markel’s, joyful ecstasy, he sees every other moment of intensity as simply a failed desire for the metaphysical harmony promised by the culture of the eighteenth century.

In this sense, De Jonge’s account of intense experiences could be criticized for homogenizing the meaning of all epiphanies in Dostoevskii: ultimately, they all express exactly the same thing. This approach could be considered reductive since it ignores the

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., pp. 135, 145, 151.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

variety of impressions, ideas, insights into the human condition that these characters' epiphanic journeys offer, and sees all of them as manifestations of a repressed impulse to recover a sense of metaphysical harmony that had been lost in the nineteenth century.

Perhaps temporally as well, De Jonge is not quite in tune with Dostoevskii; a thinker deeply aware of humanity's sense of striving towards the future. Indeed, in *A Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, where the protagonist travels to a world as yet untainted by sin and immediately corrupts them with his knowledge, the narrative suggests that the notion of returning to a time before the chaos and fragmentation of meaning would be impossible. At the conclusion of the narrative, the ridiculous man's entire ethic is focussed on striving towards the future, rather than seeking a return to a lost past.<sup>293</sup> As Miller has shown, this story can be read in a variety of ways,<sup>294</sup> but the narrative does appear to suggest the impossibility of recapturing the ethic of a lost age. This is not to say that De Jonge is arguing that Dostoevskii believed it possible to recapture a past age's ethic, but that perhaps Dostoevskii, not assuming such a return plausible, could be indicating something else about the suffering and chaos in existence through such intense experiences, and that this could just as easily be concerned with future time, or the end of time in some cases, or indeed, with the present, namely, the unseen and overflowing presence implicit in prosaic time, as Morson conceives it.<sup>295</sup> For more on how the novels reflect Dostoevskii's concern with futurity, or humanity's shared sense of striving towards the future, see the section on 'the premonitory object' in chapter 2,<sup>296</sup> as well as chapter 5 in its entirety.

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<sup>293</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 2:960-61, *PSS*, 25:118-19.

<sup>294</sup> Miller, *Unfinished Journeys*, p. 106.

<sup>295</sup> 'The Kingdom of God will come, Zosima explains, only if and when such prosaic acts of kindness change us, bit by bit, from within. What happens at every moment matters.' Morson, *A New Word*, p. 112.

<sup>296</sup> See section 2.4, 'The Premonitory Object in *The Idiot*', of this thesis.

### 1.6.3 The Epileptic Mode of Being

Like De Jonge, Dalton and Paul Fung also address moments of intensity in Dostoevskii. Their studies deal with the intensities that form a part of the process of epilepsy. Although they explore some of the same moments treated in this thesis, the term ‘epiphany’ covers a broader range of experiences than Dalton and Fung’s exclusive focus on epileptic intensities. To be sure, in my chapter on existential materiality, I explore the correlative role of Myshkin’s epilepsy in his epiphanic episodes.<sup>297</sup> Yet epilepsy is not at the core of my thesis, because the majority of the epiphanies we interpret are undergone by characters who are not epileptic.

In Dalton’s work, the author makes use of her subjective response to *The Idiot* to find a way into the unconscious life of the text itself, the latent aspect that neither reader nor writer is explicitly aware of, but that ‘is nonetheless part of its deepest meaning’.<sup>298</sup> Epiphanic episodes in *The Idiot*, which sometimes coincide with epileptic fits, are seen by Dalton as explosions of repressed libidinal feelings and impulses where the ego is overwhelmed and the id comes to the fore.<sup>299</sup> She variously interprets Myshkin’s different epileptic episodes as irruptions of fantasies, wishes and fears, claiming one such episode manifests his homosexual desires, whereas another becomes suggests a repressed fantasy of parental intercourse.<sup>300</sup> These epileptic episodes mark climactic moments in the narrative, presenting ‘a moment of unbearable tension where there is a loss of control’ on the part of the

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<sup>297</sup> In section 2.4, in the context of Myshkin’s premonitory, epileptic consciousness and also in the chapter 4 on *Crime and Punishment*, I touch upon connections with Dostoevskii’s own experience of epilepsy. I rely largely on Rice’s book, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*, to note associations between some ideas and themes in this thesis — extracted from the literary works — and epilepsy.

<sup>298</sup> Dalton, preface, x.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112 and 115.

conscious subject<sup>301</sup> — thus the similarity with the Jamesian definition of mystical experiences (my adapted definition of epiphany) ought to be clear.

There are two central critiques of Dalton's reading of *The Idiot* worth mentioning here. First, characters' underlying psychological 'role', 'personality' or 'foundational trauma' is heavily over-determined in her scheme. Characters function on doubled planes. On one hand, each represents a component of a complex psychological conflict, yet, on the other, each is also presented as a fully formed character (thus possessing all the components of psychological conflict in their mind) with presumptions made about the latent traumas that shaped their personality.<sup>302</sup>

Consequently, in different contexts, Myshkin is described as a castrated child trying to save his mother/lover (Nastas'ia) from his rival (Rogozhin);<sup>303</sup> a jealous lover seeking to kill his mother/lover, insofar as Rogozhin is said to represent Myshkin's repressed libidinal desires, his 'id';<sup>304</sup> and as a repressed homosexual.<sup>305</sup> Of course, Dalton is justified in her approach insofar as the study is showcasing the underlying libidinal impulses in the text, but such over-determination of meaning makes one wonder — since there are so many different ways to construe his founding trauma, many of which directly contradict each other — whether readers learn anything definite about Myshkin's identity or trauma from her analysis.

Apart from the over-determination of character, there is also the danger of reductionism, a charge that Dalton is already aware of.<sup>306</sup> Dalton makes broad parallels between starkly different characters, ignoring their natural differences in favour of a shared

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-24.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

presumed underlying traumatic structure to their personalities. The parallels include those between Myshkin and Rogozhin, Ippolit and Myshkin, Ganya and Rogozin, Aglaia and Nastas'ia, and Myshkin and Nastas'ia. As a result of these conflations, Dalton can say of Ippolit and Myshkin that 'In both young men the rage stimulated by a paternal imago is turned round upon the self in a masochistic re-enactment of the father's cruelty to the son.'<sup>307</sup>

Though there are some similarities between Myshkin and Ippolit, there are also divergences. Yet here, both characters appear to be governed by the same underlying complex. Similarly on Myshkin and Nastas'ia's masochistic impulses, for example, 'The masochism of Nastasya and that of Myshkin are in essence the same. Both present clearly an irrational guilt and a need to suffer.'<sup>308</sup> If it is simply their shared masochistic tendencies that Dalton is addressing, this may, in itself, contain some truth, but it is perhaps reductive to ignore the wider differences in their characters, actions, personalities in favour of such a broad generalization. After all, may it not be possible to say that most of Dostoevskii's characters exhibit 'irrational guilt and a need to suffer'? Does this mean that they all convey simply one univocal meaning in their varied experiences? These issues suggest that Dalton's reading often fails to capture the nuances of character by adopting an approach that homogenizes meaning. This is not true of all psychological approaches to traumatic narrative structures in Dostoevskii, of course. Jones and Corrigan's accounts have shown that it is possible to provide a theory of emotional interaction that, though underpinned by generalized structures of traumatized behaviour, can also provide specific psychological narratives for characters, thus avoiding the danger of bluntly universalizing the particular.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-58.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-07.

<sup>309</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin*, p. 26; Corrigan, pp. 5-6.

Fung builds on Dalton's work by providing a kind of phenomenology of the 'epileptic mode of Being',<sup>310</sup> a phrase he borrows from Robert Lord's book on Dostoevskii.<sup>311</sup> He sees this mode of Being as one where characters try to comprehend and master their own idea-forces in an 'ecstatic moment' of epilepsy, which is immediately followed by the inevitable failure of their attempts: 'In other words, epilepsy is not entirely an intensive experience; it comprises intensity and its effacement. The alternation of these two phases marks the experience of the epileptic, and it is the infinite alternation that makes epilepsy traumatic'.<sup>312</sup>

Like Dalton, Fung's interpretation also homogenizes the meaning of all the intense experiences he discusses in the book. The author seeks to demonstrate how various 'epileptic' episodes in Dostoevskii's work, which, perplexingly, includes experiences of characters who do not suffer from epilepsy, such as Raskol'nikov and Stavrogin, manifest this movement of intensity and its effacement characteristic of the epileptic mode of Being. Fung states that he has included Raskol'nikov in this study because 'Raskolnikov is an 'epileptic' character even if he is not literally an epileptic'.<sup>313</sup> Not surprisingly, Fung shies away from extrapolating this assertion in his chapter on *Crime and Punishment* and does not address the question of why Raskol'nikov is included in a book on epilepsy beyond the brief statement in the introduction, cited above. A discussion of Stavrogin, another non-epileptic character, is also inserted without any explanation. I believe a broader starting point in 'epiphany', rather than in 'epilepsy', might have allowed Fung to validly interpret all the characters he has in mind, and would also provide a clearer route to understanding what he calls the 'pluralistic'<sup>314</sup> nature of such epiphanic (Fung's epileptic) experience in Dostoevskii.

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<sup>310</sup> Paul Fung, *Dostoevsky and the Epileptic Mode of Being* (London: Legenda, 2015), pp. 2-3.

<sup>311</sup> Robert Lord, *Dostoevsky: Essays and Perspectives* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 81.

<sup>312</sup> Fung, *Epileptic Mode of Being*, p. 4.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.



#### 1.6.4 Epiphany or Conversion?

Miller also makes for an interesting interlocutor here. This is because Miller demonstrates that moments of crisis, or threshold moments as Bakhtin calls them, of which epiphanies become an important subset, do not always correctly identify the point at which conversion takes place.

Miller states that readers of Dostoevskii tend to assume that characters undergo conversion experiences through moments of crisis, that is, in epiphanies, in my vernacular. She cites James' distinguishing of conversion experiences into those that occur through crisis, that is abruptly, and instantaneously, and those that occur through lysis, gradually, over an extending period of time. Miller does not argue that moments of crisis are not there in Dostoevskii's fiction, nor 'that what seems like crisis is actually lysis, but that perhaps that event of crisis takes place at a moment whose import may be less evident than the event generally recognised as "the critical moment"'.<sup>315</sup>

In other words, readers cannot be sure that conversion takes place exactly in the grand moment of crisis that characters experience so conspicuously during their narrative journeys. This is because every such epiphany, appearing to result in a transformation in the character's viewpoint on himself and the world, is preceded by a variety of other major and minor epiphanies that also communicate the same noetic understanding delivering in the grand epiphany. In Miller's own words: 'That is, for every conversion, there is a pre-conversion and a pre-pre-conversion and so on.'<sup>316</sup>

For instance, the retelling of the folktale of the onion precedes Alesha's epiphany in the Cana of Galilee chapter. Dmitrii's conversation with the coachman and his memory of Herzenstube's pound of nuts can also be regarded as pre-conversions that occur before his

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<sup>315</sup> Miller, *Unfinished Journeys*, p. 152.

<sup>316</sup> Robin Feuer Miller, *'The Brothers Karamazov': Worlds of the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 88.

epiphanic dream of the babe. Even for Dostoevskii biographically, it is unclear exactly when the author finally acquired the noetic disclosure originally seeded by his childhood encounter with the peasant Marei. Was it when he met Marei in the fields; when he recalled the experience in Siberia; or perhaps when he recapitulated it in *A Writer's Diary*? Miller's central point is that, in most of Dostoevskii's conversion journeys, it is unclear exactly when the conversion occurs. This contradicts the idea that Dostoevskii's characters undergo conversion in one single moment of crisis.

Although this sounds as if it appears to be devaluing epiphanies, it does not do so at all. In fact, what Miller is discussing is not primarily to do with epiphany but with conversions. She is looking for the point at which an inner spiritual transformation of perspective occurs — the point of conversion. She is evaluating the journeys characters undergo from a bird's-eye perspective, that is, as a reader, and recognising that there is not one specific point where the character's viewpoint is definitively transformed in a new direction.

In fact, characters often go through multiple epiphanies through the course of their narrative lives. I thus assert that epiphanies are not the same as conversions. Since I am not reading these experiences teleologically, I am not primarily interested in whether it transforms their life for the good or for the worse. I do not assert that each character only undergoes one epiphany where all decisions about personality are finalized. In fact, quite the opposite: a character can have multiple epiphanies in a single narrative journey, as seen above in Alesha's case. My thesis does not truly contradict Miller's in any sense. It is simply that I orient my perspective through the various moments of crisis, or epiphanies scattered through the narratives, whereas Miller takes her root in the seamless journey of conversion that connects these various moments of crisis in a process of gradual self-discovery or self-

recovery. Indeed, both of us recognise that noetic understanding is transmitted in moments of epiphany.

If readers are looking at epiphanies in order to ascertain the definitive point of spiritual transformation in the character's personality — conversion — they find a journey without a sole, exclusive centre. Alternatively, if readers are looking at them to understand what the epiphanies disclose about human existentiality, then they find truths about the human condition, periodically revealed, possibly in a range of different epiphanies even in a single character's life, and not requiring a sole, exclusive centre. These studies are not at odds with one another on this point.

### **1.7 Conclusion**

Dostoevskii's texts have appealed to readers for over 150 years. My contention is that these texts have resonated with so many different epochs because they have something fundamental to reveal about the human condition. Indeed, as the review of several prominent Dostoevskiiian commentators in this section has demonstrated, critical readers have always been aware that the deeper undercurrents governing human life are somehow articulated in these works. My approach, through existential phenomenology, hopes to do justice to the polyphonic range of insights into the grounds of human nature represented in Dostoevskii's novels, by picking out various existentialia encoded in his works. By connecting these insights to some of the most celebrated and enigmatic moments in the texts — the 'epiphanies' — I aim to articulate not just the significance of 'epiphanies' in general, but also what each signifies in its own particularity.

It is not solely the grand, earth-shattering epiphanies that occupy my attention, but also the subtler moments of sudden, unexpected noetic insight, which reveal not just Dasein's Being, but the very materiality of the world that Dasein lives in. In the following chapter, I explore the existential materiality of the objects that Dasein interacts with and demonstrate

how characters in Dostoevskii's novels can become aware of the deeper material Being of the objects, that make up their 'world', in moments of minor epiphany.

## 2. Existential Materiality in the Post-Siberian Works

The ‘thing’ in Dostoevskii’s post-Siberian works possesses a certain ‘thinginess’, what John Jones calls, ‘the life-stimulating spirit of the thing’.<sup>1</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, there are: the gate to Fedor Pavlovich’s home, both open and closed depending on who perceives it; the 3,000 rubles worth of longing Fedor Pavlovich places in an envelope that his illegitimate son, Smerdiakov, manipulates so expertly to make it ‘misspeak’ its history; the towel that Ivan Karamazov believes he has placed over his head, though actually having done nothing of the sort. The existentiality of these objects can only be understood in the context of their entanglement in human possibilities.

My central contention in this chapter is that objects ‘speak’, in Dostoevskii’s post-Siberian novels, when they become unusable, or are out of usual working order, and thus conspicuous for the human observer. On one hand, I demonstrate the broad applicability of this structure of material disclosure throughout the post-Siberian works. On the other, though the structure of disclosure is the same, the revelation each type of object offers differs according to the thing’s particular intended functionality in the referential totality of objects within which it normally subsists.

I start by looking first at everyday objects: how they communicate their inextricable interconnection with human possibilities, and how certain characters, aware that the object is tied to human possibilities, manipulate them to make them ‘misspeak’. Then, I turn to iconic objects to analyse their Being as signs indicating the living human relation to divinity. Finally, in a peculiar context in *The Idiot*, I examine seemingly ordinary and everyday, yet actually premonitory objects. These objects offer presentiments to Prince Myshkin, which disclose the world’s givenness to inevitable catastrophe. This last discussion will help readers

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<sup>1</sup> John Jones, *Dostoevsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 333.

understand the possible metaphysical, apocalyptic meaning of *The Idiot*, and, in conclusion, allow for the exploration of questions concerning temporality and freedom.

The overriding goal and unifying thread throughout the chapter is to uncover the Being of the material object in Dostoevskii, as well as to understand how characters can become acutely aware of the object's existential materiality. This discussion demonstrates how it is necessary to consider the material object in Dostoevskii not simply by explaining what it 'looks' like, or as it would be in-itself, but by understanding the way in which objects bear the marks of human agency. In this sense, I seek to understand how the subject's (always already) immersed, concerned relation to the object shapes the thing's true Being, and underlies the most fundamental sense in which the material object exists — that is, appears to Dasein — in the world. Put simply, the Being of the material object cannot be understood without reference to the hand that makes use of it.

## 2.1 Beholding the Object

It would be beneficial to, first, understand the philosophical context within which Heidegger delineates the existential materiality of the object. Heidegger was responding to a Cartesian understanding of the object as a substance composed of an aggregation of specific properties. For Descartes, the route to understanding the object lies in uncovering that which endures in it through the various changes that it may undergo in its lifespan. This enduring property is the object's extension in space. 'Extension — namely, in length, breadth, and thickness — makes up the real Being of [the] corporeal substance'.<sup>2</sup> For Heidegger's Descartes, all other characteristics or qualities which the object possesses can be considered as modes of its extendedness:

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<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 123.

Matter may have such definite characteristics as hardness, weight, and colour; but these can all be taken away from it, and it still remains what it is. These do not go to make up its real Being; and in so far as they are, they turn out to be modes of *extensio*.<sup>3</sup>

Descartes' thinking about the object seeks permanence or that which constantly perseveres in the object. 'That which enduringly remains, really is'.<sup>4</sup> What this belies, for Heidegger, is a tendency in traditional ontology, to seek to understand the object simply by 'looking' at it.

Under the unbroken ascendance of the traditional ontology, the way to get a genuine grasp of what really is has been decided in advance: it lies in 'beholding' in the widest sense; or 'thinking' is just a more fully achieved form of [beholding] and is founded upon it.<sup>5</sup>

Just as traditional ontology sought to understand 'what' a human being was by describing their visible features — by representing them as a bipedal mammal with such-and-such qualities — the object, too, is to be understood in terms of 'what' it is, namely a substance with such-and-such properties. In Heidegger's words, this kind of interpretation, 'is one which lets us encounter entities within-the-world purely in the way they look, just that'.<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger's point is that such a thematic abstraction of the object is only possible because of a prior praxis-based relation to the object.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

The kind of dealing [with objects] which is closest to us is as we have shown, not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use; and this has its own kind of ‘knowledge’.<sup>7</sup>

He also wishes to point out that traditional ontology is grounded in a dualistic understanding of subject-object relations. The subject, with its rational capacity for understanding the world through the categories of his/her own mind, maintains a distance from the object world, which he/she then understands in the same way that he/she understands himself/herself.

The object becomes an enduring substance, extended in space, that can be deciphered through the subject’s perceptual cognition, their intuition, in abstraction from the context of human agency that actually envelops and defines its Being. This relation, grounded in ‘knowing’ the object, is not an originary mode of Being for the object:

But a ‘*commercium*’ of the subject with a world does not get *created* for the first time by knowing, nor does it *arise* from some way in which the world acts upon a subject. Knowing is a mode of Dasein founded upon Being-in-the-world. Thus Being-in-the-world, as a basic state, must be Interpreted *beforehand*.<sup>8</sup>

For Heidegger, the kind of knowledge gleaned from ‘beholding’ an object in abstraction is grounded upon a more primordial relation to the object, one in which subject and object are inextricably unified in human activity, in Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. ‘Ontologically, “world” is not a way of characterising those entities which Dasein essentially

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 90. (Italics in original).



is not; it is rather a characteristic of Dasein itself.<sup>9</sup> Just as was the case with a human being, in order to approach a truer understanding of the existentiality of the object, an interpreter must not seek to know ‘what’ it is, but instead ‘how’ it is, or the way in which it is, in everyday human existence. In brief, what is sought is an ‘existential’ rather than an ‘essential’ understanding of the materiality of the object.<sup>10</sup>

If not as a substance with such-and-such properties, then how does the object primarily appear to Dasein in everyday life? As mentioned earlier, the world, for Heidegger, is made up of ‘equipment’, all of which is related to one another in a system of references. The pen was manufactured in a factory in order to be sold by a retailer, in order to be used to write on paper, in order to produce a piece of writing that serves some purpose for the human being. Every object, in its fundamental existentiality, participates in a system of involvement, related to other equipment in terms of its precedent chain of manufacture, or its antecedent functional use.<sup>11</sup> This is the most foundational mode of existence for the object.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> To exemplify this importance of seeking to know ‘how’ the object is, rather than simply looking out for ‘what’ it is, I can briefly mention Yuri Corrigan’s analysis of important objects in *The Adolescent*, such as the ‘document’ given to Arkadii Dolgorukii by Kraft, and the handkerchief, left behind by Arkadii’s mother when she visits her son at his school. Corrigan states that the protagonist of *The Adolescent*, Arkadii, makes use of these seemingly ordinary objects to defer confronting the trauma at the root of his own interiority and identity. The object becomes a sacred marker of an alternate dimension of Being, ‘a dimension which can be hidden and preserved, it turns out, within a seemingly ordinary object’. These objects, protected and hidden away in Arkadii’s drawer or on his person, allow him to escape from the fragmentation and chaos that surrounds him and locate his true Being elsewhere, that is, in his treasured relation to these objects. The objects are thus deeply tied to Arkadii’s own identity, acting as ‘placeholder soul[s]’. Their existential materiality cannot be understood without reference to how Arkadii makes use of them. Simply describing what the handkerchief or the document ‘look’ like does not reveal their existentiality. Instead, they must be taken in their full Being, in the context of the significance Arkadii invests into them. Corrigan, pp. 110, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 99.

This referential system of involvement ultimately finds its meaning in a being whose existence is the purpose of the system, who is the end towards which this world is organised. This ultimate ‘towards-which’ is Dasein, for whom there is ‘no further involvement’. Dasein — a human being — is itself ‘the sole authentic “for-the-sake-of-which”’<sup>12</sup> in this system of involvement. Thus, subject and object are unified and always already immersed in Dasein’s practical engagement with the world.

Dasein’s facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating [...] All these ways of Being-in have concern as their kind of Being [...] Leaving undone, neglecting, renouncing, taking a rest — these two are ways of concern; but these are all deficient modes, in which the possibilities of concern are kept to a ‘bare minimum’.<sup>13</sup>

For the most part, the existentiality of the object remains inconspicuous. When I walk through a door, I do not normally have to think, ‘I must now twist the handle and pull the door towards me, then take a step or two towards the hall’, nor when I am typing these words, am I consciously considering how my fingers, tapping on the keyboard, are producing particular motor functions and digital processes within the laptop, causing words to appear on the screen. In Dasein’s everyday existential interaction with the world, the world of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

equipment does not explicitly announce itself. Dasein's actions are governed by what Heidegger calls its 'pre-ontological' understanding.<sup>14</sup>

It is only when an object becomes unfit for purpose, either by being damaged, or going 'missing', or simply 'standing in our way' as something that prevents Dasein from using it to pursue its own possibilities, that Dasein become aware of the object in its equipmental being. When an object becomes 'conspicuous, obstinate, or obtrusive' in this way, not only the object, but all the involvements that the object consists in, become 'lit up' for that particular human being in a way that he/she first perceives the 'world' in all its hidden 'worldhood'.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 The Everyday Object

### 2.2.1 The Signalling Thing

Dostoevskii's intuitive awareness of the object's existential materiality is apparent in scenes in which characters consciously manipulate the material context of the object, to make them 'misspeak' to others in the manner they desire. In other scenes, I show how, even a small, yet conspicuous trace upon the object, indicating that something is not quite in usual working order, can allow characters to infer entire chains of events connected to this minor fault. Thus, in this case too, the object 'speaks' to witnesses and, notably, does so when it is no longer functioning in an expected manner.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Smerdiakov is acutely aware of the 'worldhood' of the world. He knows that the world is made up of objects primarily to be used and secondarily to be interpreted in their referential arrangements. There are two significant examples of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 32, 242.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

Smerdiakov making use of his knowledge by manipulating objects in order to create artificial arrangements that signal to fellow interpreters what conclusions they ought to draw.

First, I consider the envelope containing the three thousand rubles intended, by Fedor Karamazov, to lure Grushenka. Smerdiakov misinforms Dmitrii of the whereabouts of the money, but he also then hides it in a secret location known only to him. After committing the murder, Smerdiakov, aware of this object's potential to unlock wild conjecture and supposition, manipulates it by tearing it open, taking the money and planting the empty envelope in the room to present it as a piece of evidence against Dmitrii.

Suppose for example I was the murderer, I'd have simply shoved it in my pocket without even thinking of opening it, and bolted with it, sir. Now, for Dmitry Fyodorovich the situation was quite different; he knew about the envelope only from hearsay, he'd never seen it himself, so if he had pulled it out, supposedly from under the mattress, he'd have opened it on the spot to check whether the money was there, in fact, wouldn't he? And he'd have thrown away the envelope, not realizing he was leaving incriminating evidence, because he's not a habitual thief [...] I let that idea slip out during my interview with the prosecutor, a bit vaguely, as if I didn't really realize myself what I was telling him, sir, so he'd think he thought it out for himself. That really had the old prosecutor licking his lips, sir...<sup>16</sup>

Smerdiakov is aware that the envelope, when seen through, will tell a story about its relations to human beings and to other objects. But this is not the only place where Smerdiakov manipulates the system of signs and references in such ingenious fashion. The ominous taps on the window, meant to signal Grushenka's arrival to Fedor Karamazov, are

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<sup>16</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 790-91, PSS, 15:66.

also used by Dostoevskii to present Smerdiakov's ability to manipulate the object-world to make it 'misspeak' to others.

He [Fedor Karamazov] looked at me through the window; he didn't know whether to believe me or not and he was afraid to open it — he was afraid of me too, I think. And it's funny; I suddenly had the idea of knocking in full view on the window, to give the signal that Grushenka had come; he didn't seem to believe me when I told him, but as soon as I knocked on the window he rushed to open the door. He opened it.<sup>17</sup>

The scene is indeed quite perverse, as readers imagine a deluded and disoriented Fedor Karamazov, unbelieving, but wanting desperately to believe, hearing for any hints that Grushenka has finally come to him. Smerdiakov, aware of his desire for this possibility, taps out the code. Even though Karamazov sees him do it, he is so enthralled by his desire for Grushenka, that the expected tapping convinces him, beyond all reason, to open the door to his murderer.

John Jones makes a puzzle of this, asking why, if he is suspicious of his trusted lackey at this point, he opens the door to him:

Yes it is 'a very funny thing'. What gave Smerdyakov the idea of tapping? Why did the old man believe the taps but not the words? Such details fall within the all-embracing funniness of Karamazov which is both very linguistic — pretending on purpose and so forth — and liable as here to sweep language aside in its 'deedy' and 'thingy' thrust towards tapping on a window frame.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 788.

<sup>18</sup> John Jones, *Dostoevsky*, p. 354.

Fedor Karamazov's 'deedy' three thousand rubles' worth of longing for Grushenka, and his 'thingy' expectation attached to the sign of the tapped code, combine to obscure his judgement. Without taking thematic consideration of his actions, he opens the door to his own end. Dostoevskii's deeper psychologism is tied, in both these examples, to an awareness of objects and their life-giving being in relation with characters who make use of them.

An analogous scene takes place, between Lebedev and General Ivolgin, in *The Idiot*. Here, Lebedev complains of having lost four hundred rubles which General Ivolgin has in fact stolen. Ivolgin attempts to conceal his theft by replacing the wallet on the floor of Lebedev's room, but Lebedev, aware that Ivolgin must have placed it there, 'prefer[s] not to inform him'<sup>19</sup> that he has found it. Instead he pretends not to notice in order to torture him further with guilt. Ivolgin then, believing that Lebedev has not noticed, places the wallet in Lebedev's coat, tearing the lining with a pocketknife, in another scheme aimed at reconciliation with his friend.

All this is told to readers in Lebedev's highly ironized voice as he recounts the events to Myshkin. The retelling of the scene is again highly literary — pretending not to notice, pretending out of spite — and deeply psychological. As was the case with Smerdiakov, Lebedev's conscious manipulation of the object is dependent on his awareness of the equipmental and circumstantial references within which the wallet subsists. Here too the object is still officially missing — that is, not in its proper place — as far as Ivolgin is concerned. Lebedev's refusal to 'see' it is a conscious attempt to cause anguish in the mentally unstable general, unlocking the possibilities manifest in the implied absence of the object.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Idiot*, p. 517, PSS, 8:407.

The final object I consider in this subsection is the door to the pawnbroker's flat in *Crime and Punishment*. I could look at Raskol'nikov's interaction with the door when he arrives to commit the murder, as here too, the protagonist is listening to the door, to understand Alena Ivanovna's interactions with it.<sup>20</sup> Instead, I will focus on another scene, which more directly demonstrates how the object can reveal the human activity concealed behind it, especially when something appears to be 'not quite right' with it.

Two visitors come to Alena Ivanovna's flat on business in the immediate aftermath of the murder. The door is locked. However, they suddenly begin to notice details about the door. 'Look —did you see how the door moves when you pull at it?' He also hears the bar rattling. This convinces him that the door is not locked from the outside, but is in fact bolted, with the bar mounted from the inside. 'That means there's someone at home. If they'd all gone out, they would have locked it from the outside with the key, not bolted it from inside.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, these irregularities concerning the door, which they notice and interpret by reading the signs of human activity imprinted upon it, alert them to the possibility of foul play. The locked door reveals its secrets because it has not been locked as it should have been, in the presumed course of normal events. The improper functioning of the door reveals its entanglement in this extraordinary human affair.

In none of the above cases, however, do characters appear to suddenly become aware of the peculiar materiality of the object, as I claimed in the introduction. This is because they are still absorbed in concerned engagement with it. The objects, though misdirected into a different equipmental context, continue to perform visible functions: Though Lebedev's money is supposed to be 'missing', both Ivolgin and Lebedev, for the most part, know where it is and how it has gotten there. It has been consciously turned into an object of spite, and

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<sup>20</sup> *PSS*, 6:61.

<sup>21</sup> *The Idiot*, p. 76, *PSS*, 6:68.

continues to perform its newly assigned role. Fedor Pavlovich, too, believes the ‘signal’ is properly functioning. Until the end, he appears to expect the taps on the window to herald Grushenka’s arrival. Smerdiakov consciously intends the tampered-with packet to become an object of interpretation. It is as such a functioning object — a piece of evidence — that Smerdiakov consciously manipulates it. Finally, in *Crime and Punishment*, though the unexpected state of the bolt on the door alerts Alena Ivanovna’s visitors to the possibility of foul play, once they have arrived at this realization, the door gains new significance as a clue at a potential crime scene. In its newly acquired meaning, it absorbs the attention of witnesses in an entirely different direction.

In each of these cases, the object continues to appear to be functioning within a network or context of significance. However, there are instances in Dostoevskii when objects fall into disrepair, are destroyed, cannot be used in an appropriate manner, or when they genuinely go missing. In such situations, things become conspicuous in their obstinance and can bring characters to deeper realizations of their interconnection with them.

### **2.2.2 The Unusable Thing**

I have shown glimpses of how Dostoevskii represents the materiality of the object. The bolt on the pawnbroker’s door in *Crime and Punishment* cannot reveal its true significance in the novel by simply describing what it ‘looks like’: the material it is made of, or its particular shape and distinct physical features. Even in exploring the metaphorical or symbolic significance of ‘doors’ in general as a border, limit or threshold separating two spaces, or of ‘bolts’ on doors, as symbols of exclusion or secrecy, for instance, such an analysis could be useful in other ways, but will not assist in understanding the particular ‘thinginess’ of the door or the bolt. Instead, it is the object’s role in the pursuit of human possibilities and/or its disclosure of the human agency — the desires, needs, and fears — that mark its existence.



I can take the two hundred ruble bills offered by Dmitrii's fiancée, Katerina, via Alesha, to a former army captain Snegirev to help ease his indigence in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Alesha's brother, Dmitrii, in the pre-history of the novel, had severely beaten Snegirev in front of the latter's son, Il'iusha. This caused a sense of shame and righteous indignation to well up in his son. Poverty, severe illnesses and the stigma caused by Dmitrii's beating haunt the family living in their crowded tenement.

The two hundred ruble bills occupy a central role in one of the most climactic moments in Snegirev's story. As soon as Alesha hands them over, 'the banknotes seemed to have an electrifying effect upon the Staff Captain'.<sup>22</sup> He takes the notes and stands speechless 'for about about a minute' before Alesha — the money is already acquiring a certain 'thinginess'. Snegirev explains what is becoming visible to him through the two bills he still holds in his hand, enumerating the various *possibilities* they could open up for him. 'Listen, Aleksei Fyodorovich [...] it's about time you heard what I've got to say, because you can't even imagine what these two hundred roubles could do for me'.

Snegirev raises the reader to pathos as he recounts in detail, over a number of pages, the moving tale of his family's imagined recovery from poverty and illness. 'I'll be able to get medical treatment for my lady wife and for Ninochka, my humpback angel' and further on, 'I can start getting treatment for my dear ones, I'll send the girls back to St Petersburg, I'll buy some beef, we'll have proper meals at last. My God, it's all a dream!' The happiness that this piece of paper contains becomes apparent to Snegirev precisely now because, at the back of his mind, he is aware that he cannot take the money. As Snegirev asks Alesha at the end of the chapter, 'What could I have said to my little boy if I had accepted money for the shame we suffered?'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 262, PSS, 14:190.

<sup>23</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 266, PSS, 14:193.

The captain experiences a moment of peculiar intensity, what could even be called a minor epiphany of sorts, visible in ‘his countenance pale and agitated, his lips protruding and moving as though trying to articulate something; no sound emerged, yet his lips continued to twitch strangely’.<sup>24</sup> He crumples the bills in his fists, throws them to the ground and tramples them with his heel.<sup>25</sup> With this dramatic gesture, Snegirev, realizing the recalcitrant object’s connection to his entire future, gives physical expression to the money’s obtrusiveness. These papery bills showed themselves to be more than simply their material or physical form. They contain, in potentia, all the captain’s dreams for himself and his family. This revelation comes to Snegirev because he knows that he cannot use them.

This is consistently the manner in which ‘things’ disclose their deeper existentiality in Dostoevskii’s fictional universe. Ivan Karamazov, for instance, on the brink of madness, finds objects to be obtrusive, elusive and unready-to-hand. The ‘things’ in Ivan’s immediate surroundings are not conforming to his purposes; they are slipping through his fingers. There is the coat that he forgets to take off, despite the unusual heat of the room, in his final meeting with Smerdiakov.<sup>26</sup> There is the wet towel he believes he has put around his head to calm his fever, though he has done nothing of the sort.<sup>27</sup> There is the particular spot on the sofa where his personal devil both is and is not sitting.<sup>28</sup> There is the glass of water that Ivan believes he has thrown at the devil, though it still stands unspilt on his table.<sup>29</sup>

Why does Dostoevskii place such an emphasis on everyday objects during Ivan’s developing delirium? They demonstrate doubly that, in an everyday sense, the world is arranged in a network of objects for human purposes, and also that human beings engage in

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<sup>24</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 265, *PSS*, 14:192.

<sup>25</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 265, *PSS*, 14:193.

<sup>26</sup> *PSS*, 15:61.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:69

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:86.

these purposes pre-cognitively, subconsciously, absorbedly. When this absorbed relation becomes apparent to Ivan in a break or tear in the fabric of his reality, the persistent elusiveness of the world, in his madness, surprises him. These unusable things signpost, for Ivan, his descent into delirium.

### 2.2.3 The Thing Through Mental Arithmetic

Money is an important object in Dostoevskii's fiction. I have already mentioned a few examples related to money from *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*: the two hundred ruble bills offered to Snegriev, the 3,000 rubles Fedor Pavlovich wishes to grant to Grushenka and Lebedev's 'misplaced' four hundred rubles. The significance of money is felt throughout Dostoevskii's fiction, from *Poor Folk* all the way through to *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevskii also had problems with money for much of his life. After the death of his brother Mikhail, Dostoevskii decided to take on the debts that had accumulated from the journal the brothers published together, as well as debts from his brother's other businesses.<sup>30</sup> He had to leave Russia and wrote *The Idiot* and *Demons* in a state of financial exile in Europe, fearing the debtor's prison if he returned to St Petersburg.<sup>31</sup> His letters from this time period reflect his constant preoccupation and deep struggles with money, as he pleads with publishers at *The Russian Messenger* for ever-growing advances on his work, and with friends and acquaintances, such as Maikov and Turgenev, for small loans to help him survive.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout this period of financial difficulty, the letters show Dostoevskii's tortured relationship with money. He is always trying to 'account' for it, by calculating how much he

<sup>30</sup> *Letters*, 2:152-55, *PSS*, 28.2:116-18 (9 April 1865).

<sup>31</sup> *Letters*, e.g. 3:104, *PSS*, 28.2:321 (7 November/26 October 1868) and *Letters*, 3:252-54, *PSS*, 29.1:121-24 (19/7 May 1870).

<sup>32</sup> *Letters*, 3:141, *PSS*, 29.1:22 (10 March/26 February 1869).

has in hand and how much he expects to receive ‘shortly’ from various sources. There are numerous such letters during this time. I can simply take one letter written to Apollon Maikov to illustrate how Dostoevskii had firsthand experiences of the ‘slipperiness’ of money when one tries to ‘account’ for it abstractly.

At the time of writing this letter, Dostoevskii has just sent *The Eternal Husband* to the journal *The Dawn*, and was expecting to receive payment for it shortly.

There is a *minimum* of nine of *The Russian Herald's* signatures in the novella. It's absolutely for certain that that's a minimum; it's probably 9 1/2 , but I'm only putting 9 for the first instance. Nine signatures is 1350 rubles. So far I've received advances of [...] 550 to 600 rubles from them. (We'll settle up at the final accounting; for the time being let's take the maximum, that is, 600.) That means I surely still have a minimum of 750 rubles coming. Out of that, as I've already written, I ask you, dear fellow, at the first convenient opportunity, to take *two hundred* rubles from Kashpnev, as payment of my debt to you. That means that *most likely* I'll have 550 rubles coming (or a little more at the final accounting, but now, at least, no less than 550 rubles).<sup>33</sup>

Extracts such as this one are commonplace in the letters. The qualifiers he has to add to his assertions, ‘absolutely for certain’ [*sovershenno verno*], ‘probably’ [*naverno*], ‘most likely’ [*naverno*] as he navigates his complex financial situation and asks for money from here and there are notable. Of course, he could do nothing else. His poverty forces him to calculate in this manner, account for money that is there, and that is not there, but soon will, ‘probably’, ‘most likely’ arrive. Yet, the human hands in charge of administering and delivering such

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<sup>33</sup> *Letters*, 3:205, PSS, 29.1:79-80 (19/7 December 1869).

payments would not always move as swiftly as Dostoevskii hopes, stressed as they must have been with their own financial matters, and also experiencing logistical difficulties in getting the money sent to him abroad through third parties. As a result, Dostoevskii's accounting often did not pan out.

Later in this letter, he also mentions a potential deal with Stellovskii for the rights to a separate edition of *The Idiot*. He states, 'A thousand rubles from Stellovsky now is *complete salvation* for me, resurrection! But is there anything at all serious here? Is it really possible?'<sup>34</sup> Indeed, negotiations with Stellovskii, in this matter, led nowhere and the author's desperation can be sensed, as he infuses this imagined money, from a deal which so far exists only in his and his stepson, Pavel Isaev's, minds, with his dreams. He imbues the sum with the power of his 'complete salvation' and 'resurrection', yet it was never really there in the first place. His accounting, once again, turns out to be fanciful, and the money, which was never really there, slips out of his hands, as the plans predictably come to nothing.

The letter is brimming with other details exhibiting Dostoevskii's mental financial gymnastics as he calculates the amounts of money he was receiving from pawning his belongings, along with the interest he pays on them monthly and his plan to repay lenders by acquiring an advance from Kashpirev at *The Dawn* for his forthcoming publication of *The Eternal Husband*.<sup>35</sup> In this letter, his main purpose is to get Maikov to negotiate, on his behalf, with Kashpirev to send payments so that Dostoevskii can repay his lenders by

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<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, 3:207, *PSS*, 29.1:81. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that this is the same Stellovskii who made a notoriously hazardous deal with Dostoevskii that required the author to submit a novel to him of at least 12 signatures by November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1866. Failure to deliver on time would have resulted in Dostoevskii forfeiting the rights to all his works for the following nine years to Stellovskii. Dostoevskii eventually delivered his novel 'The Gambler' at the very last moment.

<sup>35</sup> *Letters*, 3:206, *PSS*, 29.1:79-80.

Christmas and acquire basic necessities. ‘Now the whole question is whether this can be arranged. Talk to Kashpirev, my dear friend!’<sup>36</sup>

Money, in this period, continues to elude him. His guilt and shame at having to borrow from his friends, and having to scheme slightly about expected inheritances<sup>37</sup> is evident. He is afraid he will be accused of ‘money-grubbing and greed’.<sup>38</sup> His requests for funds are often pleading or indignant, and consistently express his desperation with an urgent tone. He feels guilt at not being able to send money to his dependents. ‘My heart is worn out; I haven’t given them any help in too long a time! And she and Katya are so badly off now that it couldn’t be any worse.’<sup>39</sup>

Thus, Dostoevskii must have been acutely aware, both intellectually and emotionally, of the slipperiness of money, and his dire straits would have left a deep impression on his creative imagination. It is also worth mentioning that Dostoevskii, famously, suffered from a strong gambling addiction. Although he had overcome this addiction before he wrote *Brothers*,<sup>40</sup> the author was deeply aware, through his life experiences, not only of the elation and despair contained within this all-pervasive object, but also its’ liquidity.

Dostoevskii’s fiction reflects the idea that money remains elusive when ‘accounted for’ with mental arithmetic.<sup>41</sup> I could refer to Raskol’nikov’s justification for his planned

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Letters*, 3:169-175, *PSS*, 9.1:46-52 (26/16 August 1869) and *Letters*, 3:182, *PSS*, 29.1:59 (10 September/29 August 1869).

<sup>38</sup> *Letters*, 3:217, *PSS*, 29.1:92 (26/14 December 1869).

<sup>39</sup> *Letters*, 3:199, *PSS*, 29.1:74 (8 November/27 October 1869).

<sup>40</sup> *Letters*, 3:339-343, *PSS*, 29.1:196-200 (13/1 April 1871). See also footnote on p. 342 of Lowe’s translation.

<sup>41</sup> John Jones, *Dostoevsky*, p. 351. Jones, too, recognises that ‘mental arithmetic’ often leads away from the truth. He makes specific reference to the attempts by various characters, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to calculate how much money Dmitrii squandered in Mokroe, and how much he actually had in possession.

murder of the pawnbroker, Alena Ivanovna in *Crime and Punishment*. The initial rationale for the murder appears to be that killing Alena Ivanovna, stealing the money she intends to give to a monastery after her death, and redirecting it to helping more deserving people, would serve a great utilitarian purpose. If he steals the money from the pawnbroker then ‘hundreds, perhaps thousands of human beings could be given a start; dozens of families saved from beggary, decay, ruin, vice, venereal disease; and all with her money’.<sup>42</sup> The presumed utilitarian value of the act is well captured in the phrase: ‘One death, in exchange for thousands of lives — its simple arithmetic!’ As Sarah Young has already recognised, readers are here in the territory of money performing miracles, considering how improbable Raskol’nikov’s utilitarian arithmetic actually is in this hypothesis.<sup>43</sup> After the murder, Raskol’nikov shelves his grand designs and simply hides the money, in a panic, underneath a stone in a yard.

A few examples from *The Brothers Karamazov* can reinforce the validity of this point regarding abstract calculations’ inability to approach the existential phenomenon of money in Dostoevskii’s novels. Neliudov’s interrogation of Dmitrii acts as an example, where the magistrate, absorbed in his duty, searches for but fails to discover, on Dmitrii’s person, the missing money he deduced into existence.<sup>44</sup> I could also refer to Mme Khokhlakova’s fanciful ‘gold mine’ accounting for a possible 3,000 rubles.<sup>45</sup> But for the sake of brevity, I will bring this theme into focus by looking at Trifon, the innkeeper at Mokroe who swindles Dmitrii of much of his money.

At the trial, Trifon comes to all sorts of fantastic conclusions about Dmitrii’s money from that evening, claiming Dmitrii referred to the ‘sixth thousand’ he was spending with

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<sup>42</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 59-60, *PSS*, 6:54.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah J. Young, ‘Introduction’ in *Crime and Punishment*, pp. vii – xxiv, xv.

<sup>44</sup> *PSS*, 14:434.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:349-50.

Trifon in Mokroe, surmising from this that he spent three the first time around, and three the next, ‘Three and three make six’.<sup>46</sup> Of course, the reader, aware of Trifon’s prejudices and disingenuousness, does not believe his account. Dostoevskii uses irony to demonstrate how far Trifon and his audience are from the truth precisely when they feel themselves closest to it.

In such ‘mental arithmetic’, the money is said to have been understood when it is properly ‘deduced’ by being counted out and spoken for. However, the phenomenon of money is still far from the character’s grasp. Trifon thinks he understands money because he has seen it. ‘I know money when I see it, I wasn’t born yesterday...’<sup>47</sup> In fact, money, in Dostoevskii’s novels, cannot at all be understood simply by ‘looking’ at it.<sup>48</sup> It is properly what it is only in its being thrown to Trifon’s singers and dancers; in being clenched in Dmitrii’s bloody hand; in its pouring out of his over-stuffed pocket; in its being carefully sewn up in his ‘amulet’.<sup>49</sup> The money *is* in the use of it for human possibilities, not in a theoretical accounting of it.

Occasionally Trifon’s desire to account for the whereabouts of money through calculation is imitated by commentators on Dostoevskii. Alexander Razumov, for instance, spends an entire article looking for the 3,000 rubles Dmitri has sown up in his amulet. He

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<sup>46</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 630-31, *PSS*, 14:451.

<sup>47</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 630, *PSS*, 14:450.

<sup>48</sup> The example of Goliadkin in *The Double* (1846), who extracts the greatest pleasure from what his money ‘looks like’, springs to mind: ‘The wad of green, grey, blue, red and various multicoloured notes probably looked very amicably and approvingly at Mr Golyadkin too: with a beaming face he put the open wallet onto the table in front of him and rubbed his hands hard to indicate the greatest pleasure’. Later on, Goliadkin changes his banknotes into smaller demoninations to make it seem as though he has more. This also gives him great pleasure, even though he loses out, in financial terms, from the exchange. Dostoevsky, *The Double*, p. 4, *PSS*, 1:110, 1:122.

<sup>49</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 617, *PSS*, 14:441.



provides a ‘reconstruction of events’,<sup>50</sup> and his new chronology, seeking to account for the true numerical value of the money in Dmitrii’s possession, leads him to suppose that Katerina had actually given him 4,500 rubles instead of the 3,000 claimed by Dmitrii.

This quibbling over numbers reflects Trifon’s own logic, and suggests that Razumov is making the same error of trying to ‘look’ for the money by establishing its quantity. This leads him in several strange directions. For instance, Razumov claims that Dmitrii’s fearful response to Zosima’s bow has nothing to do with Dmitrii’s apprehension at the idea that Zosima is providing a prophetic gesture indicating some future crime Dmitrii will commit, or the great suffering he will have to endure. Instead Dmitrii’s response to Zosima’s bow has to do with the money he owes to Katerina Ivanovna. ‘The answer is simple: he is remembering another deep bow made to him, by Katerina Ivanovna, and the accompanying circumstances.’<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps it could be argued that both could be true at the same time, but Razumov only mentions the latter, and suggests that the bow by Katerina is the primary cause of Dmitrii’s reaction in this scene. In that case, it would appear that Dmitrii completely misunderstands the warning that Zosima is offering to him.<sup>52</sup> Razumov then states that Dmitrii sought a lump sum of 3,000 rubles from Madame Khokhlakova and others in order to add it to the 1,500 he is keeping inside his shirt, so he can give, to Katerina Ivanovna, all the money he owes her (4,500 rubles apparently). When money is interpreted in Dostoevskii’s fiction by attempting to ‘account’ for it, it can lead to conjecture.

Jill Porter provides insights into the impact of the material history of Russian money on Dostoevskii’s fiction. She states that, due to the ‘proliferation of diverse currencies’,

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<sup>50</sup> Aleksandr Razumov, ‘The Secret of Dmitri Karamazov’s Money’, *Russian Studies in Literature*, 51, 2 (2015) 54-65 (p. 62).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>52</sup> *PSS*, 14:258.

rampant counterfeiting and high inflation, the *assignatsiia* or paper ruble had been devalued to the extent that the entire monetary system required an overhaul in 1839-43.<sup>53</sup> In itself, this is illuminating and provides interesting context for a discussion of money in Dostoevskii. However, from this fact, Porter then suggests that the instability of monetary value is one of the threads that lead to Dostoevsky's fantastic realism, and especially to the phenomenon of doubling in his fiction.<sup>54</sup>

Though the parallels are not difficult to see — counterfeit money, counterfeit characters — the inverse of this argument would be that if the monetary value were more stable, perhaps Dostoevskii would not have involved doubling in his fiction. This is indeed quite a stretch, and though Porter does not explicitly address this, it is clearly implied in her argument, which is that rampant inflation inspired Dostoevskii's fascination with doubling. It is worth noting that Porter intuits many of the ideas I have been discussing above. She recognises that 'money forms part of a distinct and generically marked emotional economy'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, money means more than simply the papery-metallic substance: It is connected to the desires of people who make use of it and determine its value.

However, Porter's argument takes its roots in the idea that money ought to be more 'real', that is, have a stable value — a value in-itself — unimpeded by human activity:

Though silver's value as a commodity might make it seem like a sign of 'real' value, coins too are conventional signs. They contain varying and frequently unknown amounts of the precious metals for which they are named, and the values of these metals is secured by political decree and social custom. Far from affirming any

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<sup>53</sup> Jill Porter, *Economies of Feeling: Russian Literature under Nicholas I* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

natural, ‘real’ supremacy of metal over paper money, Dostoevsky portrays the value of silver rubles [...] as the most devilish magic of all.<sup>56</sup>

Porter appears very close to recognising that it is senseless to search for a ‘real’, or intrinsic value of money, apart from its existence as a ‘conventional sign’. However, in the above quotation, Porter appears to imply that if money had a more stable value, one that was not impacted by ‘political decree and social custom’, or that could correspond more accurately to the ‘amounts of the precious metals’ in the coin, it would have been more ‘real’, that is more independently determinable, and not reliant on the human activity that, in actual fact, always shapes its value. The framework within which this discussion takes place is already oriented by the idea that money ought to be valuable in-itself, without reference to human activity (political decree or social custom).

This approach again reflects an attempt to ‘account’ for the missing value in the currency, in Dostoevskii’s historical time period, in the author’s fiction. The remainder of this presumed lost value is located in Dostoevskii’s doubles. The broader point that the fluctuations in currency could be a reflection of a society in a state of intense flux, and this flux could have been translated into the fiction in myriad ways still stands.

I turn to a significant scene in *The Idiot* to further demonstrate the varied ways in which Dostoevskii presents this opposition between false mental arithmetic and the true phenomenon of money in his novels. Boris Christa has already recognised the pervasive influence of money on Dostoevskii’s fictional world, charting its narrative centrality both as a motivational tool and as an aide to determining the status or authority of characters in various

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

dynamic relations with others.<sup>57</sup> In *The Idiot*, Christa recognises ‘spectacular fluctuations of fortune’.<sup>58</sup> A few prominent examples include Rogozhin’s ‘riches to rags’ trajectory, Myshkin’s initial impoverishment and sudden acquisition of inherited wealth, and Evgenii Pavlovich too, suffers a sudden decline as his rich uncle is caught for embezzlement of funds and commits suicide. This contributes to the carnivalesque nature of the novel, resulting in several ‘crownings’ and ‘decrownings’: Bakhtin’s terms for reversals of fortune.

On one level, *The Idiot* is a novel about money. Yet here too money conceals itself when ‘mental arithmetic’ attempts to circumscribe it, revealing itself only when it becomes unfit for use. For instance, several suitors in the first part of the novel seek to estimate the value of Nastas’ia Filippovna. How much is Nastas’ia worth? No one can be sure. Is it the seventy-five thousand rubles estimated by Totskii?<sup>59</sup> The eighteen thousand initially offered by Rogozhin, or is it one of his subsequent calculations — forty thousand? One hundred thousand?<sup>60</sup>

The slipperiness of the figure reflects the obtuseness of the task. It is when the money burns in the fireplace that an atmosphere of hysteria and madness seeps into the room. ‘I’d drag it out with my teeth for just a thousand!’<sup>61</sup> exclaims Ferdysenko, and another agrees with him. Gania is placed in a double bind: Take the money and reveal his greed, or refuse it and reveal his pride. Through Nastas’ia Filippovna’s dramatic gesture, the players become aware of their miscalculations and mistaken attempts to put a price on her and bystanders gain cognizance of their own greed. The true significance of the money becomes painfully

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<sup>57</sup> Boris Christa, ‘Dostoevskii and money’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, ed. by W.J. Leatherbarrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 93-110 (p. 93).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>59</sup> *PSS*, 8:41.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:97-98.

<sup>61</sup> *The Idiot*, p. 184, *PSS*, 8:146.

apparent to witnesses precisely as the money is becoming unusable, when it is ‘burning for nothing!’.<sup>62</sup>

### 2.3 The Iconic Object

In this section, I search for the Being of the icon in Dostoevskii’s fiction, or its ‘iconicity’. I wish to discover the icon’s existential materiality: how characters interact with it; what effect it appears to have on them and when, specifically, if ever, do they become aware of its iconicity.

For Malcolm Jones, the fact that so many icons in Dostoevskii are desecrated, or, at least threatened with desecration, suggests they are not properly functioning as ‘gateways to the divine realm’.<sup>63</sup> Unbesmirched icons are ‘hard to find in Dostoevsky’s writing, though such a role is lightly sketched in the story of Zosima’s dying brother Markel’.<sup>64</sup> The desecrated icon, therefore, presents a hermeneutic challenge to religiously inclined readings of Dostoevskii’s fiction, as its profaned state *might* imply a desacralized or abandoned world.

As Jefferson Gatrall notes, commentators have taken a variety of different approaches to uncover the iconic in Dostoevskii: ‘His prose has been described as a “narrative icon,” his urban landscapes as “imaginary icons,” and his characters as “living icons”’.<sup>65</sup> Though each of these approaches can provide metaphorical or allegorical readings of the broad category of the ‘iconic’ in Dostoevskii’s fiction, they cannot grasp the iconicity of the icon unless they go through the desecrated object itself. Gatrall states that the ‘divine face of the icon [...] is

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, ‘The Icon in the Picture: Reframing the Question of Dostoevsky’s Modernist Iconography’, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 48, 1 (2004), 1-25 (p. 1).

reverentially protected by Dostoevsky from the profane gaze of modern realism.<sup>66</sup> In other words, though icons can be ‘named, venerated, or even addressed, as if they were persons’, the faces on icons ‘remain strictly unrepresentable’. The icon itself is, quite literally, ‘effaced’.<sup>67</sup> This means that the object, the particular texture of the medium, the techniques applied onto the medium to capture the subject, never become the subject of ekphrastic treatment.

Since the actual faces of icons in Dostoevskii’s novels have been so meticulously placed beyond direct representation, I must infer that the selective associations possible between characters’ physical features and iconic objects — such as the one Katalin Gaal makes between Myshkin’s ‘large pale blue eyes’<sup>68</sup> and icons, for instance — are not really intended as direct representations of the iconic. The effacement of the icon is meant to indicate that — as was the case with human beings and with other equipment — interpreters cannot approach its Being by observing or commenting on the iconic figure’s particular features — by simply ‘looking’ at it.

Instead, the path to uncovering the iconicity of the icon goes through an understanding of the way human beings interacts with it; by exploring the response it evokes in witnesses or observers.<sup>69</sup> In a letter to Maikov justifying his conclusion for *The Idiot*, Dostoevskii indirectly recognises that the icon is intended to be more than simply the sum of its material features. The author exhorts Maikov, ‘In a word: “Do you believe in the icon or

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Katalin Gaal, ‘Iconic Representations in Dostoevsky’s post-Siberian Fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Queensland, 2012), p. 78. <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/docview/1372292032?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 3 Jun. 2021].

<sup>69</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, pp. 39-40.

not!” (My dear friend, believe more bravely and courageously).<sup>70</sup> Frank recognises that Dostoevskii is here referring to the experience of Slavophile, Ivan Kireevskii:

Kireevsky had described—as he stood before an icon of the mother of God—[his] imaginative immersion into the mystery of religious faith. As Kireevsky gazed at the icon, he was overcome by the feeling that it was not merely a wooden board painted with images. For centuries that board had soaked up all the passion and all the prayers addressed to it and had become “a living organism, a meeting place between the creator and the people.”<sup>71</sup>

This strengthens the idea that the icon’s central importance lies in its interconnection with human observers who bear witness, and respond to its content. Its primary purpose is not aesthetic, but existential. I must uncover the manner in which the icon is serviceable for Dasein.

### 2.3.1 The Sign in Heidegger’s Being and Time

With everyday objects such as money, bolts on doors, envelopes, the equipmental role of the object — its particular functionality in a referential context of objects — is clearly apparent. However, there is another class of everyday objects, which are not only practical ‘tools’, but also act as *signs*, providing an orientation for human observers within their material environment. The icon is an example of such a ‘signifying’ object.

Signs are also clearly pieces of equipment, but they have their own form of relation in the referential totality within which they gain significance. A sign indicates something

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<sup>70</sup> Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 575, *PSS*, 28.2:329.

<sup>71</sup> Frank., *ibid*; Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, trans. by Constance Garnett, 4 vols. (New York: Chatto and Windus, 1968). First published in 1870.

unseen. Its' specific character consists in showing or indicating. Heidegger gives the examples of 'signposts, boundary-stones, the ball for the mariner's storm-warning, signals, banners, signs of mourning, and the like'.<sup>72</sup> In 2020, societies all over the world are attempting to manage the spread of COVID-19. Though the virus itself may not be visible to the naked eye, at times the visible manifestation of the illness can be perceived in symptoms — a dry cough or a fever. These symptoms are not the illness itself, but are signs indicating or pointing to its unseen presence. Much has been said recently about 'asymptomatic' conditions, where the signs that the illness is present do not manifest themselves. In such cases too, the illness is there — it exists — but remains unseen, non-manifest.

Signs have a variety of indicative functions.

Among signs there are symptoms, warning signals, signs of things that have happened already, signs to mark something, signs by which things are recognised; these have different ways of indicating, regardless of what may be serving as such a sign.<sup>73</sup>

Heidegger uses the example of an indicator on a 'motor car', which in his time would have been an 'adjustable red arrow, whose position indicates the direction the vehicle will take — at an intersection, for instance'.<sup>74</sup> In this example, the indicator functions as a piece of equipment that the driver can use, in order to signal their intended direction of travel. The sign discloses the impending spatial movement of the driver. Primarily the sign signals to other vehicles around the driver's, who then respond by 'giving way on the proper side or by stopping'. Such a sign, thus, addresses itself to Dasein's concerned dealings within the world of equipmental objects. It directs or orients Dasein's circumspective attention towards the

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<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.



environment in a particular way, in order to alert those concerned to the presence of something not directly manifest. ‘In this example of a sign, the difference between the reference of serviceability and the reference of indicating becomes visible in a rough and ready fashion.’<sup>75</sup>

The icon is a doubled object — as a sign, it announces something unseen, and as a ‘tool’ or piece of equipment, it facilitates prayer. As Sophie Ollivier says, ‘By its presence the motionless icon asserts the possibility of redemption, it announces the Kingdom of Heaven. But in order to realise this possibility it must become the object of contemplation and prayer.’<sup>76</sup> The implied presence of the kingdom of heaven, though unseen and non-manifest in finite existence, is indicated in the iconic object. In this manner, the icon signals a promise of redemption and metaphysical harmony underlying the evident chaos, sin and fragmentation of finite life. Icons also assist the believer, in a practical fashion, in his/her pursuit of a closer relationship to divinity through prayer or contemplation. As Malcolm Jones explains, icons are intended to be ‘gateways to the divine realm, linking the believer to the saints and the Holy Trinity’.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the serviceable function of an icon is to invite the believer to participate in divine transformation through conscious acts of free will.<sup>78</sup>

### 2.3.2 Vlas

In *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevskii's entry ‘Vlas’ retells a story of two peasants who get involved in a game of who ‘could do the most daring, shocking thing’.<sup>79</sup> Their game culminates in one of the peasants goading the other to go to Holy Communion, take the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>76</sup> Sophie Ollivier, ‘Icons in Dostoevsky's works’ in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. by George Pattison and Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 51-68 (p. 56).

<sup>77</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, p. 39.

<sup>78</sup> Gaal, pp. 8, 42.

<sup>79</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:159-61, PSS, 21:34-35.

Eucharist without swallowing it, put it on a stick and shoot it. The peasant takes up the gun, but just before he is about to fire, he has a vision of the cross and the crucified Christ on it. He falls down unconscious. Later, the peasant goes to a monk in a monastery, ‘crawling’ to the Elder, ‘on his knees’, seeking repentance for his sin. Although the Eucharist is clearly not an icon, as a symbolically sacred religious object under threat of destruction, its existential functionality is similar to that of desecrated icons in Dostoevskii’s oeuvre. Thus, this tale in ‘Vlas’ and Dostoevskii’s exposition about it provides a blueprint by aid of which interpreters can make intelligible a variety of responses to the iconic.

Such an event of desecration calls forth two fundamental impulses in the Russian people, according to Dostoevskii. On the one hand, the desire to profane an iconic object reveals an urge to transgress,

to go beyond the limit, an urge for that sinking sensation one has when one has come to the edge of an abyss, leans halfway over it, looks in to the bottomless pit itself, and — in some particular but not infrequent cases — throws oneself headlong into it like a madman.<sup>80</sup>

Dostoevskii repeatedly emphasizes, in ‘Vlas’, that he is describing, through this story, a particular feeling, compelling people towards such a presumed limit-experience of abyssal depth. It is thus not quite an idea, but something deeper that stirs the provocateur through impulse and unconscious intent: ‘There are many things one cannot conceive but only feel. There is a great deal one can know unconsciously.’<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:164, PSS, 21:37.

What Dostoevskii contends is that, amongst the Russian people, even ‘the worst wrongdoer’ possesses ‘some secret sense,’ of the degradation of their own soul. At bottom, he is aware that ‘he’s nothing more than a wretch’.<sup>82</sup> It is out of this sense of his/her own unworthiness, that the provocateur instigates a game that leads to the act of profanation. For the heights of rapture induced by the indulgence of one’s own sense of ‘temerity’ or ‘audacity’, the provocateur desecrates the sacred object.<sup>83</sup> The peasant-provocateur in this instance, is willing to ‘make a mockery of something the People hold so sacred, and thus to break one’s links with the whole land; to destroy oneself forever through negation and pride solely for the sake of one moment of triumph’.<sup>84</sup> Readers shall encounter different versions of this ‘national type’ in the iconoclastic scenes in the post-Siberian novels.

On the other hand, when the peasant is on the brink of ‘shooting’ the Eucharist, a radically different, though no less primordial, urge expresses itself — an impulse to ‘restore and save oneself’.<sup>85</sup> In this sense, as Linda Ivanits recognises, the “‘Vlas” paradigm’ names a conversion journey, within which ‘great evildoers repent and set out to suffer and expiate their sins’.<sup>86</sup> The peasant’s vision and fainting spell just before the act of desecration suggests that what the peasant sensed in the threat to the symbolic object, is the threat of the potential absence of what it is intended to indicate — the promise of metaphysical harmony, and personal redemption. What immediately follows from the threat<sup>87</sup> is an intensified urge for

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<sup>82</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:162, PSS, 21:36.

<sup>83</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:163, PSS, 21:36.

<sup>84</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:164, PSS, 21:38.

<sup>85</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:161, PSS, 21:35.

<sup>86</sup> Linda Ivanits, *Dostoevsky and the Russian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 152.

<sup>87</sup> As is the case here with the symbolic object — the Eucharist — icons in Dostoevskii’s fiction are sometimes not actually destroyed in the scenes I explore, but are, at the very least, ‘threatened’ with desecration.

salvation. In other words, the threat of the ‘absence’ of the sacred object can remind witnesses, with real force and intensity, about what its presence is meant to signify.

### 2.3.3 Responses to the Icon

Now I turn to actual icons, rather than sacred symbolic objects more broadly. Although Ivanits does not directly discuss the role of icons in ‘Vlas’, what is crucial for her in the narrative is how vulnerable one is to the possibility of transformation: ‘the Vlas paradigm is first and foremost about the existence of conscience, and as long as this remained, transformation was possible’.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the iconicity of the icon is inextricably related to responses it evokes in witnesses.

In everyday situations, where the object functions as an ‘incidental background detail or as a symbolic motif in a character sketch’, the icon does not announce itself to the characters. As Gatrall notes, ‘[i]cons appear through [Dostoevskii’s] work, often as if in passing, during descriptions of domestic interiors, monasteries, churches, cemeteries, pawnshops, and prison barracks.’<sup>89</sup> Occasionally, characters do ‘notice’ the icon, and interact with the object in the intended manner, by praying before it.

Notably, characters often appear compelled to prayer in times of crisis, once again highlighting the connection between the icon, what it represents, and the character’s own feeling of vulnerability, in that particular moment in time. Dunia in *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, ‘eventually knelt in front of the icon and prayed fervently for a long time’, when she needed to decide whether to accept Luzhin’s marriage proposal.<sup>90</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alesha’s mother, too, hysterically prays to an icon at a time of crisis in a scene that can itself be thought of as an iconic memory for Alesha, as Thompson has so

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<sup>88</sup> Ivanits, p. 154

<sup>89</sup> Gatrall, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 33, 6:32.

persuasively argued.<sup>91</sup> In *A Meek One*, the titular character also prays before an icon at a time of significant crisis, as shall be discussed in more detail below. In such cases, as Gatrall recognises, '[f]or many characters, praying before a candle-lit icon suffices to indicate the depth of their unwavering religious devotion'.<sup>92</sup> If a character already recognises their connection with the incarnated divinity the icon is intended to represent, its symbolic significance intensifies, particularly in times of crisis.

### 2.3.3.1 The Provocateurs

Just as an icon cannot be objectively defined by stating 'what' it is made of, it cannot evoke an objective, universal response in its viewer. There are several provocateurs who instigate profanatory act against icons. Their responses to the icon are also worth interpreting briefly here. Like the peasants in 'Vlas', Fedor Karamazov, too, tries to desecrate an icon. In the pre-history of the novel, he threatened to spit on his second wife, Sofia Ivanovna's icon of the Mother of God as a provocative challenge to God. Within the pages of the novel, he recounts this memory for Alesha, Sofia Ivanovna's son.

Fedor Pavlovich also possesses the two contrary impulses flowing through all Russian souls. He gains a self-abasing pleasure from staring into the abyss but he also reveals an implicit, though concealed belief in God. In a conversation directly preceding his recollection of his attempt to profane his wife's icon, he professes a hatred of Russia, suggesting the nation should sweep monasteries and 'all this mystical mumbo-jumbo' out of Russia. Yet, a moment later, the same Fedor asks his son, 'You know, Ivan, God must have arranged things like this on purpose, mustn't He? Tell me, Ivan: does God exist or not?'<sup>93</sup> Ivan draws attention to this remark, allying it to Smerdiakov's belief that there must be two hermits

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<sup>91</sup> Thompson, pp. 77-82.

<sup>92</sup> Gatrall, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 169, *PSS*, 14:123.

somewhere in the desert who could move mountains. Both Smerdiakov and Fedor Pavlovich regularly endorse atheistic viewpoints, but, despite themselves, their hearts are still willing to acknowledge the existence of God, if only momentarily, and in fits and bursts.

Fedor Pavlovich recounts for Alesha and Ivan how he once sought to ‘knock that holy nonsense’ out of Sofia Ivanovna. He takes her icon. ‘Look, here’s your icon, here it is, I’m going to take it to spit on it now, in front of you, and nothing will happen to me!...’<sup>94</sup> Knowing Fedor Pavlovich, readers may recognise that his atheistic urge to spit on the icon, like the peasants in ‘Vlas’, is born of the inner turmoil of one who, loving Christ despite himself, is aware of his own self-degradation and unworthiness of the love that supposedly dwells within each and all. It is this feeling of abjection that causes Fedor Pavlovich to want to destroy the religious principle he cannot feel himself worthy of, in someone else through an act of desecration. This feeling is perhaps behind many of Fedor Pavlovich’s ‘flamboyant gesture[s]’,<sup>95</sup> and is at the root of many of the provocative games which usually directly precede the threatened desecration of icons in the post-Siberian works.

There are several other provocateurs in these iconoclastic scenes who appear to possess the same impulse to negate what the sign represents, out of a feeling of perverse pride in their own self-abasement. The pawnbroker in *A Meek One* (1876) and Versilov in *The Adolescent* (1875) are both familiar with the self-destructive pleasure gained from a prideful rebellion against the very same order that they deem themselves unworthy of. Versilov’s desire to desecrate the object, and the pawnbroker transformation of the iconic object into a commercial object, reflect their inner divisions, and the disfigured or ambivalent state of their own living relation to the divinity the sign represents. As Rowan Williams has stated of

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<sup>94</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 173, *PSS*, 14:126.

<sup>95</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 128, *PSS*, 14:93.

Versilov, ‘The breaking of the image [...] is a symbol, a rather obvious symbol of his inner dividedness or brokenness’.<sup>96</sup>

### 2.3.3.2 The Victims

The central contention throughout this chapter, across a broad range of objects, is that the ‘thing’ reveals its existential materiality when it is broken, obstinate, or obtrusive — when it cannot be used in the usual manner. Consequently, profanation, which makes the iconic object unready-to-hand and conspicuous, induces characters who interact with it to become aware of the object’s existentiality, its particular function and what it is intended to symbolize about their relationship to the divine.

In *Demons*, a group of young nihilists calling themselves the ‘scoffers’ or ‘sneerers’ indulge in various scandalous, provocative adventures in the town in order to satisfy their curiosity and frivolity.<sup>97</sup> Liamshin, a member of this group, along with Fedka, Stepan Verkhovenskii’s former serf, who carries out the murders of the Lebiadkins later in the novel, are thought to be responsible for one such adventure — the desecration of a large icon of the Mother of God, standing at the gates of the town’s church at the marketplace. ‘[O]ne night the icon was stolen, the glass of the icon-case broken, the grating smashed, and from the crown and the setting several stones and pearls removed’.<sup>98</sup>

The responsible parties are not present when a crowd gathers to witness the desecrated object. The desecrated icon has a peculiar effect on the crowd’s sensibilities. It elicits, in the vast majority of them, a renewed faith and an intensified urge for salvation. ‘A

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<sup>96</sup> Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 197.

<sup>97</sup> For more on this group, see subsection 3.1.2.2, ‘Curiosity’, of this thesis.

<sup>98</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, trans. by Robert A. Maguire (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 359, *PSS*, 10:252-53. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation.

crowd was constantly in attendance, just how big, Lord only knows, but at least a hundred people [...] As people arrived, they crossed themselves and kissed the icon; they began to make offerings and a collection plate appeared, with a monk standing by the plate'. A 'fat and sallow merchant' also drives up to the event. He too, 'made a low bow, kissed the icon, contributed a rouble, climbed back into the droshky, sighing, and again drove off'.<sup>99</sup> Thus, it is clear that the profanation of the icon allows some of the witnesses to re-perceive the object for what it truly is — a representation of the possibility of salvation — when it is no longer 'ready-at-hand' in the usual manner.

The gloomy outlooks of the crowd, and the sighs of the merchant are meant not just to grieve the event of sacrilege, but are perhaps also a resigned reflection on the state of the world that produces such events. Many observers are still far from understanding what the event truly signifies. Lizaveta Tushina, for instance, displays a glimmer of an urge for salvation. 'Her cheeks flushed with indignation. She removed her round hat and her gloves, fell on her knees in front of the icon, straight on to the dirty pavement and made three reverential deep bows.'<sup>100</sup>

However, it is clear that she does not really understand the inner strivings that drew her to kneel before the desecrated object. She removes her diamond earrings and puts them on the plate. 'May I, may I? To ornament the setting?', she asks. The request suggests a misunderstanding of what the icon manifests, as she appears more concerned with decorating the icon, which has been stripped of its stones and pearls, than with the more immaterial promise it contains. She is still simply 'looking' at the icon. Indeed, soon after the event, she rejoins the 'scoffers' as they continue their scandalous adventures. Thus, even in a desecrated state, the icon continues to function as a reflection of one's relationship to the divine.

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<sup>99</sup> *Demons*, p. 360, PSS, 10:253.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*



Nonetheless, Liza Tushina, and perhaps many in the crowd, would have passed by countless icons in their lives without feeling an urge to honour them. It is the desecrated icon that moves them, and momentarily inspires their devotion.

Desecrated icons can draw out a hidden urge in the observer to seek salvation in Dostoevskii. When Fedor Karamazov threatens to spit on the icon, Alesha's mother reacts without words. '[S]he merely jumped up, held up her hands, then suddenly buried her face in them, began to shake all over, and fell to the floor... collapsed, just like that...'<sup>101</sup> To Fedor Pavlovich's surprise, as he is recounting Sofia's reaction to his sons, Alesha's expression changes. He reacts in exactly the same way his mother had reacted many years ago to the threat to her icon. He 'suddenly jumped to his feet, held up his hands, covered his face and slumped into a chair, shaking violently in a sudden fit of hysterical, silent weeping'. The immediate impact of the event on its victims — Alesha and his mother — reflects how they sense a tear opening up in their own relationship to the divine when the icon is threatened. Their hysteria is a response to this sensed breaking, felt across temporalities. Fedor Pavlovich, too, eventually, fleetingly gives voice to his sputtering capacity for active love, his remembrance of his sinful act, and his urge for salvation, by offering Alesha his mother's icon.

In his rapture he grabbed Alesha's hand and pressed it tightly to his heart. There were even tears in his eyes. 'Take the icon, the one of the Mother of God I was telling you about, and look after it. And I'll let you go back to the monastery... I was only joking before, don't be angry'.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 173-74, *PSS*, 14:126-27.

<sup>102</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 178, *PSS*, 14:130.

All the examples explored in this subsection so far involve icons that have been profaned or threatened with profanation, but icons can also become ‘unready-to-hand’ when they simply go ‘missing’. Characters can have memories of icons that stay with them long after the event has passed and the actual icon is no longer ‘there’ physically. These can be called ‘missing’ icons, though the memory of them remains at hand. One such example is Alesha’s iconic memory of his suffering mother. Another searing, even darker memory of a particular set of missing icons belongs to Raskol’nikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

In the aftermath of Raskol’nikov’s murder of the pawnbroker, Alena Ivanovna, Raskol’nikov spends ‘a laborious two minutes, getting his hands and the axe covered with blood’<sup>103</sup> as he cuts away at a cord tied around the dead old woman’s neck. He finds a purse strung on the cord as well as two, ‘crosses, one of cypress wood and one of brass, and a little enamelled saint’.<sup>104</sup> Raskol’nikov takes the purse but drops the crosses onto the old woman’s breast.

Towards the end of the novel, when Raskol’nikov is beginning to understand his own inner urge to confess, he visits Sonia. ““Yes, yes!” laughed Raskolnikov, “I’ve come for your crosses, Sonia.””<sup>105</sup> Sonia notices that there is pretence in his tone of voice and words. Nonetheless, she takes out two crosses and gives one to Raskol’nikov. He notices that the icon that Sonia keeps was Lizaveta’s. ‘So she was wearing it... at that moment, was she?’, Raskol’nikov asks, referring to the night of her murder. The cross evokes a memory in him of the crosses he left on the pawnbroker’s corpse after the murder. ‘I know another pair of crosses like these, a silver one and a little icon. I tossed them onto the old woman’s breast that day. Actually I ought to be wearing those ones now...’<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 71, PSS, 6:64.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 463, PSS, 6:403.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Here I find the promised set of missing icons. Raskol'nikov is reminded, first and foremost, of the icons that are not there. Despite his refusal to confess his shame and guilt to Sonia even now, and his persistent misunderstanding of the true significance of his own great sins, the urge for guilt and salvation emerge momentarily in the only words that appear sincerely said in this conversation. 'I ought to be wearing those ones now...' The icon discloses when it is not fully 'there'. It discloses its significance mainly in 'flickers' of profound absence. Malcolm Jones suggests:

We may conclude that it is not so much that Russian Orthodoxy bathes Dostoevsky's imaginative fiction in its light as that it flickers fitfully from time to time in varying guises and contexts. But [...] these flickers [...] are an integral part of human experience for Dostoevsky's characters, as they were for the author himself, and hold out to the divided, crippled and alienated personalities that people his novels, the genuine possibility of a personal salvation and wholeness through a life of active love. The extent to which this promise is realized may vary from novel to novel and character to character.<sup>107</sup>

In the fragmented, chaotic and violent existence that makes up Dostoevskii's novels, the active presence of the iconic dimension of Being cannot unequivocally manifest itself. When the iconic object is under threat, its 'flicker' reveals the state of a character's own relation to divinity.

In Dostoevskii's short story, *A Meek One*, the icon's function is transformed. This is the story of a pawnbroker who marries a girl thirty years younger than himself, intending to

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<sup>107</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, p. 41.

subjugate her by provoking her, and breaking her spirit. Eventually, the young girl commits suicide, clutching an icon to her breast.

Close to the beginning of the narrative, the young girl pawns the icon. The pawnbroker places the object in an icon case in his shop. As Ollivier recognises, this act changes the function of the icon. ‘When it is pawned the icon seems to lose its religious character. It changes from a sacred object into a commercial one.’<sup>108</sup> The icon is ‘broken’ insofar as its purpose has been transformed. Towards the end of the narrative, after several provocative games of transgression have taken place between the pawnbroker and his young wife, she restores the icon.

Heidegger notes that the act of setting up a sign can reveal to circumspection precisely why it needs to be there, and what its intended function is:

The peculiar character of signs as equipment becomes especially clear in ‘establishing a sign’. This activity is performed in a circumspective fore-sight, out of which it arises, and which requires that it be possible for one’s particular environment to announce itself for circumspection at any time.<sup>109</sup>

In the case of *A Meek One*, the act of restoration re-establishes, and thus once again announces, the symbolic meaning of the iconic object. Just before she commits suicide, the young girl prays to the icon, demonstrating her renewed urge for salvation. The restoration of the icon, apart from restoring the sign’s proper meaning, is also a restoration of her personal relationship to divinity. She then jumps out of the window, clutching the icon to her breast.

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<sup>108</sup> Ollivier, p. 62.

<sup>109</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 111.

The incident is based on a real-life case-study Dostoevskii discusses in *A Writer's Diary*. Dostoevskii describes a seamstress who commits suicide because 'she was absolutely unable to find enough work to make a living'.<sup>110</sup> She too jumps out of a window clutching an icon in her hands. Dostoevskii reflects that this is the type of event that can haunt one for a long time, and 'it even seems as if one is somehow to blame for them'.<sup>111</sup>

Indeed, this was not an unusual notion for the times. Instigated suicide was recognised as a crime, and newspapers often raised the question of instigation in cases of suicide, as Susan Morrissey has recognised.<sup>112</sup> Even though the heroine of *A Meek One* commits suicide, Dostoevskii appears to imply it is really others — her silent husband — who, failing to recognise the icon and what it symbolizes of the inner strivings of the human heart, played more of a role in causing her death than herself. It is clear that Dostoevskii intends this to be a tale signifying the abuse and misery this young, meek girl has had to endure throughout her life, and how loss of faith in salvation can lead people to torture one another in provocative games, destroying the love and goodness inherent in their shared inner striving towards another world. The absence of the properly functioning icon, symbolizing this loss, inaugurates the deadly games, which concludes with its restoration.

Like the unnamed woman in *A Meek One* and the two peasants in 'Vlas', Ippolit and Rogozhin too become involved in a game of provocation in *The Idiot*. Here too, the icon's proper symbolic and serviceable functionalities have been compromised. During an intense encounter in Ippolit's bedroom, Rogozhin sits on a table, directly under the light of an icon, and stares at Ippolit for hours. The icon does not go missing, nor is it consciously desecrated, but it is as if Rogozhin, representing a dark, deathly force, interrupts the light of the icon.

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<sup>110</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:653, PSS, 23:146.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Susan Morrissey, 'Patriarchy on Trial: Suicide, Discipline, and Governance in Imperial Russia', *The Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003) 23-58 (p. 50).

Neither Ippolit nor Rogozhin are aware of the icon's presence in the moment. As Ollivier says, 'They neither contemplate the icon nor pray before it and it has no effect on them.'<sup>113</sup>

In interpreting the manner in which the icon functions here for Ippolit, it would appear that the interruption of the light by Rogozhin, who symbolizes abyssal darkness, implies the absence of the iconic dimension in the world — Ippolit perceives a world radically removed from the possibility of renewal and resurrection. This event finally furnishes Ippolit with the resolve to commit suicide. He reasons that, '[He] can't go on participating in a life which assumes such bizarre and outrageous forms'.<sup>114</sup>

For Ippolit, the metaphysical meaning of such a world is that of a truncated apocalypse — the world in its final throes of violent catastrophe, but with no sign indicating resurrection. If there is a character who believes, most puritanically, in the vision presented by the Holbein painting in *The Idiot*, it is Ippolit.<sup>115</sup> Ippolit's mind and heart are now resolved to commit suicide, to 'shoot the icon', that is, to perform an ultimate transgression, quit and thus negate a world so devoid of the possibility of resurrection and redemption.

#### 2.4 The Premonitory Object in The Idiot

Indeed, *The Idiot* is a novel whose central aesthetic image of Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* presents the crucifixion as catastrophe without the possibility of renewal. This negates the idea of resurrection. This is the meaning Ippolit attributes to the painting, and which resonates so strongly with his metaphysical conception

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<sup>113</sup> Ollivier, p. 59.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>115</sup> The icon scene occurs in the evening. During the day of the event, Ippolit visited Rogozhin and saw a replica of the painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. The painting compels Ippolit to imagine that, 'if death was so dreadful and nature's laws so powerful, how could they possibly be overcome?' (*Idiot*, p. 430, *PSS*, 8:339) Even before the icon scene, Ippolit's faith in his own salvation, in a deeper metaphysical harmony beyond the chaos, misery and fragmentation of his world, is already breaking.

of the world. Sarah Young states that ‘resurrection and new life in the novel are ultimately denied’ and the calamitous ending to the novel appears to deny ‘even the possibility of the representation of the ideal in narrative’.<sup>116</sup> Denis Zhernokleyev also acknowledges that there is no resurrection in *The Idiot*: ‘The truth that is emphatically absent in *The Idiot* is the truth of resurrection.’<sup>117</sup>

For Zhernokleyev, the entire narrative of *The Idiot* manifests a givenness to fascination with the aesthetic image. In the tragic finale, Dostoevskii is showing how the mimetic flow that the aesthetic image generates, leads to ‘epistemic entropy’.<sup>118</sup> The manner in which Dostoevskii reveals that which lies beyond the aesthetic is through an apophatic movement, ‘which seeks to affirm its main truth negatively, by means of dramatically intensifying its absence’.<sup>119</sup> In other words, the world of *The Idiot* never positively depicts that which lies beyond the finite, existential realm. Though the world is moribund and oriented towards decomposition, the radical absence of whole meaning, for Zhernokleyev, negatively indicates an unrepresentable presence beyond itself.

Zhernokleyev states that there is a moment, in *The Idiot*, which provides a glimpse, or perhaps in Malcolm Jones’ language, a ‘flicker’, of what lies beyond mimesis. This is Myshkin’s moment of sensed presence directly preceding an epileptic fit: ‘In this brief moment of transcendence the incessant mimetic flow is suspended, thus liberating vision from the aesthetic mode of perception.’<sup>120</sup> Zhernokleyev is right to intuit that the religious

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<sup>116</sup> Sarah Young, *Dostoevsky’s ‘The Idiot’ and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating and Scripting* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), p. 183.

<sup>117</sup> Denis Zhernokleyev, ‘Beholden by love: A Study in the Apophasis of Dostoevsky’s Poesis’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2016), p. 113. <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/docview/1858816397?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 3 Jun. 2021].

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

perception of that which lies beyond the fragmented and chaotic narrative is connected to Myshkin's epileptic consciousness.

However, readers must consider Myshkin's moment of transcendence in the context of the existential temporality of his epileptic consciousness as a whole. Myshkin's moment of euphoria is a real-life sensory symptom, associated with epilepsy, known as the ecstatic aura.<sup>121</sup> What is of interest here is, primarily, that the ecstatic aura, as a moment that precedes and signals an impending seizure is a premonitory sign.<sup>122</sup> Rice explains, 'premonitory signs of epilepsy are termed either prodromata (days or hours before a seizure) or auras (minutes or seconds before).'<sup>123</sup>

But what does this have to do with material objects? There are certain objects in *The Idiot* that induce premonitions, in Myshkin, foretelling impending catastrophes. Myshkin's epileptic consciousness can thus also be termed a premonitory consciousness. His object-inspired presentiments and the catastrophes they foreshadow are temporally analogous, isomorphic, a microcosmic imitation of the relation between prodromata or auras and the seizures they foretell.

Moreover, this association between premonition and catastrophic event is also evident in the relation between eschatological prophecy and the apocalyptic event. Thus, Myshkin's relation to the premonitory object can serve as the most concrete foundation for apocalyptic readings of the novel. It can present a framework that relies neither on Lebedev's railways, as David Bethea<sup>124</sup> and William Leatherbarrow do, nor on a complex but lucid symbology as

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<sup>121</sup> Rice, p. 83.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>124</sup> David M. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 64.



Leatherbarrow<sup>125</sup> and Robert Hollander<sup>126</sup> do, but is grounded in the core narrative events themselves — the crime of Nastas'ia Filippovna's murder; Ippolit's failed suicide, and the breaking of the vase, with all that entails for Myshkin and Aglaia's budding romance and Dostoevskii's parodic critique of the nobility. These are the climactic events in the final three parts of the novel, and they are all connected through Myshkin and these premonitory objects.

Rice suggests that Dostoevskii experienced a variety of different premonitory signs related to his own epilepsy from at least 1846 onwards.<sup>127</sup> Rice also claims that,

In *The Idiot* [...] Dostoevsky outlines a succinct model of epilepsy which conforms generally to the medicine of his day and ours, and to his own case as we know he then perceived it (with lingering ambivalence toward its strictly 'mechanical' and its psychic aspects, and hence toward its moral and spiritual dimensions).<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, I presume that Myshkin's premonitory, epileptic consciousness, specifically, his ability to intuit future catastrophes by interacting with certain significant material objects, is a deliberate, creatively adapted, yet realistically-inspired feature of Dostoevskii's narrative construction, borrowing much from his own personal experience and his inclination to invest parapsychological meaning<sup>129</sup> into the premonitions associated with his condition.

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<sup>125</sup> William J. Leatherbarrow, 'Apocalyptic Imagery in 'The Idiot' and 'The Devils'' in *Shapes of Apocalypse: Arts and Philosophy in Slavic Thought*, ed. by Andrea Oppo (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press: 2013), pp. 122-33 (pp. 128-29) (first publ. in *Dostoevsky Studies: Journal of the International Dostoevsky Society*, Vol. 3 (1982), 43-51).

<sup>126</sup> Robert Hollander, 'The Apocalyptic Framework of Dostoevsky's "The Idiot"', *Mosaic*, 7 (1974) 123-39 (p. 138).

<sup>127</sup> Rice, pp. 6-8.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 85.

### 2.4.1 Objects Foretelling Catastrophes

So far in this chapter, I have focused on how an object can disclose its function within a totality of equipment serviceable to human possibilities. In *The Idiot*, objects can also evoke presentiments of *future* events. I focus on three ‘things’: the pistol, the garden knife and the Chinese vase. Each of these objects, when absent, unusable or taken out of their proper context, provides premonitions of impending catastrophe, all of which come to pass as foretold through the course of the narrative.

Myshkin’s presentiments or premonitions can thus be classified as examples of foreshadowing or omens: they imply backward causality. As Morson explains,

The very term foreshadowing indicates backward causality [...] it is a shadow cast in advance of an object; its temporal analog is an event that indicates (is the shadow of) another event to come [...] The shadow does not cause the object ahead but is caused by it, even though we encounter the shadow first.<sup>130</sup>

Morson continues to say that such backward causation ‘robs a present moment of its presentness’. It ‘lifts the veil on a future that has already been determined and inscribed.’ By indicating a future that is already concretely real enough to cause events to occur in the present, foreshadowing closes off time and reveals freedom, the human ‘sense of many possible futures’, to be ‘an illusion’.<sup>131</sup> This argument suggests that the presence of genuine foreshadowing ‘preclude[s]’<sup>132</sup> the possibility of open-ended time.

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<sup>130</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 48.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Morson does have a more nuanced reading of foreshadowing in Dostoevskii, with a recognition of what he calls ‘vortex time’,<sup>133</sup> which I will discuss at the end of this section. Despite this brief recognition, in his article ‘Sideshadowing and Tempics’, Morson implies that presentiments in *The Idiot* are no more than predictions that happen to come true.

Prophecies and fulfillments: but what about all those promises that are not fulfilled, such as the overdetermined signs that there will be a conflict between Myshkin and Ganya? There are countless such loose ends in *The Idiot*, apparent prophecies that do not come true [...] The fact that someone’s prediction on one occasion actually came true does not turn it into a prophecy, does not confer inevitability on it, because we know most predictions do not come true.<sup>134</sup>

Are Myshkin’s presentiments simply mere predictions that happen to come true or is there genuine backward causation taking place here? Clearly, I will argue that the revelations elicited from premonitory objects are examples of genuine foreshadowing. Having demonstrated this, I will be able to ask broader questions concerning the nature of temporality, freedom and responsibility in Dostoevskii’s fictional world.

#### 2.4.1.1 The Pistol

Presentiment [*predchuvstvie*] is an important word in *The Idiot*. While Alan Myers uses a variety of terms to translate this word, such as ‘foreboding’, ‘premonition’,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-64.

<sup>134</sup> Gary Saul Morson, ‘Sideshadowing and Tempics’, *New Literary History*, 29 (1998), 599-624 (pp. 9-10). In fairness to Morson, he is not directly addressing Myshkin’s premonitions here. He is specifically rejecting the idea that Myshkin’s stories of execution in Part I or the narrator’s remarks regarding Myshkin and Rogozhin’s ‘fateful’ meeting in the train carriage at the beginning of the novel, can act as evidence of prophecy or authentic foreshadowing. However, his broader argument in this article still appears to suggest that there is no genuine foreshadowing in *The Idiot*.

‘presentiment’, ‘misgivings’ and the verb-form is sometimes translated with ‘foresee’, or ‘sense’, the diversity of terms may obscure the significance and consistency of the allusion in the original Russian.<sup>135</sup> *Predchuvstvie* emerges whenever Myshkin has a ‘presentiment’ of catastrophe. Of course, other characters have presentiments as well, and though they are often correct, they are not instances of backward causation. Instead they function more as what Morson calls ‘predictions’ — such as the narrator’s prediction about the conflict between Myshkin and Gania — representing inferred knowledge.

Another clear example of a ‘prediction’ would be Kolia Ivolgin’s ‘well-founded presentiment’ [*po vernomu predchuvstviuu*], after Rogozhin’s attempted murder of Myshkin and the Prince’s epileptic fit. Though Kolia is not at the scene of the event, he experiences a ‘presentiment’ that persuades him to rush towards the spot, after ‘overhearing by chance that someone had had a fit’. Knowing that Myshkin has such seizures, Kolia infers that it must be the Prince, who has ‘had a fit’.<sup>136</sup>

On the other hand, the premonitions that Myshkin gains, through the garden-knife or the notion of a misfiring pistol, about these objects’ involvement in future catastrophe, could not have been ‘predicted’ or causally inferred from known facts. Indeed, Rogozhin himself does not know that he will use the garden-knife to murder Nastas’ia Fillipovna when Myshkin first interacts with it. Thus, the premonitory object discloses its role in future calamity to Myshkin before even Rogozhin knows what he intends to use it for. Myshkin’s presentiments differ from others, not only in that they are always true and foretell seemingly ‘unpredictable’ events, but they are also accompanied by strange sensations which alter his consciousness, behaviour, gestures and inculcate a strange, pre-epileptic state-of-mind. It is in

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<sup>135</sup> *Idiot*, pp. 244, 245, 578, 223, 324, 411, *PSS*, 8:193, 8:194, 8:454, 8:177, 8:256, 8:324.

<sup>136</sup> *Idiot*, p. 247, *PSS*, 8:196.

this mystical context that he experiences these peculiar object-inspired epiphanic presentiments.

The sequence with the pistol begins after one of Dostoevskii's famous scandal scenes. Prince Myshkin, while in the company of the Epanchins in the park, prevents an officer from retaliating against Nastas'ia Fillipovna. Previously, in response to an insult from the officer, Nastas'ia had whipped him flush on the face, causing his nose to bleed. As the officer approaches her with violent intent, Myshkin intervenes, and prevents physical harm.

In fact, there are a couple of minor premonitions that directly precede this event as well. As Sarah Young notes in her forthcoming chapter on sense experience and embodied spatiality, the closely webbed repetition of particular motifs or actions — such as eavesdropping in Young's chapter, or premonitions in this chapter — in a tight narrative sequence can serve to draw attention to the motif, emphasizing its significance and intensifying the reader's attention upon it.<sup>137</sup> The two minor premonitions preceding the major premonition, inspired by the pistol, involve the 'green bench' that Aglaia points out to him during their walk, and 'a certain face, pale with dark curly hair and a familiar, very familiar smile and glance' that flickers and disappears, in Myshkin's premonitory consciousness, just before Nastas'ia and her party appear in the park.<sup>138</sup> Both these presentiments are examples of foretelling.

After the premonition of the face, which presumably belongs to Rogozhin, Myshkin continues to search his surroundings, thinking to himself, 'this first apparition might

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<sup>137</sup> Sarah Young, 'Deferred Senses and Distanced Spaces: Embodying the Boundaries of Dostoevsky's Realism' in Katherine Bowers and Kate Holland, eds., *Dostoevsky at 200: The Novel in Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). I can also note that Alesha mirroring his mother's actions in response to Fedor's recounting of the incident, where he threatens to desecrate Alesha's mother's icon, is another instance of this type of intensifying repetition.

<sup>138</sup> *Idiot*, p. 365, PSS, 8:287.

foreshadow and herald a second. That would almost certainly be the case.’<sup>139</sup> Morson’s test to assess whether a particular instance of foretelling is genuine or what he calls ‘pseudo-foreshadowing’ is clear-cut. For him, pseudo-foreshadowing normally intimates some impending catastrophe without providing specifics about the event. ‘The first thing to note about pseudo-foreshadowing is that it closes off virtually no options’. It is a ‘vague warning’ that instead of foretelling exactly what will happen, allows the reader to ‘focus keenly on possible futures. The result is a sense that anything may happen’.<sup>140</sup> However, here, the compact temporal sequence clearly indicates an authentic instance of foreshadowing.

There are only two possible options: Either the presentiment of the ‘apparition’ is or is not followed by a ‘second’ manifestation, as Myshkin expects it to be. The fact that his premonition of the ‘face’ finds fulfilment so soon after Myshkin experiences it, in the arrival of Nastas’ia and her party, suggests that Myshkin’s presentiments are neither illusions, nor ‘mere predictions’, but authentic presentiments that will be verified in the narrative events that follow them. Thus, by the time the narrative approaches the major premonition of the pistol, Myshkin’s ability to have accurate presentiments of future events has already been implied.

After the incident with Nastas’ia Filippovna and the officer, Aglaia, concerned that the officer may challenge the prince to a duel, asks him, ‘Surely you can load a pistol?’<sup>141</sup> Myshkin confirms that he cannot. Aglaia launches into a thorough explanation of the process. She starts by advising him to buy good gunpowder, ‘not damp (very dry they say, not damp)’ and ‘not the sort they use to fire big guns’.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Morson, *New Literary History*, 29, pp. 6-7.

<sup>141</sup> *Idiot*, p. 373, PSS, 8:294.

Then take a pinch of powder or perhaps two pinches and sprinkle it in. Better put plenty in. Ram it in with felt (they say it has to be felt for some reason), you can get that somewhere, a mattress, or doors are covered with felt sometimes. Then when you've inserted the felt, lay the bullet in — listen now, the bullet afterwards and the powder before, otherwise it won't go off.<sup>142</sup>

The entire scene is tinged with absurdity. The reader knows that Myshkin would not fire at another human being, so Aglaia's exposition appears unfit to the situation. Her explanation reads as if it were an excerpt from an instruction manual, standing out both stylistically and tonally from all that surrounds it. Aglaia's methodological description continues in some detail and it is notable how, in referring to the pistol, she elaborates an entire system — totality or network — of relations which the object relates to: the pistol refers to the thimbleful of powder; the powder to the 'felt' it must be rammed in with, which refers to a 'mattress' where the felt can be procured and further details which connect all these objects together in a network serviceable to the human end of firing a pistol. In this way, the scene opens up onto Heidegger's hidden work-world of interconnected equipment.

Aglaia's exposition does not imply that she is having an epiphany, but it serves instead as a kind of incantation that raises Myshkin to a heightened state of disquiet, which manifests itself in his consistently inappropriate laughter. Myshkin's absurd laughter contributes to the surreal or parodic tone of the passage, and, signals that a strange mood is beginning to simmer within the Prince. He is dimly aware that something is not quite right, that there is something else to this conversation that he has not yet addressed. 'He rather had the feeling that there was something he ought to find out about, enquire about, something

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<sup>142</sup> *Idiot*, pp. 373-74, *PSS*, 8:294.

rather more important than how to charge a pistol.’<sup>143</sup> Indeed, this statement could be read as an example of pseudo-foreshadowing as it does not specify a particular outcome but creates a sense of foreboding for the reader. However, as the narrative progresses towards Ippolit’s climactic failed suicide, where Ippolit is saved from death because his pistol misfires, echoes of the themes of Myshkin’s conversation with Aglaia resurface repeatedly.

As Myshkin wanders absentmindedly, General Epanchin confirms the news that Evgenii Pavlovich’s uncle, Kapiton Alexeich Radomskii, had ‘[s]hot himself this morning, at dawn, seven o’clock’.<sup>144</sup> Although the news does not mention a ‘pistol’, and is not a direct example of a premonition, there is perhaps a murmur of recognition, a subtle reminder of Aglaia’s earlier incantation about how to load and shoot a pistol here. The prince’s mood continues to intensify. Eventually, talking to Keller, who offers to be Myshkin’s second, assuming, like Aglaia, that a duel is forthcoming, Myshkin is reminded of his conversation with Aglaia.

Ha-ha! I know how to load a pistol now! Do you know, I’ve just been taught to load a pistol! You know how to do it, Keller? First of all you have to buy the powder, pistol-powder, not damp [...] then roll the bullet in, but not the bullet before the powder, otherwise it won’t fire. *Do you hear, Keller: because it won’t go off.* Ha-ha! Isn’t that the most marvellous reason, friend Keller?<sup>145</sup>

The fact that Myshkin repeats much of Aglaia’s exposition here, almost word-for-word, implies that Dostoevskii has some plan in mind for this hypothetical pistol. His

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> *Idiot*, p. 375, *PSS*, 8:297.

<sup>145</sup> *Idiot*, p. 379, *PSS*, 8:299-300. The italicized sentence, from the original Russian [‘Слышите, Келлер: потому что не выстрелит. Ха-ха!’] is omitted in the Myers translation.



repeated emphasis on the single fact that the pistol ‘won’t go off’ foreshadows Ippolit’s attempted suicide. Myshkin, reflecting on how Keller, like Aglaia, wants to discuss dueling with him, imagines that, ‘this business of how to charge a pistol might not have been fortuitous...’.<sup>146</sup> Once again, this suggests that the original conversation with Aglaia was not accidental, and may mean something more. Myshkin’s premonitory state of mind as he wanders through the park is filled with backward causation: his attention is inexplicably drawn to the idea of a misfiring pistol, before Ippolit’s pistol misfires.

Thus far, all these discussions and presentiments of pistols have been induced by a hypothetical, absent pistol. Ippolit announces the appearance of the real pistol during his reading of what he intends to be his suicide-note. He recounts,

I had a small pocket pistol; I got it when I was a boy, at that silly age when one suddenly develops a fancy for stories of duels and bandit hold-ups; or I’d be challenged to a duel and stand nobly facing the barrel. A month ago I examined it and prepared it for use. I hunted out two bullets in the drawer where it was lying, and enough powder in the horn for three charges. The pistol is no good, it aims off to one side and its range is only fifteen paces; but of course it can blow your head off if you put it close to your temple.<sup>147</sup>

Ippolit’s anecdote contains many traces of Aglaia’s earlier exposition. Thematically, Ippolit too discusses ‘duels’, and mentions several pieces of equipment required to prepare a gun — the two bullets in the drawer and the powder.

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<sup>146</sup> *Idiot*, p. 380, *PSS*, 8:300.

<sup>147</sup> *Idiot*, p. 433, *PSS*, 8:341.

It is only in Ippolit's climactic moment of failed suicide that all these premonitory signs find fulfilment.

All he saw was something glinting in Ippolit's right hand and a small pocket pistol instantly appear against his temple. Keller had darted forward to grab the pistol but Ippolit had immediately pulled the trigger. There followed a sharp, dry, snap, but no report.<sup>148</sup>

The moment is a realization of Myshkin's premonition. His conversation with Aglaia and the encounters during his absentminded wanderings prefigured precisely this moment, when the pistol 'won't go off' and the truth is ultimately explicable, in causation and intent, only through finding out how the pistol was loaded. The object is recalcitrant in this passage — since it is unable to fire. Once again, when the object is unready-to-hand and obtrusive, Myshkin's premonitory intuitions about the pistol are realised; the misfiring pistol reveals its equipmental being and also has the last word on Ippolit's fate, which the character is finally unable to master.

After this episode, Myshkin and Aglaia are seated at the bench. Aglaia says of Myshkin: 'although you actually do suffer from mental illness [...], the essential part of your mind is superior to all of theirs, it's the sort of mind they've never even dreamed of, because there's two kinds of brain, the main one and the secondary one. That's so, isn't it? Isn't it?'.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, there is something like this involved in Myshkin's consciousness. On the one hand, his 'secondary' brain communicates premonitions to him, but they appear opaquely, with only strands of fate perceived. In his premonitory consciousness, his 'main' brain is

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<sup>148</sup> *Idiot*, p. 442, *PSS*, 8:349.

<sup>149</sup> *Idiot*, p. 452, *PSS*, 8:356.

constantly attempting to interpret the intuitions being sensed in his secondary brain. Not only does this explain Myshkin's doubt, it also signals a connection between his premonitory consciousness and his epilepsy.

#### 2.4.1.2 The Knife

The most significant premonitory object in this novel is the little garden-knife that overcomes the chaotic planning of the novel to maintain itself from Part II onwards as a constant symbol for death, ends, perhaps even the apocalypse. The possibilities Myshkin senses issuing from the garden-knife conduct him into a distracted yet prescient state, and finally to full-blown madness.

The first incident occurs when Myshkin is talking to Rogozhin about Nastas'ia Filipovna. They both repeatedly recognise that Nastas'ia knows full well that marrying Rogozhin is almost equivalent to committing suicide.<sup>150</sup> As the two are talking about how Rogozhin and Nastas'ia appear to be willingly plunging towards a marriage that will give rise to inevitable violence, the prince absentmindedly picks up the garden-knife from Rogozhin's table. Rogozhin seizes it and returns it to the table, but it appears that Myshkin's premonitory state of consciousness has been activated, as contact with the knife evokes a memory of an earlier premonition.

Myshkin says to Rogozhin: "It was as if I knew when I was coming into Petersburg, as though I had a premonition..." [...] "I didn't want to come back here! I wanted to forget everything here, tear it out of my heart!"<sup>151</sup> Once again, the reader's attention is intensified, in this densely packed scene, onto the garden-knife through repetition of action: '[T]he prince had absently picked up the knife again and once more Rogozhin took it from his hand and threw it on the table'. The narrator then gives readers a complete description of the knife,

<sup>150</sup> *Idiot*, e.g. pp. 218-23, *PSS*, 8:173-77.

<sup>151</sup> *Idiot*, p. 227, *PSS*, 8:180.

emphasizing its physical properties. ‘It was a plain-looking knife, with a horn handle and a fixed blade, some seven inches long and broad in proportion.’ The description initially appears strangely trivial. Yet both the reader and Myshkin’s own ‘secondary brain’ sense that it is not primarily the physical properties of the knife that attract him so peculiarly to the object, but instead the cryptic disclosure of the calamitous future interactions with human beings that it already contains within itself.

Rogozhin notices that Myshkin’s attention is still drawn to the knife that he has snatched from his hand twice already, and places it in the book laying on the table. Myshkin is here in the throes of another characteristically half-recognised premonition: “‘You cut pages with it, do you?’” asked the prince, but somehow abstractedly, seemingly still sunk in profound meditation.’ As a simple functional object, the knife certainly ought not to be as conspicuous as it has become here. His absentmindedness and state of ‘profound meditation’ indicate that backward causation is taking place through the object. Like Aglaia’s hypothetical duelling pistol, the knife will mean something more than its stated function at this stage of the narrative — cutting pages — suggests. When Myshkin’s premonitory consciousness interacts with it, the knife ‘speaks’ of a different future: it promises something catastrophic. Rogozhin defends himself. But Myshkin involuntarily, ‘started, and shot an intent glance at Rogozhin’.

When Myshkin is on the precipice of uncovering the truth being disclosed by his premonition, he, characteristically, turns away from it. “‘When my head aches so and this illness of mine... I get really absentminded and silly. It wasn’t this I was going to ask you about at all... Can’t recall what it was. Goodbye...’”<sup>152</sup> There is indeed something of the wilful amnesiac about Myshkin, especially with regards to his premonitions of catastrophe. Even though his premonitory relation to these objects allows him to partially see through

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<sup>152</sup> *Idiot*, pp. 227-28, *PSS*, 8:181.

them towards the future catastrophe they foretell, he also seeks, simultaneously, to forget and suppress what he knows.

Corrigan has recognised the pervasive presence of amnesia in many of Dostoevskii's characters. He interprets its origins as follows:

Having experienced some intense but vaguely defined distress or terror in the narrative prehistory, Dostoevsky's [...] protagonists are intent upon forgetting, and they guard their interior space against any intrusions, even from their own inquiries, preferring instead to remain forever on the threshold of their own personalities.<sup>153</sup>

At a fundamental level, it can simply be said that Myshkin does not want to look at what is revealed. This explains why, just as he is about to articulate what the garden-knife is telling him, he begs forgiveness of Rogozhin, blames his strange ideas on his illness and immediately forgets what he really wanted to say or ask. This is indeed a consistent pattern for Myshkin. It was also there with regards to the pistol.<sup>154</sup> The half-recognition of the presentiment issuing from a premonitory object is inexplicably forgotten or suppressed before he can delve deeper with his primary brain into the articulations of his secondary brain.

Myshkin's doubt, his mistrust of his premonitions and his aversion to articulating precisely what they are disclosing, plays an important role in the narrative of the novel. Indeed, it produces a Hamlet-like indecisiveness in Myshkin's character, preventing him from doing anything to stop the catastrophes that his premonitions foretell. With regards to the pistol, when Ippolit is about to attempt suicide, Kolia urges the prince, 'Prince! Prince!

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<sup>153</sup> Corrigan, p. 31.

<sup>154</sup> *PSS*, 8:294.

Do something!’<sup>155</sup> But the prince does not act. It is only after the fact that Myshkin reflects, ‘Perhaps I really did provoke him by... not saying anything’.<sup>156</sup>

Similarly, although he is aware that Rogozhin will probably murder Nastas’ia Filippovna if he marries her, he insists that he will not interfere. “I shan’t hinder you all the same”, he said softly, almost pensively, as if in answer to some secret inner thought of his own.<sup>157</sup> As Sarah Young points out, while the murder scene is unfolding in Petersburg, Myshkin is serving cups of tea to visitors in Pavlovsk, emphasizing how distant Myshkin has become from the cause of saving Nastas’ia Filippovna.<sup>158</sup> It is again, much later in the narrative that Myshkin finally understands what he ought to have said to Rogozhin. ‘It was only now, at this moment of her sudden reappearance, that he realized, intuitively perhaps, what had been lacking in his words to Rogozhin. He had not found words to express his horror — yes, horror!’<sup>159</sup>

Myshkin’s doubt leads him to inaction — to something resembling apathy — in the face of the catastrophes that are destined to unfold. How then are readers to interpret Myshkin’s premonitory consciousness temporally? He is, in effect, both Oedipus and Tiresias. As Tiresias, he foretells the future. As Oedipus, he doubts it.

Morson recognises that, in *Oedipus*, ‘the play’s irony depends on traces of the future, on foreshadows cast back by the terrible ending Oedipus does not see.’<sup>160</sup> Myshkin too refuses to fully perceive what his premonitions are communicating to him. As Morson says of Oedipus, so too it could be said of Myshkin, ‘As he responds to the present he unwittingly describes the future because he is in the grips of a temporality inverse to the one he

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<sup>155</sup> *Idiot*, p. 439, PSS, 8:346.

<sup>156</sup> *Idiot*, p. 444, PSS, 8:350.

<sup>157</sup> *Idiot*, p. 223, PSS, 8:177.

<sup>158</sup> Young, *Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, p. 133

<sup>159</sup> *Idiot*, p. 367, PSS, 8:289.

<sup>160</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 59.

imagines.’ Myshkin still ‘imagines’, despite what the portents are telling him, that he can alter what appears destined to occur. But, most significantly, just like Oedipus, Myshkin realises too late the inevitability of the future possibilities his inner Tiresias, his ‘second brain’, knew to be fated all along. ‘Oedipus lives by one temporality and senses the other too late; but we and Tiresias have known it all along. Tiresias sees the present pulled forward to its prescribed destiny.’<sup>161</sup>

Perhaps the only conclusion that could be generated from this would be that, in terms of Myshkin’s premonitory consciousness, the novel suggests that time is ultimately prophetic. I can adapt what Morson says of the play *Oedipus* to fit Myshkin’s premonitory narrative: ‘Not fate [inevitable, specific catastrophes] but temporal openness [Myshkin’s doubt, which seeks to deny the future his premonitions foretell] proves to be the mirage, as time is shown to be essentially oracular.’<sup>162</sup> I will leave this here as a provisional conclusion but will have to revisit, qualify, perhaps even deny its certainty at the end of the chapter when the whole picture comes in view.

After his visit to Rogozhin, Myshkin wanders the streets in an intense absentminded state. Myshkin’s desire for solitude and escape continues to manifest itself in response to revelations flooding his consciousness from his secondary brain.<sup>163</sup> Just as Myshkin’s thoughts kept returning to the idea of a misfiring pistol before the object itself emerged in Ippolit’s attempted suicide, here too, Myshkin’s secondary brain keeps directing him back towards the knife.

He imagines that, perhaps five minutes ago, ‘he had been standing on the pavement in front of a shop-window’.<sup>164</sup> Myshkin walks back, and finds the shop-window, where he sees

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> *PSS*, 8:186.

<sup>164</sup> *Idiot*, p. 235, *PSS*, 8:187.

the same garden-knife he was handling in Rogozhin's home. Though Dostoevskii does not directly state that it is the same knife, it is clear that it is.

But he had fled from the station and recovered himself only when he was standing in front of the cutler's shop and pricing a certain item with a hartshorn handle at sixty kopecks. The strange and horrible demon had seized upon him for good and did not mean to leave him.<sup>165</sup>

Dostoevskii uses the exact same phrase here as he did when describing the knife during Myshkin and Rogozhin's exchange. Like before, it is the object with the hartshorn handle [*s olen'im cherenkom*] making it unequivocally clear that the object that has been preoccupying him the whole time (despite not actually being there) is the self-same garden-knife that inspired his initial premonition and his pre-epileptic state of mind. Myshkin's premonitory consciousness has a deeper hold on him in these scenes than anywhere else in the novel, until the end. The various premonitions he has experienced since his visit to Rogozhin are all connected, and all point to the knife's inevitable re-emergence and its potential for catastrophe. Despite this clarity, Myshkin still cannot believe in the 'conviction' that is pressing upon him in this premonition.<sup>166</sup>

The narrative then arrives at the famous staircase scene, where Rogozhin attempts to murder Myshkin. Several fleeting premonitions of Rogozhin's presence strike the prince in these scenes preceding the attempted murder. When he finally meets Rogozhin concealed in a nook near the staircase, the prince sees Rogozhin raise his hand, and notices 'something flashed in it'. This is one of the catastrophes that the knife contained within itself from the

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<sup>165</sup> *Idiot*, p. 243, *PSS*, 8:193.

<sup>166</sup> *Idiot*, p. 244, *PSS*, 8:194.



beginning, which Myshkin sensed as soon as he interacted with the object. Myshkin's reaction to Rogozhin's raised hand sums up much of what has been said: 'Parfion, I don't believe it!'<sup>167</sup>

What he does not believe is that his premonition has come true. Thus, even when confronted with his would-be murderer, and the concrete fulfilment of his vision, Myshkin still does not want to perceive the possibility, does not want to believe. Almost immediately after seeing the knife 'flash', Myshkin falls into an epileptic seizure. It is evident that the inevitable future calamities, that the Being of the knife is inextricably intertwined with, have been the source of Myshkin's premonitions, which have now been partly fulfilled, and also have led to his seizure.

The knife reappears at the conclusion of the novel, confirming the reader's suspicion of definite backward causation. However, it is not plausible to suggest that Dostoevskii always intended the knife to reappear at the end in the manner that it does. Morson recognises that the notebooks for the novel suggest that Dostoevskii only discovered the eventual ending on 4 October 1868, towards the end of the planning for part III of the novel.<sup>168</sup> There were still several possible endings for Nastas'ia Filippovna by the time the knife entered the narrative.

Wasiolek recognises, in his introductory remarks to Dostoevskii's notes for Part II of *The Idiot*, that Nastas'ia Filippovna could have been killed by Rogozhin; killed herself in a brothel; or potentially died naturally.<sup>169</sup> Thus in terms of its literary creation, there was still

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<sup>167</sup> *Idiot*, p. 246, PSS, 8:195.

<sup>168</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 136.

<sup>169</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for 'The Idiot'*, ed. and trans. by Edward Wasiolek (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 159-160. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the PSS citation, when required.

plenty of what Morson calls ‘loose play’,<sup>170</sup> that is, several different potential trajectories, when Dostoevskii wrote about this little garden-knife in part II. The conclusion, in terms of its literary creation, only echoes the original garden-knife, and could not have been foretold precisely as it unfolds when the knife first entered the narrative, as Dostoevskii did not know how the novel would end.

On the other hand, Myshkin clearly does experience several other presentiments foreshadowing the conclusion in the last chapter before the finale, as Morson himself recognises.<sup>171</sup> Summarily, the final version of the novel reflects Myshkin’s capacity to consistently and accurately foretell future catastrophes through premonitory objects. His object-inspired presentiments should not to be read as mere predictions.

In this context, I recognise Dostoevskii’s own belief in premonitions, partially inspired by his personal experience of prodromal and aural presentiments as a part of his epileptic condition. Rice, citing Dostoevskii’s personal physician, Dr Stepan Dmitrievich Ianovskii’s account, refers to an incident dating all the way back to July 1847. Ianovskii mentions a time when he was drawn back to Petersburg from his summer dacha in Pavlovsk a day earlier than usual by an ‘irresistible but unfounded urgency’, and that, instead of heading home by his normal route, the doctor instinctively and ‘under the influence of some agitated sensation’ walked to Senate Square where he encountered a stricken Dostoevskii in the grips of a convulsion, being helped by a policeman.<sup>172</sup> Ianovskii states that Dostoevskii interpreted his physician’s appearance at the scene at such a necessary moment as portentous, and that

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<sup>170</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 84.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>172</sup> Rice, pp. 10-11. S. D. Ianovskii, ‘Vospominaniia o Dostoevskom’, *Russkii vestnik*, 1885, No. 4, pp. 796-819.

whenever the two later recalled it, Dostoevskii would say, ‘Well, after that, how can one help believing in premonitions?’<sup>173</sup>

I should also recognise Dostoevskii’s own conviction about the conclusion to *The Idiot*, which he mentions in a letter to his beloved niece, Sonia. ‘This fourth part and its conclusion are the most important things in the novel, that is, the whole novel was practically written and conceived for this dénouement.’<sup>174</sup> Additionally, the notebooks hint that the meaning of the novel is deeply tied to prophecy. In a note that comes under the heading ‘N.B. The chief point’,<sup>175</sup> Dostoevskii, in what appears to be a kind of manifesto, or staunch defence of his novel to imagined critical readers,<sup>176</sup> states, ‘Reality is above everything. It is true perhaps that we have a different conception of reality, a thousand thoughts, prophecies [*prorochestva*] — a fantastic reality.’<sup>177</sup> Even though there is loose-play in its creation, and the author himself is unsure where the plot is going to go, he does sense that the whole novel is being drawn inevitably to violent catastrophe, and that the meaning of the novel must, on one level, reflect a sense of prophecy fulfilled.

The premonitions Myshkin gains through the knife can be seen as a guiding thread in an otherwise ever-changing structure to the novel. Myshkin, seeing Nastas’ia Filippovna murdered, asks Rogozhin, ‘Listen, tell me: how did you do it to her? A knife? That knife?’<sup>178</sup> Rogozhin confirms that it is the very same knife. Myshkin asks him specifically, ‘did you

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> *Letters*, 3:100, *PSS*, 28.2:318 (7 November/26 October 1868).

<sup>175</sup> *Notebooks for ‘The Idiot’*, p. 227, *PSS*, 9:276.

<sup>176</sup> Miller also discusses this particular entry from the notebooks, in her book on *The Idiot*. Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 86-87.

<sup>177</sup> *Notebooks for ‘The Idiot’*, p. 227, *PSS*, 9:276. (translation amended).

<sup>178</sup> *Idiot*, p. 646, *PSS*, 8:505.

mean to kill her before my wedding, before the ceremony, at the church door, with the knife? Did you or not?'<sup>179</sup> Rogozhin equivocates. However, he does finally state,

I can only tell you this about that knife [...] I took it out of the locked drawer this morning, because it all happened this morning, some time after three. I had kept it as a bookmark all this time.<sup>180</sup>

In this sense, Rogozhin's final act reflects the spontaneous freedom insisted upon by Dmitrii, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he is interrogated about why he picked up the pestle. Morson writes about Dmitrii's pestle:

He did not yet have a specific intention [...] It [picking up the pestle] might indeed have led to murder, though in this case it did not; even if it had, the murder would not have been premeditated. The intention was not formulated until the last possible moment when Dmitri was standing over his father's head with the weapon in hand.<sup>181</sup>

Although this is undoubtedly true of *Dmitri's* actions, *Rogozhin's* seeming spontaneity, on the other hand, appears to go some way towards confirming the authenticity of Myshkin's premonitions and the fatalistic temporality they imply. Since Rogozhin had no intention to use the knife to murder Nastas'ia Filippovna, when it first made its appearance in the narrative, Myshkin's various premonitions foretelling that it would come to pass suggest that they are indeed signs from the future. The premonition of the garden-knife not only predates the murder, but also predates, by a significant span of time, the intent to act.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 144.

It is this knowledge that finally drives Myshkin to madness. It is his second last cogent insight. He is beginning to unravel as he asks Rogozhin to give him a pack of cards. Myshkin, bewildered, melancholy and desolate, articulates his final insight:

all at once he had become aware that at that moment, and for some time past, he had not been saying what he ought to have been saying, not doing what he should have been doing, and that these cards he held in his hands and had been so pleased about, could avail nothing, nothing at all now.<sup>182</sup>

The prince, like Oedipus, ‘knows too late’ what his premonitions concerning the knife were really about.

#### 2.4.1.3 The Chinese Vase

Apart from the already noted temporal analogy between Myshkin’s object-inspired premonitions of catastrophe and prophecy’s relation to the apocalyptic event, I have also mentioned a temporal isomorphism at play between apocalyptic prophecy and the existential temporality of Myshkin’s epileptic seizures. When describing the process of building up to an attack, Myshkin states that he can sense the impending seizure in the moments before the event. There is an aural premonition or presentiment here; it is Dostoevskii’s famous ecstatic aura.

This warning of seizure is experienced first as a surge in his vital forces in flashes of intense illumination. ‘But these moments, these flashes, were merely the prelude [*predchuvstvie*] to that final second (never more than a second) which marked the onset of the actual fit. That second was, of course, unendurable.’<sup>183</sup> Myers translation of *predchuvstvie* as

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<sup>182</sup> *Idiot*, p. 647, *PSS*, 8:506.

<sup>183</sup> *Idiot*, p. 237, *PSS*, 8:188.

‘prelude’ here captures the temporal commonality between these ‘flashes’ that foretell an impending seizure, and apocalyptic prophecy. The vital surging flashes that precede an epileptic fit, and apocalyptic prophecy both act as ‘warnings’ or ‘preludes’ to events that are yet to come. The event is ‘that final second’ of the epileptic seizure which is unendurable, takes one out of oneself, towards an experience that lies beyond the novelistically articulable.<sup>184</sup>

The ‘final second’ signals the onset of the seizure, but it also reflects the temporality of the apocalypse. The common futurally-directed temporal structure of Myshkin’s premonitory consciousness, his epilepsy, and apocalyptic prophecy — presentiment (object-inspired premonitions; ‘flashes’; apocalyptic prophecy) and catastrophe (narrative calamity; seizure; apocalypse) — could suggest that Myshkin’s experience of such closed temporalities allegorically heralds ‘the end of time’. Myshkin quite directly associates the sensations he feels in the build up to his seizure with apocalyptic prophecy. ‘At that moment I seem to understand the strange phrase, “there should be time no longer”’.<sup>185</sup>

If, as Lebedev suggests, they are in the age of ‘the third horse, the black one’,<sup>186</sup> and are then on their way to the ‘final terrifying second’, it would make sense that these catastrophes being intimated to Myshkin through particular objects reflect the world’s givenness to chaos and fragmentation, as it awaits the end of time. In other words, the premonitions of narrative catastrophes — Myshkin’s seizure after Rogozhin attempts to murder him; Ippolit’s attempted suicide; Nastas’ia’s murder and the breaking of the vase — characterise a world in a state of terminal decline.

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<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Sarah Young has recognised that the alteration of perception that takes place in the instant before the seizure — the ‘prelude’ to the event — and the seizure itself, with its ‘characteristic falling and loss of consciousness’, point to a connection in temporal terms between Myshkin’s epilepsy, and apocalyptic prophecy. Young, *Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, p. 105.

<sup>185</sup> *Idiot*, p. 238, *PSS*, 8:189.

<sup>186</sup> *Idiot*, p. 210, *PSS*, 8:167.

Of course, the breaking of a vase is not as ‘catastrophic’ as the events associated with the other premonitory objects under discussion: attempted murder, murder and attempted suicide name far more calamitous occurrences than the breaking of a vase. Yet the innocuousness of the object perhaps helps conceal the darker possibilities this scene, where the breaking of the vase takes place, allegorically articulates. Regardless, formally, all three objects are clearly premonitory and foretell the ‘disasters’ that they are destined to participate in.

The loss of the vase is perhaps, in itself, trivial, yet this event refers to more than simply the destruction of the material object. The narrative of *The Idiot* appears to be driven towards the end of time, and, perhaps, negatively or apophatically points towards a presence that lies beyond narrative depiction. In Myshkin’s interaction with the Chinese vase, readers shall see how his object-inspired premonition, epilepsy, and apocalyptic prophecy of the inevitable renewal and resurrection of mankind come together, precisely at the moment when the vase shatters into pieces, that is, becomes broken and unready-to-hand.

The breaking of the vase takes place at a party at the Epanchin residence. The assumed purpose of the event is to present Prince Myshkin as a potential suitor for Aglaia. Aglaia, exasperated by and anxious for Myshkin, sarcastically instructs him to break a precious Chinese vase at the party. ‘At least smash the Chinese vase in the drawing-room! It’s valuable; smash it, please’.<sup>187</sup> Initially Myshkin is worried that he will now smash the vase out of ‘sheer nervousness’, but he also imagines another potential outcome of the event, ‘This time an idea came to him in his semi-delirium: what if he had an epileptic seizure in front of them all?’<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> *Idiot*, p. 555, *PSS*, 8:435.

<sup>188</sup> *Idiot*, p. 557, *PSS*, 8:437.

Of course, at the event, Myshkin both smashes the vase and possibly has an epileptic seizure. Directly before this foretold ‘catastrophe’ comes to pass, Myshkin intensely, passionately, wildly elaborates his prophetic ideas about Russia. ‘Show him the future renewal of all mankind, and its resurrection, perhaps through Russian thought alone, the Russian God and Christ, and you will see what mighty, truthful, wise, and gentle giant he will rise before an astonished world’.<sup>189</sup> Myshkin’s episode here could very well be regarded as a seizure. This is because there are accounts suggesting that Dostoevskii had similar experiences himself. He had ‘seizures which were completely unanticipated, and actually struck with the victim’s mouth opened in mid-utterance during lively and inspired speech’. They could strike when he was at the ‘peak of an impassioned harangue’ about something exalted and jubilant, ‘on the verge of “some revelation”’.<sup>190</sup>

Both Myshkin’s object-inspired premonitions and his world-historical prophecy he appears to be elaborating in this moment, aim at revealing thick strands of fate. Bearing in mind Dostoevskii’s own extraordinary condition, and his willingness to infer parapsychological phenomena into its symptoms,<sup>191</sup> could Myshkin’s capacity for premonitions be intended as an indication that he carries within himself some greater truth about the future salvation of mankind?

Perhaps this analogical connection between prophecy and presentiments of narrative catastrophe is what Dostoevskii is indicating by allowing Myshkin to express his world-historical prophecy just before his presentiment of the breaking of the vase comes to fruition:

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<sup>189</sup> *Idiot*, p. 577, PSS, 8:453.

<sup>190</sup> Rice, pp. 82, 85. N. N. Strakhov, ‘Materialy dlia zhizneopisaniia F. M. Dostoevskogo’, in *Biografiia pis'ma i zametki iz zapisnoi khizhki F. M. Dostoevskogo*, ed. by O. Miller (St Petersburg: A. S. Suvorin, 1883), pp. 170-329 (p. 214); A. G. Dostoevskaia, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: *Khudozhestvennaia literature*, 1981), p. 123-25.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



Could one really believe that, after Aglaya's words of the day before, a kind of indelible conviction had imprinted itself on the prince's mind, a sort of amazing and impossible presentiment that he would smash the vase the following day, no matter how he tried to steer clear of it and avoid disaster? But so it was.<sup>192</sup>

The phrase 'impossible presentiment' emphasizes Myshkin's peculiar capacity for inexplicably intuiting the future. The vase is then broken and the premonition fulfilled.

At this point, the narrator cannot help but add significantly.

We must mention, however, an odd sensation that came over him at that instant and stood out sharply from all the other strange and confused emotions that came crowding in upon him: it was not the embarrassment, the disgrace, the fear, not the suddenness of it all that struck him most forcibly, it was that the prophecy had come to pass!<sup>193</sup>

Thus, it is the 'fulfilment of prophecy' that is most significant in this event. Indeed, in the very same paragraph, just as Myshkin has this arresting thought reflecting on the prophetic fulfilment of his premonition, his pre-epileptic state appears to intensify. 'A moment passed and everything before him seemed to expand; instead of horror — light and gladness, ecstasy; he began to struggle for breath and... but the moment passed. Thank God, it wasn't that!' 'It wasn't that', or 'Not that' [*ne to*] appears to be referring to an epileptic fit, but the ambiguity of the phrase suggests the possibility of a doubled reading — that is, it may very well also be a hidden hint of a reference to the impending apocalypse itself. In this final 'не то', the novel

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<sup>192</sup> *Idiot*, p. 578, *PSS*, 8:454.

<sup>193</sup> *Idiot*, p. 579, *PSS*, 8:454.

offers a cryptic clue indicating the synergy between the different forms of closed temporal structures, outlined above, that underpins Myshkin's narrative journey in *The Idiot*.

#### 2.4.2 Apocalyptic Readings of *The Idiot*

The first question this analysis leads to would be: is *The Idiot* an entirely apocalyptic novel? Even though Morson states that Dostoevskii's novels are fundamentally governed by open temporality, he recognises threads of closed temporality pulling the novel towards closure. In this sense, he acknowledges that foreshadowing and presentiments foretelling the future, are undoubtedly there in Dostoevskii's work,<sup>194</sup> and he calls this type of closed temporality 'vortex time'.

In vortex time, 'several vortices of varying power are revealed in a Dostoevsky novel. When one appears, an otherwise improbably sequence of escalating disasters occurs, with one shocking event following another with ever-increasing force.' Morson's interpretation of vortex time thus appears to correspond quite closely with the structure of premonitory temporality, identified above, pulling Myshkin — through presentiments manifesting genuine instances of backward causation — towards foretold catastrophes.

When a vortex is strong enough, it attracts everything, any stray thought or chance event, to its centre, even if the character struggles against it. In the vortex, all forces, all theories, no matter what their initial trajectory, are redirected to point toward the catastrophe ahead.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> 'In the vicinity of catastrophe, foreshadowing is very definitely possible.' Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 164.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Morson even identifies a commonality in the temporal structures of Myshkin's epilepsy and the apocalypse: "“There shall be no more time” — Dostoevskii's favourite phrase from the Book of Revelation — links the temporality of execution and epilepsy to the novel's other governing image of a vortex: the approach of Apocalypse.”<sup>196</sup>

Much has already been said about the theme of the apocalypse in *The Idiot*.

Leatherbarrow notes that *The Idiot* and *Demons* are Dostoevskii's most apocalyptic novels.<sup>197</sup>

Mochulsky claims that ‘On the metaphysical plane, *The Idiot* is an apocalyptic vision of the world standing under the sign of the black horse and a prophecy of its nearing end.’<sup>198</sup>

Biographically as well, Dostoevskii certainly expected the apocalypse to occur. This was especially the case in later life, as is evident from *Diary of a Writer*.<sup>199</sup> Hollander points out that Dostoevskii was thinking about the apocalypse while he was planning *The Idiot*, evidenced by the two letters he wrote to Maikov in March and May 1868, discussing Maikov's epic poem interpreting the Book of Revelation.<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, Gary Rosenshield states that ‘The Apocalypse was one of Dostoevskii's favorite books of the Bible, and all his

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Leatherbarrow, ‘Apocalyptic Imagery’, p. 124.

<sup>198</sup> Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, trans. by M. Minihan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 365.

<sup>199</sup> When discussing the ‘three great ideas’ that have shaped human history and the role of the Slavic idea in resolving history: ‘This is a matter of universal significance and of ultimate importance; and although it will certainly not resolve *all* human destinies, there is no doubt that it brings with it the beginning of the end of all the previous histories of European humanity, the beginning of the resolution of their eventual destinies, which are in the hands of God and which *humans can scarcely foresee, even though they may have forebodings*. [My italics]’ *A Writer's Diary*, 2:816, PSS, 25:9. On Dostoevskii's apocalyptic utopianism in *Diary of a Writer*, see also Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's 'Diary of a Writer' and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1981) pp. 33-38.

<sup>200</sup> Hollander, p. 129. PSS, 28.2:282-83 and 29.1:38-46.

major works, especially those with eschatological implications, borrow and build on its tone, imagery, and rhetoric.<sup>201</sup>

Rosenshield is, of course, correct. Several weighty pieces of evidence suggest that the apocalypse is a central image in the novel. Symbolic readings in light of the Book of Revelation illuminate its thematic centrality. Hollander identifies,

The knife in the book, the creature in Ippolit's dream, the notion of Jesus conquered by nature, the picture of a man the moment before the machine-monster executes him: all these have become for Dostoevsky the hopeless portents of the triumph of the Antichrist.<sup>202</sup>

Leatherbarrow recognises the complex symbology evident in characters' proper names in *The Idiot*, which echo the apocalypse.<sup>203</sup> As already stated, Myshkin's relation to the premonitory object can serve as the most concrete foundation for apocalyptic readings of the novel, grounding itself in the narrative's most climactic events, and demonstrating how Myshkin's presentiments draw the narrative towards inevitable disaster. But the original question still remains, now somewhat qualified: Though the novel clearly responds to a symbolically apocalyptic reading, does it unequivocally suggest that the apocalypse will happen?

Indeed, even within apocalyptic readings of the novel, the ending can be interpreted in different ways — there is still some 'loose play' possible. Rosenshield states,

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<sup>201</sup> Gary Rosenshield, 'Chaos, Apocalypse, the Laws of Nature: Autonomy and "Unity" in Dostoevskii's "Idiot"', *Slavic Review*, 50 (1991) 879-89 (p. 822).

<sup>202</sup> Hollander, p. 138.

<sup>203</sup> Leatherbarrow, 'Apocalyptic Imagery', pp. 127-29, 132.

From an apocalyptic point of view, Myshkin can be taken to be the son of man whose destruction is a sign and precondition of the beginning of a new world. As a character in the plot of natural law, however, Myshkin faces failure and personal ruin that indicates the complete absence of hope — a failed Apocalypse — not only for Russian society, but for all mankind.<sup>204</sup>

Everything depends on how the significance of the chaos in the novel is interpreted. Rosenshield states that the idea of the apocalypse is really a ‘transvaluation’<sup>205</sup> of the idea of chaos. For ‘Dostoevskii’s ideal reader’,<sup>206</sup> chaos, instead of suggesting irredeemable fragmentation and loss, when presented as a necessary precursor to the apocalypse, ‘not only takes on form, but also receives meaning and justification’.<sup>207</sup>

In Rosenshield’s second reading presumed to belong to the ‘imperfect reader’,<sup>208</sup> the one engrossed ‘in the plot of natural law’, it appears that the chaos, violence and evil in the world reflects Dostoevskii’s failure to render his ideal of a ‘positively beautiful person’,<sup>209</sup> or perhaps, at the very least, indicates Myshkin’s incapacity to change the world. There is here a ‘sort of truncated Apocalypse: a cataclysm without Revelation; Crucifixion without Resurrection’.<sup>210</sup> The moribund narrative and morbid ending suggest a failure in religious terms. In such an interpretation, Alesha’s narrative, especially the community of children he establishes at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, would be seen as fulfilling Dostoevskii’s aborted intentions for *The Idiot*.

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<sup>204</sup> Rosenshield, p. 887.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 882.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 888.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 884.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 888.

<sup>209</sup> *Letters*, 3:17, PSS, 28.2:251 (13/1 January 1868).

<sup>210</sup> Rosenshield, p. 888.

These multiple readings are possible because the entire novel, and indeed, each of Dostoevskii's novels, takes place in human time: the apocalypse never takes place. A *probable* conclusion is allegorically put forward in Myshkin's premonitions hurtling towards catastrophe, and the isomorphism of these premonitions with his epilepsy and the idea of the apocalypse. Yet the narrative always persists within the time before the 'time when there will be no more time', so the question of whether such a time will ever arrive is never settled.

### 2.4.3 Freedom and Responsibility

The doubled interpretive possibilities even within the apocalyptic reading suggest that 'time', though appearing oracular from the perspective of Myshkin's premonitory consciousness, does not impart certainty to the idea of the apocalypse. This is simply due to the undeniable fact that the apocalypse does not occur in the narrative. It is possible to produce an apophatic reading suggesting that, by characterising the world's givenness to inevitable chaos and calamity, Dostoevskii is negatively indicating a presence beyond finite time. However, it is also possible to suggest that the world's fragmented state is just that, and does not allow for a way out in *The Idiot*. Indeed, the crux of the matter is, as Denis Zhernokleyev put it, and as already cited in the introductory paragraph to this discussion of premonitory objects, that 'The truth that is emphatically absent in *The Idiot* is the truth of resurrection.'<sup>211</sup>

Dostoevskii reserves this narrative loophole for himself because freedom and responsibility are interlinked. As Morson states,

Imagine the world as a place in which it makes sense for conduct to be judged good or bad. His world will be one in which actions, once taken, cannot be changed — they have real consequences — but also one in which, until actions are taken, choice is

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<sup>211</sup> Denis Zhernokleyev, p. 113.

possible [...] that is what an emphasis on conduct requires and what ordinary experience teaches.<sup>212</sup>

The clearest way to exemplify the need for avoiding the complete closure of time, that is, for preserving an underlying sense of open time, is found in a novel where the forces of closed time are particularly strong — *Crime and Punishment*.

Morson admits that vortex time dominates *Crime and Punishment*, which is filled with instances of providence's interference in affairs. 'How else to explain why the hero of *Crime and Punishment* finds himself in just the right place to overhear chance information facilitating the murder?'<sup>213</sup> Indeed, there is a plethora of examples of backward causation or providential interference in *Crime and Punishment*: the fortuitous eavesdropping on the soldier and student's conversation; finding an axe at just the right moment; hearing important information about where Lizaveta is going to be when he intends to commit the murder. However, since this is a chapter on premonitory objects, I will briefly focus on the foreshadowing elicited from a significant object in the narrative — the 'bell' to the landlady's apartment.

Close to the beginning of the book, as Raskol'nikov visits the landlady to pawn his father's old flat silver watch and to perform a 'rehearsal'<sup>214</sup> of his intended murder, he rings the bell as he waits for her to answer the door.

In buildings like these, the flats almost always have that sort of bell. He had forgotten the sound of it, and now its particular clink suddenly reminded him very vividly of something. He shuddered — his nerves were far too shaken today.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 86.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>214</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 5, PSS, 6:7.

This is another clear example of backward causation as the bell ‘reminds’ him of a memory he is yet to have.<sup>216</sup> This is why he shudders. The bell once again comes into focus as he is waiting to enter her apartment to murder her and also when visitors are ringing it with Raskol’nikov inside, after he has committed the murder.<sup>217</sup> But most significantly, Raskol’nikov again seizes the bell in a haunting scene, when he revisits the pawnbroker’s apartment some time after the murder.

Here, clearly, the echoes of his fateful first ring of the bell are present and it again evokes a memory of the crime in him, this time, after the fact.

Raskol’nikov stood up, went out to the landing, took hold of the bell and tugged it. The same little bell, the same tinny sound! He pulled it a second time, and a third, listening and remembering. He began to recall the old, excruciating, frightening, horrible feeling, ever more clearly and vividly; he winced with every pull at the bell, feeling more and more pleasure each time.<sup>218</sup>

Again, in summary, this is an omen evoking a memory in Raskol’nikov of an event that is yet to occur. Once the omen has been fulfilled and Raskol’nikov is deeply in the grips of forces manifesting and portending the gradual destruction of his soul,<sup>219</sup> he returns to the memory, to relive it again and again.

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<sup>215</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 6, *PSS*, 6:8.

<sup>216</sup> As Sarah Young states regarding this scene: ‘[It] implies that Raskol’nikov has a recollection of the murder he has not yet committed’. Young, *Dostoevsky at 200* (forthcoming).

<sup>217</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 68, 75, *PSS*, 6:61, 6:67.

<sup>218</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 154, *PSS*, 6:134.

<sup>219</sup> See chapter 4, ‘Metaphysical Guilt and the Death Sentence in *Crime and Punishment*’.



As was the case with Myshkin in *The Idiot*, this piece of evidence appear to suggest that time is closed, that Raskol'nikov was destined to murder. However, I must insist on Raskol'nikov's freedom to choose to desire in a way that would free him from the rhythms of what Morson calls vortex time, and what I, following René Girard, call mimetic desire.<sup>220</sup> This possibility of desiring differently must always be open to Raskol'nikov. If he was not initially free to desire in a way that would not have led to the pawnbroker's murder, he is not responsible for the crime, and the moral aspect of the novel collapses.

Frank has already recognised, there are 'two ineluctable truths' that Dostoevskii held dear in his post-Siberian life. One, according to Frank, is that a 'Christian morality of love and self-sacrifice was a supreme necessity for both the individual and society', and the other, most relevant to this discussion, is that 'the human psyche would never, under any conditions, surrender its desire to assert its freedom'.<sup>221</sup> This is perhaps why Dostoevskii emphasizes in the epilogue that it was possible for Raskol'nikov to understand the error in his thought before he actually reaches such a renewal in the narrative.

He tormented himself with that question, unable to see that even then, standing and looking down into the river [when he planned to commit suicide], he might perhaps have already sensed how deeply wrong he and his convictions were. He couldn't see that this sensation might foreshadow a profound change in his life, a future resurrection, and a new view of life to come.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See chapter 5, on *The Brothers Karamazov*, for an explanation of mimetic desire, its pervasiveness in Dostoevskii's fiction and for the possibility of 'desiring differently'. Additionally, in chapter 4, I explore the effects of vortex time (albeit without referring directly to Morson's term) on Raskol'nikov's soul before and after the murder, compelling him forward in a state of living death.

<sup>221</sup> Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, pp. 283-84.

<sup>222</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 481, PSS, 6:418.

Thus, the possibility to desire differently, to adopt a ‘new view of life’, is open to him. To be sure, he is in the grips of a form of desire which resembles slavery throughout the novel, its rhythms and patterns can be predicted based on his pride and his central idea. He is very much within vortex time, which is a time that always tends towards annihilation of self and/or other. Yet the possibility of escaping this time is also open to him.

#### 2.4.4 Faith

But what of Myshkin in *The Idiot*? I have recognised that multiple apocalyptic readings of the novel are possible, while still insisting that the prophetic reading is the most probable one. Why do I qualify the seemingly oracular nature of temporality in this novel? Perhaps this could be linked to an understanding of the temporality of faith.

Faith, unlike proof, depends on radical uncertainty. It is only in contingent, temporally open existence that one can have faith in the promise of a certain outcome. If the future was not uncertain, faith would not be faith, it would be proof. Perhaps it could be said that Morson’s ethic of open temporality — since it suggests that human beings can all seek to live in accordance with primordially open temporality through prosaic acts of goodness — also implies a certain hope for the future, and faith in the openness of time.

Indeed, Morson, citing James, acknowledges that, ultimately, ‘no facts and no science could ever adjudicate’<sup>223</sup> between the indeterminist or the determinist views of temporality. In other words, the question of whether time is ‘genuinely’ open or closed cannot be solved from within finite time. Belief in open time, however, well founded, does require a faith in outcomes, even if that outcome is the absence of fixed outcomes.

Dostoevskii’s loophole in *The Idiot* — the room he leaves for ambiguity in ultimate metaphysical meaning — allows him to represent the temporal openness of existence, where no certain answers are given, and yet indicate his faith (not proof) in the fulfilment of

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<sup>223</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 84.

prophecy. Just as Dostoevskii says: ‘if someone proved to me that Christ were outside the truth, and it *really* were that the truth lay outside Christ, I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth’.<sup>224</sup> It could indeed be proven that Christ lies outside the truth. Yet it is from a perspective within finite and fragmented existence, filled as it is with the genuine possibility of radical doubt, that Dostoevskii prefers to stay with Christ.

Dostoevskii’s awareness of the possibility of radical doubt emanating from the temporally open nature of finite human life prevents the narrative from ever actually overstepping into a time beyond time. Such a time is only ever represented negatively as ‘not that’ [*ne to*] in the scene with the Chinese vase. The premonitory objects, and the closed temporality they reflect, hurtling towards inevitable catastrophe, indicates, by analogy, the world’s givenness to the final catastrophe. However, the absence of this actual final catastrophe, and the resurrection of humankind that it promises, helps preserve the artistic integrity of his novel.

This absence also indicates that Dostoevskii’s focus remains on finite human existence and never directly upon a transcendent world beyond it.<sup>225</sup> Indeed, Dostoevskii says nothing substantial about a time beyond existence, as he believes that nothing much can really be said about such a time from a human perspective.<sup>226</sup> Dostoevskii’s focus is always

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<sup>224</sup> *Letters*, 1:195, *PSS*, 28.1:176 (End of January—20 February 1854).

<sup>225</sup> As Dostoevskii states in *Winter Notes*: ‘what is needed, in short, is the principle of brotherhood and love – we must love. Man must instinctively and of his own accord be drawn towards brotherhood, fellowship and concord, and he must be drawn towards them despite immemorial sufferings of his nation, despite the barbarous brutality and ignorance which have become rooted in the nation [...] The need for brotherly fellowship must, in fact, have its being in the nature of man, he must be born with it or else have acquired the habit of it from time immemorial’. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, trans. by Kyril FitzLyon (Richmond, Surrey: Alma Books, 2016), p. 68, *PSS*, 5:80. First published in 1863.

<sup>226</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Unpublished Dostoevsky: Diaries and Notebooks*, trans. by T. S. Bercyzynski, Barbara Monter, Arline Boyer and others, 3 vols. (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 1:40,

processual. It is fixed on human striving towards alterity from within finite time. Indeed, both small, prosaic acts of kindness and the ecstasies of the vortex imply, in different ways, this trait of striving towards alterity from within time.<sup>227</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

The reader may question why a chapter that started out analysing material objects ends with a discussion of the conditions for freedom and temporality in the works. What this chapter demonstrates, first and foremost, is the breadth of the applicability of this conception, borrowed from Heidegger, of the existential materiality of the object and how it reveals itself when the object is absent or unready-to-hand in some manner. This breadth is what allows for such a sprawling narrative in this chapter.

Objects connote different meanings in accordance with their own particular, or even peculiar (in Myshkin's case), functionality and serviceability for Dasein's purposes. If readers seek a guiding thread that pulls all these objects to a central core, it is the fact that the same process of disclosure in absence governs them all. In other words, simply because the objects in *The Idiot* suggest revelations whose 'content' brings forth questions about temporality and freedom does not mean that readers ought to expect all the objects discussed to make the same revelations. All that is required is that they disclose themselves in the same way, namely, when the object is not functioning as it is expected to.

Yet the progression from material thing to freedom and time can also be partially explained in another way. During this chapter, as I sought to demonstrate how the Being of

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*PSS*, 20:173-75. Further references to this text will always refer to this translation, when directly cited, followed by the *PSS* citation. This specific citation refers to a famous entry from Dostoevskii's notebook [*zapisnaia knizhka*] of 1863-64, titled, 'Masha is lying on the table. Will I meet again with Masha?'. The entry, dated 16 April 1864, was written on the day after the death of his first wife. For consistency, I shall in future refer to this entry in text, where necessary, as the '16 April 1864 entry'.

<sup>227</sup> This is a topic I engage with in chapter 5.

the ‘thing’ is not to be found in describing what it is made of or what it looks like, but what human *possibilities* it contains and gives expression to, I have also always been implicitly exploring the grounds for understanding the existentiality of human freedom in finite time. Since objects cannot be understood without reference to the human choices they have been set up for and give expression to, a discussion of existential materiality is at the same time, a discussion of human possibility. Dasein’s striving towards the possible is, of course, not a ‘proof’ of human freedom, and this discussion is not intended as such. But it perhaps adds a secondary explanation for why this chapter has ended by discussing freedom in human time, since the existentiality both of Dasein’s experience of the material world and of ‘freedom’ is inexplicable without reference to the human pursuit of the possible in time.

Despite this idea, I restate that my primary purpose in this chapter has been to establish the existential materiality of the object in Dostoevskii’s fictional worlds in an entirely new manner. On the one hand, it is the environment — the world — that allows Dasein to pursue its possibilities within it, and this has been the terrain of this chapter. On the other, Dasein is only able to chase the possible because, on some level, it is aware that this capacity in Dasein is finite and must inevitably come to an end. In existential terms, it is not exactly this moment of ‘ending’ that requires attention, but how Dasein constantly live towards-the-end. In other words, Dasein is towards-death in every moment of its life — Being-towards-death is an *existentiale*. This *existentiale* is given particularly focused attention by the author in *Demons*.

### 3. Death and Immortality in Dostoevskii's Demons

It is undoubtedly the case that Dostoevskii was concerned with living relations to mortality. It is known that he was fascinated by suicide notes and letters, and had access to authentic documents of this sort.<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Jones recognises that Dostoevskii had an 'almost obsessive interest' in suicide in his novels and non-fiction writing.<sup>2</sup> Even as early as the 1840s, according to his younger brother, Andrei, and other friends, Dostoevskii was terrified of suffering a cataleptic seizure and being accidentally buried alive. The fear was so strong that Dostoevskii would sometimes write notes before he retired to bed, containing instructions not to bury him prematurely if he appeared to be dead.<sup>3</sup> Of course, Dostoevskii's own near-death experience led to a moment of epiphany and revelation for him, which he detailed in a letter to his brother Mikhail.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin speaks about criminals who are waiting to be executed. He draws out the existentiality of these rare moments, commenting on the peculiar feeling of certainty involved in a death sentence.<sup>5</sup> Myshkin also speaks of a man he encountered the previous year, who, like Dostoevskii, was reprieved from a death sentence. Myshkin hears about the 'twenty minutes' where, 'he [the unnamed man] lived with the certain conviction that within minutes he would suddenly die'.<sup>6</sup> Dostoevskii's detailed retelling of those moments of impending death, their peculiar fullness and intensity, suggests that the author

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<sup>1</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:742, *PSS*, 24:53-54.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> *F. M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, eds. K. Tiun'kin and M. Tiun'kina, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 1:174 and 2:204-05.

<sup>4</sup> Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, pp. 181-82.

<sup>5</sup> *PSS*, 8:20.

<sup>6</sup> *Idiot*, p. 63, *PSS*, 8:51.

was pertinently concerned with near-death experiences and the unique existential relations to mortality they entail.

Dostoevskii's interest in this theme is something he shares with Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, too, it is the living relation to death that represents the true phenomenon of death. This is because for Heidegger, human beings, in existential terms, never 'die'. Death, as an event that happens at the end of Dasein's life — the moment when Dasein 'perish[es]', or comes to its 'demise' — names only the point at which it ceases to be. Once Dasein ceases to be, it is no longer 'there' to experience life. Since one cannot be 'there' to experience the moment when one 'ceases to be', this means that human beings never 'die', or that 'Dasein never perishes'.<sup>7</sup>

When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its 'there'. By its transition to no-longer-Dasein, it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced.

Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular Dasein in relation to itself.<sup>8</sup>

In *Letter to Menoceus*, Epicurus states, 'so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist'.<sup>9</sup> This succinctly captures the thrust of the Heideggerian idea that human beings never experience their death. However, this does not stop human beings from primarily taking death as an event that will come 'some day' in the future, and perhaps not even specifically to each of us, but to 'everyone'. Taking death to refer solely to an event that will occur sometime in the far-distant future but currently has

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 291.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>9</sup> Whitney J. Oates, ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), p. 31.

nothing to do with one, allows Dasein to suppress its deeper understanding of death as an existential process each human being is constantly and individually undergoing and as a threat that could be actualized at any moment. Human beings thus suppress the ever-present possibility of their own non-existence and flee a genuine disclosure of their mortality.

One of the ways Dasein flees is through statistics. The world is currently dealing with COVID-19, and people have been inundated with data regarding daily case numbers, infection rates, deaths, locally and globally. However, even confronted with such statistical irrefutability, many still appear to believe that death is something that is happening to other people, or perhaps even not happening at all, according to some contemporary conspiracy theories. Statistics do not, in themselves, disclose the ever-present, and, in these times, amplified threat of death. Perhaps such information, by aggregating various ‘cases’ of death that can be collectively ‘accounted for’, actually defers or suppresses understanding of the radical individuality of death — the fact that it could happen *to me* at any moment. Statistical accounting for the phenomenon of death — even in such extraordinary times in 2020 where the threat of death appears oppressively close and pervasive at times — cannot, in itself, disclose the ever-present possibility of my own non-existence to me.

In order to uncover the true phenomenon of dying in Dostoevskii, death must not be taken primarily as an event that will happen ‘some day’ to ‘someone’ or to ‘anyone’. Instead, I seek to outline the manner in which characters’ suppressed awareness of the constant possibility and radical individuality of death conditions their lived experience of the world. I must turn to the *existentiale* of being-towards-death, which names the human living relation to mortality.

In this chapter, I will identify characters in *Demons* who face the possibility of their own, certain and unpredictable, death, without deferral or avoidance. I argue that *Demons* gives voice to a polyphony of extraordinary responses to disclosures of mortality. Death is a



centrally significant concept in this novel. Indeed, out of all of Dostoevskii's fictional works, *Demons* has the highest number of violent and unnatural deaths. Shatov; Kirillov; Liza Tushina; Fedka; Stavrogin; Matryosha, and the Lebyadkins suffer some of the more prominent unnatural deaths that take place in the narrative. The novel's emphasis on the phenomenon of death is prefigured very early in the novel.

In the very first chapter of the novel, readers learn that Stepan Verkhovenski, in the days of his youth, wrote a poem in which an 'incredibly handsome youth'<sup>10</sup> rides in on a black steed.<sup>11</sup> 'The youth represents death, and all the peoples are longing for it.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the theme of characters' living relations to death, signposted in Stepan's allegorical poem here, forms a significant narrative thread running through the work. I will discuss a range of different living relations to mortality in *Demons*, from evasive responses, to prophetic reactions to direct confrontations with mortality. Ultimately, readers will see that Dostoevskii provides an answer to the existential insight that all people suffer from a fear of the pain of death as long as they live. The answer lies with the perception of one's own immortality.

Epiphany plays a role in a many of these experiences. Mar'ia Lebiadkina experiences a minor epiphany in the form of presentiments about Stavrogin and relates prophetically to her own death. Epiphanies appear to various characters as ominous dreams threatening death, and as dreamt visions promising paradise. Kirillov's moment of wordless intensity as he seeks to conquer his own death through a supreme act of will also constitutes an epiphany according to the above definition. Finally epiphany will appear as a shared revelation, as characters raise themselves to an awareness of immortality.

De Jonge and Thompson's respective interpretations of moments of intense sensation and shared epiphany in Dostoevskii inform my discussion of epiphany in this chapter.

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<sup>10</sup> *Demons*, p. 10, PSS, 10:11.

<sup>11</sup> This could also be a reference to the 'black horse' of Revelation 6:5.

<sup>12</sup> *Demons*, p. 11, PSS, 10:10.

Thompson limits her analysis to *The Brothers Karamazov*, thus I will be able to identify Thompson's epiphanies in *Demons*, such as Shatov and Marie's shared epiphany, and Stepan Verkhovenskii's epiphany with Sofia towards the end of the novel.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these epiphanies represent the radicality of Dostoevskii's thinking on the pervasive effect of conscious or subconscious awareness of mortality on human thinking and behaviour. In this sense, *Demons* prefigures a variety of twentieth-century existentialist narratives concerned with Dasein's living relation to death.

### 3.1 The State of Society: Corrupted Discourse

On the one hand, *Demons* demonstrates how human existential responses to mortality can awaken characters from a fallen state of lost selfhood. On the other hand, the book is concerned with representing that fallen state. Idle chatter and frivolous curiosity have corrupted social discourse in high society. Springing out of this everyday form of discourse that allows people to flee in the face of their mortality, readers find, for example, Kirillov, a character who seeks a more 'authentic'<sup>14</sup> relation to his own mortality and through such an experience, a spiritual and physiological transformation.

Derek Offord recognises that Dostoevskii wished to analyse the 'moral and spiritual failings within the educated class which he believes have brought the country to... [a] critical

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<sup>13</sup> Thompson, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> The word for 'authentic' is *eigentlich* in *Being and Time*. By an 'authentic' existence, Heidegger has in mind a way of living which does not seek to avoid or distract itself from the true nature of its existence. It is a way of choosing to live a life truer to Dasein's fundamental existential nature: 'And because Dasein [human being] is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, "choose" itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only "seem" to do so. But only in so far as it is essentially something which can be *authentic* — that is, something of its own — can it have lost itself and not yet won itself.' Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 68. It is important to know that *eigentlich*, whose prefix *eigen* means 'own' in German, also carries a connection to the idea of 'belonging to oneself' or, as Heidegger puts it in the quote above, to the state of being 'something of [one's ...] own'.

condition'.<sup>15</sup> Malcolm Jones also reaches similar conclusions.<sup>16</sup> Rumour [*slukhi*] and gossip [*spletni*] are interwoven into nearly every episode in the novel.<sup>17</sup> They are a fundamental feature of social life and also perform important narrative functions, shaping key plot lines.<sup>18</sup> Idle chatter, frivolous curiosity and fears form threads holding together the town's social fabric. Thus, before presenting the varied epiphanies of mortality in *Demons*, I will demonstrate how the social discourses of the town have been corrupted. This will help clarify how characters, in everyday life in *Demons*, seek to avoid or flee their own Being, specifically their mortality.

### 3.1.1 Fallen Existence in Heidegger's Being and Time

My analysis of these divertive social behaviours and how they suppress a deeper awareness of mortality owes a debt to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The 'authentic' life for Heidegger, which is born of a primordial experience of the necessary conditions of human existence, springs out of everyday life that is, proximally and for the most part, a fallen life,

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<sup>15</sup> D. C. Offord, 'The Devils in the Context of Contemporary Russian Thought and Politics', in William J. Leatherbarrow, *The Devils: A Critical Companion* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 63-69 (p. 65).

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoyevsky: The Novel of Discord* (London: Elek, 1976), pp. 131-33.

<sup>17</sup> Melissa Sokol, in her PhD thesis, recognises the prevalence of rumour and gossip in *Demons* and explores gossip's relation to several connected phenomena such as fear; secrets; whispering and ambiguity. She also explores how several characters make use of or are impacted by the prevalence of gossip and rumours in the novel. Melissa Sokol, 'Rumors and Gossip in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Literature: Griboedov, Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Brown University, 2007). <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304898485/?pg-origsite=primo>> [accessed 3 Jun. 2021].

<sup>18</sup> On the potential narrative functions of gossip and rumour in *Demons*, especially in terms of accounting for the 'occasional omniscience' of the gossipy narrator, G—v, see Greta Matzner-Gore's chapter 'Curiosity, Suspense, and Dostoevsky's *Demons*', particularly the subsections, 'The Gossip G—v' and 'Problems of Omniscience in *Demons*' in Greta Matzner-Gore, *Dostoevsky and the Ethics of Narrative Form: Suspense, Closure, Minor Characters* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pp. 24-29.

corrupted by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity. Although these appear to be pejorative terms, Heidegger intends them as essential aspects of human life. They are ‘existential characteristics’ describing the manner in which Dasein discusses, understands, sees and interprets others, the world and itself.<sup>19</sup>

By ‘idle talk’, Heidegger means rumour, gossip and passing the word around.<sup>20</sup> Individuals in their everyday lives find themselves always already delivered over to a shared ‘average intelligibility’. This ‘average intelligibility’ provides Dasein with a public interpretation and understanding of the world, others and of Dasein itself. This is why, when engaging in ‘idle talk’, it appears that everything has been perfectly understood, that Dasein is already aware of the truth of the matter, though in actual fact, the object under discussion is not ‘appropriated in a primordial manner’. In simple terms, ‘Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own’.<sup>21</sup> Although Dasein can be talking about ‘something’, and believe itself to have grasped that ‘something’ in its essence, that something gets understood only superficially and approximately. Idle talk ‘serves not so much to keep Being-in-the-world open for us in an articulated understanding, as rather to close it off, and cover up the entities within-the-world’.

Heidegger says repeatedly that this type of understanding is ‘groundless’ and ‘uprooted’.<sup>22</sup> The pervasiveness of idle talk in social life sets out the limits of Dasein’s understanding. ‘In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed.’<sup>23</sup> Thus, everyday life is marked by a pervasive, rootless type of understanding and interpreting, which is

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 212-14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

informed not as much by independent thought, as by rumour, gossip and the borrowed word. Such discourses form the broad context of Dasein's understanding in everyday life, and they take on an 'authoritative' and self-evident character suppressing disputation or new inquiry. In effect, idle talk allows Dasein to maintain itself in an 'average intelligibility' that suppresses genuine disclosure and inquiry.

Curiosity is another phenomenon that constitutes itself in Dasein's everyday life. If idle talk is a given perversion of discourse, curiosity is a given perversion of sight. Curiosity, in Heidegger's specific sense, does not concern itself with seeing in order to understand what is seen but '*just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty'.<sup>24</sup> Curiosity encounters objects restlessly and with frivolous excitement. The purpose of such 'looking' is not primarily to understand what is being looked at, but instead to amuse and lose oneself in the world and its variety of stimulating diversions.

Curiosity is concerned with 'the constant possibility of *distraction*'. Heidegger also points out that idle talk even controls curiosity in some instances, in the sense that I am directed towards what one 'must' read and see by a public understanding of things. Curiosity and idle talk provide Dasein with a life, which appears to be genuinely 'lively', and engaging, even though it is actually superficial, uprooted and groundless.

This climate of idle talk and curiosity allows discourses to imply a certain 'ambiguity' about what is and is not true. Public interpretation is able to make surmises about what is happening curiously and perhaps what will happen in the future, while the truth remains ambiguous. Everyone is watching over each other, listening in for the newest interest, or the latest received wisdom, to repeat it under the pretence of true knowledge. Readers will see how the ambiguous nature of truth in shared public interpretation and this sense of watching

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

over each other comes into play in Dostoevskii's *Demons*. Readers will also see the interconnection between rumour, curiosity and ambiguity at work in the novel.

Fallen existence — made up of idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity — is tempting, tranquillizing and alienates Dasein from its ownmost Being. Whilst falling, Dasein loses the path towards a true understanding of its own true possibilities, existence and mortality.<sup>25</sup> In order for a human being to recover their 'ownmost potentiality-for-Being', he/she must free themselves from their absorption in curiosity and idle talk.

### 3.1.2 Idle Talk, Curiosity and Ambiguity in *Demons*

#### 3.1.2.1 Idle Talk

Gossip, rumour, the passed around word are central to the sprawling narrative of this novel. As mentioned, several key plotlines are shaped by idle talk. These include Petr Verkhovenski's slanderous rumours about his father and Shatov to the authorities, and his rumour about a revolutionary network of 'groups of five' spread throughout Russia. The rumours surrounding Marie Shatova, Mar'ia Lebyadkina, Liza Tushina and Dar'ia Shatova's relationships with Stavrogin also fuel various events of the novel. Rumours regarding Dar'ia Shatova's proposed marriage to Stepan Verkhovenski, and the presumed reasons for this intended arrangement, propel the narrative towards a carnivalesque scene in Varvara Petrovna's drawing room at the end of part one. The rumours that subsequently stem from this scene form the undercurrent propelling various relationships through the novel. 'Needless to say, rumours of all different kinds begin circulating through the town, concerning, of course, the slap in the face, Lizaveta Nikolayevna's fainting spell, and everything else that had happened on that Sunday.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>26</sup> *Demons*, p. 231, *PSS*, 10:167.

Slander and gossip, of course, constitute a significant motif in Dostoevskii's wider oeuvre. Carol Apollonio recognises that rumour, rather than concrete action, make Svidrigailov a villain in *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>27</sup> 'Talk leads away from the truth'<sup>28</sup> for Dostoevskii's characters, Apollonio argues, and indeed, it is often the case for the townsfolk in *Demons*. Sarah Young states that Myshkin and Rogozhin's narrative presentations of Nastas'ia Filippovna in *The Idiot* shape much of her identity in the novel. Their interpretations of her photograph; conversations and stories about her and the 'endless rumours and interpretations' circulating about her relationship with Myshkin finalize the narrative space within which she dwells.<sup>29</sup> The slanderous rumours Antip Burdovskii and his compatriots attempt to spread about Myshkin early in *The Idiot*,<sup>30</sup> and the rumours and gossip Arkadii has to navigate in *The Adolescent*<sup>31</sup> also come to mind when considering the prevalence of idle talk more broadly in Dostoevskii's post-Siberian fiction.

Rumour and gossip are, however, at the very heart of social life in *Demons*. The whole town is fervently involved in chatter. Liputin, an atheist and a member of both Stepan and Petr Vekhovenskii's liberal circles, is an 'out-and-out gossipmonger [*spletnik*]'.<sup>32</sup> He justifies his taste for idle talk by arguing, 'Here you are talking about gossip, but there's no need for me to shout about it when the whole town is chattering away, and I'm just listening and nodding in agreement.'<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Carol A. Apollonio, *Dostoevsky's Secrets: Reading against the Grain* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Young, *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating and Scripting* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), p. 53

<sup>30</sup> *Idiot*, pp. 273-80, *PSS*, 8:216-21.

<sup>31</sup> *PSS*, 13:58, 197, 403.

<sup>32</sup> *Demons*, p. 32, *PSS*, 10:27.

<sup>33</sup> *Demons*, p. 115, *PSS*, 10:84.

There are several other references to the town's discourse being corrupted by gossip. Liza observes, 'one has a whole town full of gossips!'<sup>34</sup> Many of the ladies liked to gossip about Stavrogin's relationship with Mar'ia Lebiadkina, 'And the things they chattered [*boltali*] on about! The chattering was fed by the mysterious nature of the situation'.<sup>35</sup> Petr too claims the whole town is 'chattering' about scandals that have taken place.<sup>36</sup> The title *Besy* thus gains further significance as society as a whole appears possessed by 'demons' (or indeed, by the 'demonic' aspects of human nature), just as the epigraph to the novel from Luke appears to suggest.

The novel was initially conceived as being about Stepan Verkhovenskii<sup>37</sup> and indeed, he is one of the prime examples of characters possessed by gossip and rumour. Stepan is a terrible gossip. He has acquired the bad habit of not being able to be alone, constantly craving new amusement. Furthermore, he 'absolutely had to be told some gossip, something interesting that was going on in town, and it had to be something new every day besides'.<sup>38</sup> Stepan enjoys the company of his liberal circle, which was rumoured to be a 'hotbed of freethinking, depravity and godlessness; and these rumours kept growing' but in fact, was simply composed of 'the most innocent, nice, completely Russian, cheerful, liberal idle talk'.<sup>39</sup> Stepan's circle engages in talks of 'higher liberalism', which essentially means talking

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<sup>34</sup> *Demons*, p. 123, *PSS*, 10:90.

<sup>35</sup> *Demons*, p. 232, *PSS*, 10:167.

<sup>36</sup> *Demons*, p. 589, *PSS*, 10:407. In the original Russian, the verb Maguire translates as 'chattering' is *treshchit*. In gathering these various examples together in this passage, I am indicating that they all refer to a certain type of behaviour — 'chattering', 'blathering' in these contexts indicate intense dissemination of gossip. Thus it is not essential for the argument to find the exact term for 'chatter' [*boltat*] always employed.

<sup>37</sup> *PSS*, 11:65.

<sup>38</sup> *Demons*, p. 69, *PSS*, 10:52.

<sup>39</sup> *Demons*, p. 37, *PSS*, 10:30.



about ideas without any definite programme in mind. As Varvara says to him later on, ‘all your time is frittered away in chatter’.<sup>40</sup>

When Liputin visits their ‘liberal’ circle with new rumours, the true nature of Stepan Verkhovenskiï’s irrepressible desire for gossip emerges. Stepan’s circle often consumes Liputin’s gossip. The narrator — a participant in the circle — states that, despite Liputin’s gossip-mongering, ‘we liked his sharp wit, his inquisitive nature, his particular brand of jolly malice’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the circle takes secret pleasure in his idle chatter. Although Stepan protests and chides Liputin for his love of the passed-around word, Liputin observes that Stepan craves the distraction of rumour as much as himself. ‘Ah, Stepan Trofimovich, it’s all very well for you to shout about gossip and spying, but observe that it’s after you’ve squeezed everything out of me, and with such an excess of curiosity besides.’<sup>42</sup>

This tendency in Stepan Verkhovenskiï, though seeming innocent and harmless, actually has a number of detrimental consequences. His predilection has a clear impact on the solidity of his own identity as well as his relations with others. Although the circle explicitly rebukes Liputin for his gossiping, the narrator informs us, ‘We were not averse to rehashing the gossip of the town either, which sometimes led us to hand down severe and highly moral verdicts.’<sup>43</sup> The ‘severe and highly moral verdicts’ point towards the condemnatory aspects of idle talk. Indulgence in rumours or gossip allow characters to denounce, to accuse others in their own hearts, and finalize them on the basis of second-hand knowledge delivered through the passed-around word.

An example of this tendency to pick each other in idle talk occurs when Stepan has marriage to Dar’ia proposed to him by Varvara. His thoughts become cynical and suspicious

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<sup>40</sup> *Demons*, p. 68, PSS, 10:51.

<sup>41</sup> *Demons*, p. 32, PSS, 10:27.

<sup>42</sup> *Demons*, p. 114, PSS, 10:84.

<sup>43</sup> *Demons*, p. 37, PSS, 10:30.

as he begins to give credence to the rumour that Dar'ia had a secret intimate relationship with Stavrogin, Varvara's son. This makes him invent a narrative where he, the victim, is being forced into marriage, 'for another man's sins'.<sup>44</sup> His obsession with idle chatter, here, belies a deep concern with public shame. He fears the public ridicule his marriage to Dar'ia may encourage. 'What will they say at the club?'<sup>45</sup>

Stepan Verkhovenskiï is vain, self-centred, and, most importantly, self-deluded. Although he held certain liberal westernized views of the 1840s, he often acts not out of principle, but from vanity, from self-aggrandization, especially in the first part of the novel. His irrepressible penchant for 'idle talk' often causes him to lose himself, as he seeks to keep up with public opinion. This tendency in Stepan is exhibited by an event that occurred in the pre-history of the novel, when the reforms for the liberation of the serfs<sup>46</sup> were near at hand, and a baron close to these reforms visits Varvara.

The narrator, recalling the event, states that the visiting baron confirmed the 'rumours about the great reform that were just beginning to spread'.<sup>47</sup> Stepan Verkhovenskiï responds to the news about the impending emancipation of the serfs. Feigning delight, he cries 'Hurrah!' in a most 'appropriate' manner. 'His exclamation was not loud, and was even genteel; his delight was perhaps even premeditated, and his gesture purposely practised in front of the mirror half an hour before tea.'<sup>48</sup> The baron notices Stepan Verkhovenskiï's insincerity. This anecdote demonstrates that Stepan, though agreeing with the liberation of serfs in principle, in accordance with the ideals popular among the Russian Westernizers of his generation, does not really believe in the reform. He is centrally concerned with

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<sup>44</sup> *Demons*, p. 117, PSS, 10:86.

<sup>45</sup> *Demons*, p. 88, PSS, 10:65.

<sup>46</sup> The Emancipation Reform of 1861, which effectively abolished serfdom throughout the Russian Empire.

<sup>47</sup> *Demons*, p. 18, PSS, 10:16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

maintaining the semblance of agreement with public opinion, that is, with the way things have been publicly interpreted and made intelligible.

Stepan Verkhovenskiĭ's fascination with idle chatter is quite obvious in the first part of the novel. He shares this character trait with Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina. Stepan's dramatic and expressive nature make his chatter more conspicuous in the narrative, but Varvara too pays particular attention to what is being said about town. Information almost always reaches her through rumours and gossip. Rumour is how she learns about national events, such as the impending reforms of serfdom, and cultural shifts, such as the 'new type of ideas' being discussed in the cities.<sup>49</sup> Her son does not write to her, but, when he is away at military service, 'strange rumours'<sup>50</sup> begin to reach Varvara about his debauchery. She also hears rumours about Stepan's son in Switzerland, which she discusses with her friend.<sup>51</sup>

Rumours and gossip are a serious business for Varvara. Rumours about Stavrogin relationship with Mar'ia and Dar'ia preoccupy her attention. '[M]eanwhile certain strange rumours were already beginning to reach her and proved exceedingly irritating to her, precisely because they were so vague'.<sup>52</sup> The narrator believes that because of her direct character, and her 'tendency towards sudden attacks', she cannot tolerate the secrecy of slanderous accusations in rumour and gossip. Though this may be true, her obsession with rumours, and her reliance on them for much of her information, suggests a deeper entanglement in idle chatter than her outward character suggests.

Moreover, she can quite willingly be 'taken in' by a rumour, if she is inclined to believe it.

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<sup>49</sup> *Demons*, pp. 17, 22-23, *PSS*, 10:16, 10:20.

<sup>50</sup> *Demons*, pp. 45-46, *PSS*, 10:36.

<sup>51</sup> *Demons*, p. 69, *PSS*, 10:52.

<sup>52</sup> *Demons*, p. 179, *PSS*, 10:129.

One thing was strange: Varvara Petrovna suddenly believed beyond a doubt that Nicolas had actually ‘made his choice’ at Count K.’s, but, and what was strangest of all, she believed it from the rumours that had reached her, as they had everyone else, out of thin air.<sup>53</sup>

It is because she desires this to be true that she believes it so groundlessly. Although Stepan Verkhovenskii is the more prominent consumer of idle chatter, Varvara too is entirely enveloped in it.

Varvara’s engagement with rumours, like Stepan Verkhovenskii’s, and indeed, the town’s at large, suggest that idle talk has corrupted the town’s discourses. Truth is indeed flexible, and uncertain. Social discourse is uprooted, severed from the object under discussion and built of facts plucked ‘out of thin air’.

### 3.1.2.2 Curiosity

I have explained how, for Heidegger, human life is constantly marked by a desire for newness. Dasein leaps from one curiosity to the next in a bid for distraction from its deeper self and its existence. In *Demons*, this constant leaping from interest to interest is described as ‘frivolity’ [*legkomyslie*].<sup>54</sup> Malcolm Jones notes that the town is constantly engaged in ‘trivial, frivolous, superstitious, sometimes vicious, always bogus activities and pursuits’.<sup>55</sup> Not much is known about Stavrogin’s father, apart from the notion that he is a ‘frivolous old

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<sup>53</sup> *Demons*, p. 332, PSS, 10:234-35.

<sup>54</sup> Perhaps a closer translation of *legkomyslie* would be ‘light-mindedness’. I will continue to follow Maguire’s translation of ‘frivolity’ for this term, since it captures the sense of leaping from one amusement to the next for the purpose of entertainment and diversion. However, I mention ‘light-mindedness’ as an alternative translation as it evokes a different, significant aspect of the behaviour I am referring to, insofar as it implies a levity that does not allow for clarity of thought or understanding.

<sup>55</sup> Malcolm Jones, *The Novel of Discord*, p. 131.

man' [*startsya legkomyslennogo*].<sup>56</sup> The narrator judges Stepan Verkhovenskiï for his 'capricious self-indulgence' [*kapriznoe samodovol'stvie*] and his 'frivolous playfulness' [*legkomyslennno-igrivoie*].<sup>57</sup>

High society in particular exhibits a thirst for scandal and gossip, for the distraction and entertainment such chatter provides.

All that could be seen were the familiar faces of society people who were scanning the scene, some in stern surprise, others with sly curiosity and, at the same time, naively eager for a juicy little scandal, while still others were even beginning to chuckle.<sup>58</sup>

The gossip, rumour and mystery surrounding Stavrogin is considerable amongst 'society people'. Although Stavrogin's past actions have earned him notoriety and disapproval, what is particularly noteworthy is how quickly opinion of him softens and transforms in high society.

During a gathering, the governer's wife, Iuliia Mikhailovna, attempts to associate two of Stavrogin's actions — fighting a duel for honour against Gaganov, and enduring the dishonour of a slap from Shatov without retaliating. She concludes, 'After all, he couldn't very well challenge his own former serf to a duel!'<sup>59</sup> The crowd are very pleased with this new interpretation of otherwise stale gossip.

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<sup>56</sup> *Demons*, p. 18, *PSS*, 10:17.

<sup>57</sup> *Demons*, p. 88, *PSS*, 10:65.

<sup>58</sup> *Demons*, p. 173, *PSS*, 10:124.

<sup>59</sup> *Demons*, p. 329, *PSS*, 10:233.

Significant words! A simple and clear thought, but one which, however, hadn't entered anyone's head until now. Words that had unusual consequences. All the scandal and gossip, all the trivia and chitchat were suddenly relegated to the background. A new character had appeared, about whom everyone had been mistaken, a character with almost ideally strict standards.<sup>60</sup>

The newness of this vision of Stavrogin appeals to the crowd. They are keen to forget and forgive his past transgressions and now instead insist, 'That's just the sort of man we need; we're short of such people'. He is reformed — a 'new man' — they conclude, despite being aware of his previous indiscretions and attacks. Several rumours begin to orbit around Stavrogin. They speculate about his connections with Count K. and his presumed engagement to one of her daughters, 'although there were no grounds for such a rumour'.<sup>61</sup> He is excused from his treatment of Lizaveta Tushina, as she is labelled 'the most ordinary kind of girl' and from his dealings with Mar'ia. 'Why, even if there'd been a hundred crippled women, who hasn't been young once!' This demonstrates high society's addiction to new curiosities, their thirst for distraction and their ability to forget the past.

Stavrogin is also subject to romanticized and exaggerated images of himself in high society. Baseless rumours fuel their curiosity, as they seek something 'new' to understand about the image of Stavrogin. The myth centred on Stavrogin is a well-discussed motif in commentaries.<sup>62</sup> Petr Verkhovenskii intends to position Stavrogin as an 'idol', a figurehead to his revolutionary movement. For us, it is important to recognise that this is partly Petr's

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Demons*, p. 331, PSS, 10:234.

<sup>62</sup> e.g. Nancy Anderson, *The Perverted Ideal in Dostoevsky's 'The Devils'* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 55; Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 112-13.

creation, partly the town's, for they too are willingly turning to Stavrogin, seeking and expecting something great from him due to their own capacity for exaggeration and gossip, to satisfy their ever-curious desire for new experiences.

This insatiable desire for the 'new' intensifies as the novel progresses. As Iuliia Mikhailovna's ill-fated gala approaches, the narrator directly observes a certain frivolous tendency taking hold of the town.

People were in a strange state of mind at the time. Especially among the ladies a certain frivolity [*legkomyslie*] was noticeable, and it couldn't be said to have come on gradually. Several extremely unconventional notions seemed to have been floated. There was a heightened gaiety, an air of levity, which I won't say was always pleasant. A certain disorder in people's way of thinking was in fashion.<sup>63</sup>

In this unsettling social climate, a group of young people, associated with Iuliia Mikhailovna's 'literary circle', form themselves into a group called the 'scoffers' [*nasmeshnikami*] or 'sneerers' [*nadsmeshnikami*].<sup>64</sup> As the name suggests, the group's purpose was to 'sneer' at everything as well as perform all sorts of inappropriate pranks that cause scandals, in order to facilitate their amusement and diversion.

The 'scoffers' indulge in picnics and evening parties, travel through town in carriages and on horseback, seeking adventures, 'solely for the purpose of having a lively story to tell'.<sup>65</sup> In frivolous mood, they enjoy the liveliness of their lives, partaking in amusement for its own sake. Unfortunately, many of these amusements are far from innocent. The group causes havoc, placing pornographic photographs in a bible-seller's bag. This action leads to

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<sup>63</sup> *Demons*, p. 354, *PSS*, 10:249.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Demons*, pp. 355-60, *PSS*, 10:248-253.

her arrest. The pedlar re-enters the narrative towards the end of the novel as an image of holiness, sharpening the reader's judgement of the scoffers retrospectively. They also indulge an act of sacrilege. As has already been mentioned, Fedka, the convict, steals the icon of the Mother of God from their church,<sup>66</sup> and Liamshin, a member of the revolutionary group, reportedly leaves a live mouse in its place as a joke.<sup>67</sup>

The group reach their nadir when they gawk at a suicide victim. 'I remember that one of them said aloud, then and there, that "everything's become so boring that there's no point in being fastidious about one's amusements as long as they were diverting"'.<sup>68</sup> Thus, it is clear that the 'scoffers' indulge in these curiosities as a cure for their boredom, as an amusement that distracts them.

The narrator provides the details of the suicide. A young man, entrusted with a poor family's essential income, accrued over many years, decides to spend it all on lavish entertainment and gambling. After his spree, he shoots himself. 'Death must have occurred instantaneously; there was no sign of the death agony in his face: his expression was calm, almost happy, if only he were alive. Everyone in our party studied him with avid curiosity.'<sup>69</sup>

The scoffers engage in frivolous adventures to distract themselves from their mortality. This is why the observers cannot really reflect on the causes of the tragedy, as Nancy Anderson has already recognised.<sup>70</sup> When an onlooker begins to wonder why 'people in our country [have] taken to hanging and shooting themselves so frequently, as if they'd lost their roots', the crowd are displeased and 'cast unfriendly looks at the philosophizer'.<sup>71</sup> After this, Liamshin and others seek to 'lighten the mood' and distract from the unpleasant

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<sup>66</sup> See subsection 2.3.2.2, 'The Victims', of this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> *PSS*, 10:252-53.

<sup>68</sup> *Demons*, p. 362, *PSS*, 10:254.

<sup>69</sup> *Demons*, p. 364, *PSS*, 10:255.

<sup>70</sup> Nancy Anderson, *Perverved Ideal*, p. 48.

<sup>71</sup> *Demons*, p. 364, *PSS*, 10:256.



reality of death before their eyes, by playing the role of a buffoon and stealing grapes off a plate lying in the dead man's room. A second follows his lead and a third attempts to steal the champagne before a police officer prevents them. The lack of seriousness during this incident is particularly telling. It suggests that the group are indeed fleeing the reality of the suicide. Curiosity serves an essential purpose, as does idle talk, insofar as it allows people to forget their own Being, forget themselves and their mortality as they become absorbed in novelty and untethered rumour and gossip.

### 3.1.2.3 Ambiguity

Gossip, rumour, and idle chitchat are an endless source of entertainment for the townsfolk of *Demons*. Chatter and frivolity create a lively, fast-paced environment that fascinates participants, and monopolizes their attention. Truth becomes unfamiliar and ambiguous. Indeed, the pursuit of genuine disclosure appears unnecessary, since in chatter and fleeting curiosities, characters believe themselves to have actually perceived the real matter in its entirety. In such a lively environment, discussion, although formally appearing to aim at getting to the nub of the things, is really simply concerned with keeping the conversation going, with '[b]eing "in on it" with someone'<sup>72</sup> as Heidegger puts it.

The 'nice liberal idle talk' Stepan Verkhovenskii's circle indulges in their circle; the rumours and exaggerations surrounding Stavrogin and Petr Verkhovenskii in the imagination of high society; the discussions in the revolutionary milieu establishing itself in the town all rest on a certain ambiguity of truth. People are simply taking pleasure in chattering about scandals, in guessing at their significance and what they reveal about the slandered. They enjoy the mystery surrounding Stavrogin. It is the vagueness of this topic that constitutes its chief allure, since clarity would mean that there would be nothing left to talk about. Thus,

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<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 218.

idle talk and curiosity create an environment where scandal is encouraged, and truth becomes flexible and ambiguous.

Of course, political, ideological debate is not exempt from this tendency towards ambiguity and endless chatter. The purpose of such discussion in *Demons* is not really to effect change, but simply to carry on making predictions and surmises about what is happening — being ‘in on it’ with others. At Petr’s meeting of revolutionaries, the conversation appears to be of this ilk.

Young students are debating their views on topical issues. A ‘girl student’ asks where the notion of family in its current ‘prejudicial form’ arises. Stavrogin asks her to clarify. She replies,

‘That is to say, we know that the prejudice about God came from thunder and lightning,’ the girl student suddenly broke in again, her eyes almost dancing over Stavrogin. ‘It’s very well known that primitive man being frightened by thunder and lightning, deified the unseen enemy, aware of how powerless he was before them. But where did the prejudice about the family arise? Where could the family itself have come from?’<sup>73</sup>

The girl’s ideas are all couched in what ‘everyone knows’. ‘We know’, ‘it’s very well known’, such terms people her speech and demonstrate that her thoughts are not her own, but reflect the popular socio-ideological language of the time. It also demonstrates the doubled certainties in such discourses. On the one hand, there is complete faith in the ‘truth’ of what ‘everybody knows’, on the other, there is in fact no genuine pursuit of truth, simply a desire to align herself with popular opinion. Truth itself has become ambiguous, and characters

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<sup>73</sup> *Demons*, p. 438, *PSS*, 10:306.

ensconced in such discourse can carry on endlessly chattering curiously, trying to guess what each other are thinking, where the ‘right’ opinion lies, and who they can borrow it from.

There is plenty of heteroglossia in the girl’s speech and in the novel more broadly when dealing with authoritative ideological discourses. Heteroglossia is Bakhtin’s term for a specific form of double-voiced discourse where the speech of a character, narrator or author is interpenetrated with another socio-linguistic ideological perspective or ‘language’.<sup>74</sup> When the girl tells readers about what ‘everyone knows’, she adopts a more formal, scholarly tone — the implication being that she is parroting established wisdom. In other words, the speech becomes a ‘double-accented, double-styled *hybrid construction*’.<sup>75</sup>

The goal here is to ‘refract’ authorial intent. The double-accented nature of the girl’s speech creates a parodic effect. This effect, Bakhtin tells us, unmasks and destroys the incorporated language and socio-ideological belief systems — what ‘everybody knows’ — and reveals it to be ‘something false, hypocritical, greedy, limited, narrowly rationalistic, inadequate to reality’.<sup>76</sup> Through this technique, Dostoevskii is able to bring into question authoritative public discourses without using direct authorial speech. The reader can then perceive the ambiguity of meaning such discourses rest upon.

Stepan Verkhovenskii attacks the revolutionary milieu’s discourses in his combative speech at the gala. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I have solved the whole mystery. The whole secret of their effect lies in their stupidity!’<sup>77</sup> Stepan understands that the arguments and morality of the nihilists depend on ambiguity of meaning for their ‘mystery’ and ‘effect’. It is because high society is seeking to be fooled, wishing to surmise the greater wisdom in these

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<sup>74</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’ in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422 (p. 324). This essay was first published in 1934-35.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 311-12.

<sup>77</sup> *Demons*, p. 535, *PSS*, 10:371.

ideologues, that the ideologue's 'stupidity' becomes successful. "It can't be that there was nothing more here," everyone says to himself, and looks for the secret, sees a mystery, wants to read between the lines — the effect is achieved!<sup>78</sup>

Dostoevskii also makes use of heteroglossia in Varvara's speech as she borrows Petr's phrases in her own rationalization of her son's behaviour: 'to use your comparison once again Pyotr Stepanovich'.<sup>79</sup> Varvara interprets the rumours about her son and Mar'ia Lebyadkina in her son's favour. She sees in his 'marriage' to Mar'ia, a hero, driven by noble impulse, to an extravagant act of kindness, where perhaps there was only a cynical joke or something else altogether. She sees it in this way because Petr shows it to her beforehand. She sees it because it is a tempting narrative for her.

Varvara continues this trend of 'borrowing words' in a later episode. She confronts Stepan Verkhovenskii about his ideas. 'Nowadays no one, no one any longer gets excited about the Madonna or spends any time on it except old men who are set in their ways. That's been proven'<sup>80</sup>. The language of 'proof' and 'no one' getting excited about the Madonna again suggests Varvara is borrowing ideas recently transmitted to her by the authoritative discourses of the revolutionary milieu. When Stepan accuses her, 'Oh, what an eruption of borrowed words!'<sup>81</sup> she replies,

Yes, it's come to that, Stepan Trofimovich. You've tried in vain to hide from me all the new ideas that are now already familiar to everyone, and you've done so solely out of jealousy, In order to have power over me. Now, even this woman Yulia is a hundred versts ahead of me. But now even I have seen the light. I've tried to defend

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> *Demons*, p. 210, *PSS*, 10:151.

<sup>80</sup> *Demons*, p. 376, *PSS*, 10:264.

<sup>81</sup> *Demons*, p. 377, *PSS*, 10:264-65.

you, Stepan Trofimovich, as much as I could; you're the one that everyone is blaming.<sup>82</sup>

The atmosphere of accusation and condemnation is also part of the public revolutionary narrative. Varvara's borrowed words express a desire to be 'in on it' with others. She must modulate her opinions, not to get a clearer idea of the subject under question, but instead to suit modern certainties, to suit authoritative public intelligibility, just as Stepan Verkhovenskii did with the baron in an earlier example in this chapter. It appears that living in accordance with the way things have been interpreted is indeed tempting. People want there to be a deeper mystery underlying their ambiguous discourses. They want to be deceived. Several characters display this desire. Varvara, eager to excuse her son's past sins, desires to believe in Petr's words. Iuliia Mikhailovna, too, her gala in ruins, still wishes to believe Petr's feeblest excuses. 'Alas, the poor woman still so wanted to be deceived!'<sup>83</sup>

This is where Petr Verkhovenskii's role in the novel becomes clear. Petr's main goal is to spread sedition and confusion throughout the town. In Dostoevskii's notebooks for *Demons*, Petr states, 'Actually, I am not concerned with the people or with getting to know the people. I know that it is now possible to spread sedition among the people, and that is all there is to it.'<sup>84</sup> At another point in these nascent sketches, the character says that he is not a Westernizer and does not have anything against Russia. 'It's simply that I am in favour of tearing everything up by the roots.'<sup>85</sup> Anderson recognises that Petr exploits the deluded nature of high society for his purposes. 'Such a society, which has willingly given itself up to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> *Demons*, p. 545, PSS, 10:378.

<sup>84</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, *Notebooks for 'The Possessed'*, ed. and trans. by Edward Wasiolek (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1968), p. 99, PSS, 11:77. Further references to this text will refer to this translation.

<sup>85</sup> *Notebooks for 'The Possessed'*, p. 96, PSS, 11:75.

its own delusions, provides fertile grounds for the destructive activities of Pyotr Verkhovenski. <sup>86</sup>

Whereas other characters appear to be subject to idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity, moved to act on the basis of hearsay, gossip, rumour, and at the whim of fashionable ideas, Petr understands society's dependence on these phenomena, and uses his mastery to manipulate and uproot the population. Petr even boasts about his capacity to confuse truth with rumour. "If you only knew the line of twaddle I've had to hand them. But you do know." He began to laugh. <sup>87</sup>

He gives definite examples as well. 'You know I put Shatov's wife into circulation, that is to say, the rumours about your liaison with her in Paris, which I of course used to explain the incident on Sunday'. <sup>88</sup> He also uses rumour to rile Von Lembke against the Shpigulin workers, and creates slanderous accusations about Shatov in order to misdirect the authorities. <sup>89</sup> He authors and makes Kirillov sign a false confession in an attempt to, once again, spread mistruth among the population and save himself from punishment for his crimes. <sup>90</sup> It is also arguable that he most likely instructed Liamshin and Teliatnikov to persuade the authorities of the falsehood that Stepan Verkhovenski was a member of the revolutionary movement. <sup>91</sup>

Petr Verkhovenski uses mystery and ambiguity to create a feeling of shock or awe in his victims. This is how he persuades his circle that there are thousands of other 'groups of five' <sup>92</sup> throughout Russia, ready to launch a coordinated attack against the authorities. He

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<sup>86</sup> Nancy Anderson, *Perverved Ideal*, p. 34.

<sup>87</sup> *Demons*, p. 242, PSS, 10:174.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> PSS, 10:272-75.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:472-73.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:282-83.

<sup>92</sup> *Demons*, p. 433, PSS, 10:302-03.

also uses ambiguity to present Stavrogin as a figurehead to his movement, manipulating Stavrogin's mysterious aura to inspire his revolutionary band.<sup>93</sup> Petr consistently seeks to portray or present others in a manner suitable for his own purposes. Fedka perceives this trait: 'Pyotr Stepanovich was perhaps not a stupid man, but Fedka the Convict got it just right when he said of him that "he himself goes and invents a man and then lives with him"'.<sup>94</sup> His methods in this regard are to mix the truth with lies. He takes half-truths about characters and adorns them with further embellishments, exaggerations or simple falsehoods to create an image of a person, which he can then propagate for his purposes. 'In order to make the truth more plausible, you mustn't fail to mix a lie in with it.'<sup>95</sup>

### 3.1.3 Collective Understanding

The narrator informs readers that the governer, Von Lembke, 'had the expression of a sheep'<sup>96</sup> during his meeting with Petr Stepanovich. When explaining Shigalev's system for social reorganisation, a high-school student compares nine-tenths of the population to 'cattle'.<sup>97</sup> The implication constantly in the novel is that people have become docile and lacking in self-will or independent thought.

Petr Verkhovenskiï recognises and exploits this. He states that his work in the town has meant that 'no one else has a single idea of his own left in his head! They would consider that shameful.' He appears to save his most stinging criticism for his own circle. 'They're just waiting, with their mouths wide open, like baby jackdaws in their nest, to see what treat we've brought them'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *PSS*, 10:326.

<sup>94</sup> *Demons*, p. 402, *PSS*, 10:281.

<sup>95</sup> *Demons*, p. 238, *PSS*, 10:172.

<sup>96</sup> *Demons*, p. 394, *PSS*, 10:275.

<sup>97</sup> *Demons*, p. 447, *PSS*, 10:312.

<sup>98</sup> *Demons*, p. 247, *PSS*, 10:177.

At the beginning of Petr's meeting of 'revolutionaries', attendants cannot agree whether the gathering is a meeting or not. The discussion is quite comical as a vote is held to decide the matter. 'Some raised their hands others didn't. There were some who raised their hands and then lowered them again. Then lowered them and raised them again'.<sup>99</sup> When Madame Virginskaia, who proposed the vote in the first place, asks a student why she didn't raise her hand, she replies. 'I kept watching you, you didn't raise yours, so I didn't raise mine'.<sup>100</sup> Even on such a trivial matter as whether to label the gathering a meeting or not, the crowd are waiting for others to decide for them.

As the meeting progress, the crowd begins to take on an almost choric nature, shouting in unison on several occasions as if they had completely surrendered their self-will. Petr manages to convince the gathering, in principle, to endorse his destructive route to social change, asking them whether they would prefer 'a tortoise-like procession in the swamp, or crossing the swamp under full sail?'<sup>101</sup> Many characters respond that they prefer going 'full sail' even though, in actual terms, this implies mass extermination or wanton destruction. Nonetheless, it appears that 'almost everyone' agrees, exclaiming in choric fashion once again, "“Everyone, everyone,” cried a majority of voices'.<sup>102</sup> A major makes a further clarification. "“I must admit that I'm more for a humane solution,” said the major, “but since everyone is for yours, then I'll go along with the rest”".<sup>103</sup>

The statement adds to the several comic elements in the chapter, and suggests that people have lost their self-will and their ability to think independently. They spy on each other to establish the 'right' view to take in accordance with public intelligibility. Petr clearly

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<sup>99</sup> *Demons*, p. 443, PSS, 10:309.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Demons*, p. 453, PSS, 10:316.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*



recognises this habit and even says so in response to the major. ‘And that’s the way all of you are! He’s ready to spend six months arguing to show off his liberal eloquence, and the result is that he goes and votes with everyone else!’<sup>104</sup>

Later in the novel, at another meeting where Petr convinces the gathering to conspire with him to murder Shatov, he displays a particularly short temper, trying to persuade through fear and thinly veiled threats. The circle asks him what he is blaming them for. He replies directly, “‘For self-will!’” Petr Stepanovich shouted savagely. “‘While I am here, you shouldn’t dare to act without my permission.’”<sup>105</sup> Virginskii tries to object to the decision to murder Shatov, ‘I’m opposed. With all my soul I protest against such a bloody decision!’<sup>106</sup> However, he is soon overruled and perhaps obscurely threatened as well.<sup>107</sup> Resigned, he intones, ‘I’m for the common cause’.<sup>108</sup> Their fearful, watchful allegiance to Petr Verkhovenskii’s ‘common cause’ alleviates the burden of selfhood.

Earlier, I referred to Liputin, the ‘gossip-monger’. An associated accusation levelled against him is that he acts like a ‘spy’. That is, as he picks and transmits gossip throughout the town, he is always on the lookout for scandal and intrigue, so he can chatter about it. This language of ‘spying’ is central to the revolutionary ideology in the novel. This ideology encourages spying as a means of control. When Petr is leaving the circle, after Shatov’s murder and the disposal of the body, he advises his group, ‘if need be, observe and keep an eye on one another’.<sup>109</sup>

The principle of ‘spying’ is germane to the uprooted kind of society prevalent in this novel and in everyday social life in *Being and Time*. Heidegger, too, warns that under the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Demons*, p. 607, *PSS*, 10:419.

<sup>106</sup> *Demons*, p. 609, *PSS*, 10:421.

<sup>107</sup> *Demons*, p. 610, *PSS*, 10:421.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> *Demons*, p. 672, *PSS*, 10:463.

guise of idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity, everyone is watching over everyone else, to keep an eye on public opinion and on those who may be faltering or indeed running ahead of them.

Everyone keeps his eye on the Other first and next, watching how he will comport himself and what he will say in reply... [it is] an intent, ambiguous watching of one another, a secret and reciprocal listening-in. Under the mask of 'for-one-another', an 'against-one-another' is in play.<sup>110</sup>

So too in *Demons*, the same practice is at work, as people are encouraged to spy on one another. Verkhovenskii makes direct reference to this philosophy. 'He's [Shigalev] got spying down. He has each member of society watching the others and obliged to inform. Each belongs to all, and all to each. All are slaves, and are equal in their slavery.'<sup>111</sup> The axiom of 'each belongs to all, and all to each' accurately summarizes their viewpoint, made of mistrust, and a desire to promote division, preying on people's fears, and to pursue their own self-interest under the pretence of a wish for equality.

This phrase may remind readers of Dostoevskii's fundamental axiom, which makes some appearances in *Demons*, but is most prominent in *Brothers Karamazov*. The prophetic and spiritually pure monk Zosima and other holy characters in that novel consistently repeat forms of the leitmotif, 'each one of us is guilty of the other's sin, and I most of all'.<sup>112</sup> Whereas Petr Verkhovenskii advocates suspicion, mistrust and spying to preserve one's own self-interest, Zosima calls for universal guilt, where each takes responsibility for the sins and weaknesses of others as well as one's own.

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<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 219.

<sup>111</sup> *Demons*, p. 463, PSS, 10:322.

<sup>112</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 360, PSS, 14:262.

Malcolm Jones argues that *Demons* best exemplifies the truth of this axiom, since it is clear to the reader that everyone in the town has some measure of responsibility for the catastrophe that ensues.<sup>113</sup> Thus, Petr and Shigalev's endorsement of spying is a corrupted form of a true message of fraternity and universal forgiveness in their version of 'each belongs to all, and all to each'. This further reinforces the notion that the social discourses, and the publicly intelligible philosophies underpinning these discourses, have been debased, and cut from the root. It is this very corruption of discourse, which allows Petr and others to weaponize idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity in order to control people who are no longer able to think or act independently.

### 3.1.4 United in Fear

I have now explored the manner in which social discourses in the town have been corrupted by idle talk, curious frivolity and ambiguity. These forces are constant features of everyday human life, and it is out of this ordinary, 'fallen' state of confusion, that characters are able to pursue possibilities of more primordial disclosure in moments of epiphany. There is, however, another force conditioning everyday human behaviour in the novel worth noting — fear.

Fear unites all characters in the novel. All exhibit certain significant fears; some even have epiphanic moments of 'terror' or 'mystic fear', and the concept of fear bears philosophical importance for Kirillov. Stepan Verkhovenskiï is fearful of many things. The nervous illness that he is afflicted by throughout the novel is 'the usual outcome for him of nervous tension and moral shock',<sup>114</sup> the narrator tells us. In other words, they are the physical manifestations of fears. He also has more everyday fears, such as the fear of public opinion, or his fear of serf rebellion, clear from his hysterical reaction to the Anton Petrov

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<sup>113</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Novel of Discord*, p. 148

<sup>114</sup> *Demons*, p. 719, *PSS*, 10:495.

affair.<sup>115</sup> Varvara both admires and fears her son Stavrogin.<sup>116</sup> Petr fears Stavrogin.<sup>117</sup> Petr's circle also act out of fear of denunciation, and Petr plays on their raw fear of death.<sup>118</sup> Liputin is eager to murder out of fear, but is ultimately too afraid to act independently.<sup>119</sup> Stavrogin too confesses that he has to overcome his feeling of fear to commit vile atrocities.

There are also notably significant moments of fear in this novel. When the crippled Mar'ia Lebiadkina meets her lawful 'husband' Stavrogin in her quarters, she experiences a moment of 'stark terror'.<sup>120</sup> Stavrogin stands in the doorway looking at her severely, and with disdain, 'even a gloating delight at her fear' was evident in his face.

after almost a minute of expectant waiting, an expression of stark terror suddenly showed on the poor woman's face. It was contorted by spasms; she raised her trembling hands and suddenly burst into tears, exactly like a frightened child; another moment and she would have started screaming.<sup>121</sup>

This 'stark terror' could also be considered prophetic as at the end of the meeting, Mar'ia foresees that Stavrogin will play a part in her murder.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> PSS, 10:32. Anton Petrov was the leader of a peasant revolt that followed the Emancipation Reforms of 1861. The peaceful protest was eventually dispersed with violence from the Russian Army under the orders of the Tsar. Petrov was detained and eventually shot in the street by Russian soldiers. Between 50-100 peasants were killed as the military subdued the riots. Stepan Verkhovenskii's hysterical reaction reflects the fear of economic collapse and peasant revolution amongst the royals and upperclassmen following the emancipation of the serfs.

<sup>116</sup> PSS, 10:38.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 10:178.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 10:419, 10:421.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 10:422.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 302, 10:215.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 10:219.

Another moment of unusual fear occurs after the murder of Shatov. While some are preparing the body to be sunk into the pond, the group are standing together over the corpse, ‘they all seemed to be only partially conscious’.<sup>123</sup> Then Virginskii begins to waver, quivers all over and shouts mournfully at the top of his voice, ‘This isn’t right, it isn’t right! No, it’s absolutely not right!’ Liamshin responds to this by wrapping his arms around Virginskii with all his might, and shrieks in ‘an inhuman way’.<sup>124</sup>

There are powerful moments of fear, for instance, when a person suddenly begins to scream in an unnatural voice, one that you could never before have imaged to be his, and that’s sometimes even a very terrifying thing. Lyamshin began to scream in a voice that wasn’t human, but animal-like.<sup>125</sup>

Whereas Mar’ia’s ‘stark terror’ indicated some prophetic quality, Liamshin’s scream appears to be more primal and animalistic, as he is seized by the horror of murder; a murder he helped carry out. Later in the novel, as the authorities discover Shatov’s murder, an ‘overwhelming sense of almost mystical fear’<sup>126</sup> overcomes society. The narrator describes the murder as ‘the climax of our stupidities’<sup>127</sup> as if the entire town were complicit in it.

Finally, after Petr has persuaded his circle to become complicit in Shatov’s murder, Liputin begins to realise that Petr may have murdered Fedka the convict.

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<sup>123</sup> *Demons*, p. 669, *PSS*, 10:461.

<sup>124</sup> *Demons*, p. 670, *PSS*, 10:461.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Demons*, p. 675, *PSS*, 10:465.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

the coincidence of the fateful words ‘that Fedka was drinking vodka for the last time in his life that evening’ with the immediate fulfilment of the prophecy was so significant that Liputin suddenly stopped hesitating. The jolt had been administered: it was as if a stone had fallen on him and crushed him forever.<sup>128</sup>

This ‘jolt’ also appears to be a moment of intense fear. Liputin realises that Petr is a murderer and his fear immediately compels him to decide that he will take part in Shatov’s murder, presumably out of fear for his own life. He is the ‘first to appear’ at the designated site for the murder.

The significance of fear in the novel is twofold: First, its ubiquitous presence suggests that the town is particularly ‘fearful’. Secondly, the fears experienced by Mar’ia Lebyadkina, Liamshin and Liputin, bear marks of a peculiar, almost epiphanic intensity. The fact that the characters experiencing these particular fears are either absorbed in terror-filled presentiments of their own demise, or in their sense of horror at the murder of another, implicitly acknowledges that their powerful impressions are associated with a fear of death.

### **3.2 Being-towards-death in Being and Time**

#### **3.2.1 Fear, Death and Anxiety**

In everyday life, human beings fear death as if it were an oncoming event, rather than a process that Dasein is constantly undergoing. People are dying by the millisecond all over the world. Dasein encounters them as myriad events or ‘case[s] of death’<sup>129</sup> occurring somewhere out of sight, perhaps existing only in digital feeds and TV screens. Dasein sees

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<sup>128</sup> *Demons*, p. 624, *PSS*, 10:431.

<sup>129</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 296-97.

death in its own life constantly as well — strangers, neighbours, acquaintances, family members.<sup>130</sup>

According to Heidegger, since Dasein always lives with an understanding that it too will die, Dasein looks for ways in which to evade the responsibility of its own mortality, and understands death as some form of infinitely postponed event that has nothing to do with it. Dasein understand death ‘in a ‘fugitive’ manner’ and expresses its evasion in phrases such as ‘One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us’ and ‘one dies’.<sup>131</sup> In this way, death appears to be an impersonal concept, generally applicable to all collectively, rather than each individually. Such talk about dying allows human beings to conceal their own mortality from themselves. ‘Dying, which is essentially mine in such a way that no one can be my representative, is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the “they” encounters.’<sup>132</sup>

Falling into idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity is tempting, and tranquillizing. In this instance, the ‘they’ provides a ‘*constant tranquilization about death*’.<sup>133</sup> The deaths of others, Heidegger suggests, also often appear as social inconveniences, if not downright tactlessness, against which Dasein seeks to guard itself. As already mentioned in the introduction, Heidegger refers briefly to Tolstoi’s ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich’ when explaining the concept of being-towards-death in *Being and Time*.<sup>134</sup> In Tolstoi’s story, upon learning of Ivan Il’ich’s

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 298.

<sup>134</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 495. Also referred to in footnote 187 of the introduction. The two citations are performing different functions. The first, in the introduction, only provides evidence for the idea that Heidegger presumes literature capable of representing existential phenomena. The current citation refers to Tolstoi’s story — in the same way that Heidegger does in *Being and Time* — to further explain what Heidegger means when he states that there is a ‘*constant tranquilization about death*’ in everyday life.

demise, the thoughts of characters that knew him turn towards the tiresomeness of having to attend his funeral and the implications Ivan's death has for their careers or financial security. It fills them with delight that it is someone else and not them who dies.<sup>135</sup> This betrays a kind of stubborn evasion in the face of death, seeking to protect themselves, at every turn, from its true significance.

An authentic relation to death is possible with the appropriate mood, which for Heidegger is 'anxiety'.

In anxiety in the face of death, Dasein is brought face to face with itself as delivered over to that possibility which is not to be outstripped. The 'they' concerns itself with transforming this anxiety into fear in the face of an oncoming event.<sup>136</sup>

Anxiety is distinct from fear, for Heidegger. Anxiety about Dasein's Being-in-the-world, about its own mortality, is latent in the everyday world and manifests itself as fear. Fear is thus a repressed response to the innate anxiety of death, which Dasein constantly feels at a precognitive level. 'Fear is anxiety, fallen into the "world", inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself.'<sup>137</sup>

Whereas fear always deals with a threatening entity within-the-world, which may or may not come upon Dasein — fear of a fall; fear of losing one's home; fear of failing in some way. In anxiety, it is not clear what an anxious person is anxious about. That in the face of which one is anxious remains 'completely indefinite'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, trans. by Anthony Briggs, David McDuff, Ronald Wilks (St Ives: Penguin Classics, 2008), pp. 157-58.

<sup>136</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 298.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.



Therefore that which threatens cannot bring itself close from a definite direction within what is close by; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere.<sup>139</sup>

### 3.2.2 Epiphanies of Mortality

For Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, a relation to one’s own mortality where the true existential meaning of death has been fundamentally lived through in a moment of anxiety, is called an ‘authentic Being-towards-Death’.<sup>140</sup> Anxiety discloses the truth about Dasein’s always operative, living relation to the nullity of its own mortality, without seeking to evade it or cover it up through the diversion or suppression offered in everyday life through idle chatter; curiosity and ambiguity.<sup>141</sup>

More specifically, in *Being and Time*, anxiety reveals that Dasein always *is* the possibility of its own impossibility. Dasein can die at any moment. Human beings carry this relation to death through every moment of their lives. The fact that a range of existentialist thinkers, such as Heidegger, Bataille and Maurice Blanchot<sup>142</sup> adopt this structure of inauthentic everyday communally shared public discourses on death and potentially more authentic responses to mortality, suggests that Dostoevskii’s thought was radical in this regard and prefigures these narratives.

However, Dostoevskii’s ideas about how best to cope with the fact of one’s own mortality differ from the thinkers mentioned above. Dostoevskii’s existentialism, though

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. 304-5.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 296; Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Boldt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 70-71. First published in 1943; Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 95-96. First published in 1955.

recognising the nullity within death, also sees the human lived experience of death as providing grounds for faith in immortality. In this respect, common ground will be found between Dostoevskii's view of the relation between death and eternity and Levinas.

### 3.3 Being-towards-death in Demons

Whereas Heidegger only presents an inauthentic and a possible authentic relation to death through anxiety, Dostoevskii's *Demons* presents a variety of different attempts to relate to human mortality. I propose three categories to distinguish the different forms of relations-to-death in *Demons* — inauthenticity, prophecy and leaping-towards-death. Following a discussion of these different existential relations, I will also explore a fourth relation to death: immortality.

#### 3.3.1 Inauthenticity

Many characters display a tendency to flee in the face of their own mortality. Karmazinov, the poet, in his eloquence, puts this most directly. “I really do intend,” he grinned not without venom, “to live as long as possible. There’s something in the Russian gentry that wears out extremely rapidly in every respect. But I want to wear out as late as possible”<sup>143</sup> This is indicative of the type of thinking that asserts that death will come, ‘but not right away’, thereby postponing and forgetting about the certainty and constant possibility of one’s own death.

Readers know that Petr Verkhovenskiï was a very ‘nervous boy’ during childhood, ‘...very sensitive and... fearful’.<sup>144</sup> In fact he prayed to God frequently, ‘so that he wouldn’t die in the night’. Thus, from his earliest days, Petr worried about mortality. The adult Petr, however, is perfectly aware that people fear death just as he did as a youth. ‘[S]ince you are a

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<sup>143</sup> *Demons*, p. 410, PSS, 10:287.

<sup>144</sup> *Demons*, p. 102, PSS, 10:75.

civilized man, you're probably afraid of death'.<sup>145</sup> Verkhovenskii has converted his own childhood fear of death into an instinct for murder. '...if I were in your place, to show self-will I would kill someone else, and not myself.'<sup>146</sup>

This is still an inauthentic relation to death, as he tries to conceal his consciousness of his own mortality by taking power over the life and death of others. Kirillov recognises this in his response to Petr. 'To kill someone else would be the lowest point of my self-will, and that's where you reveal who you are completely. I'm not you: I want the highest point, and I'll kill myself.'<sup>147</sup> Petr Verkhovenskii's instinct for murder, although it steeps him in the death of others, does not allow him to become conscious of his own mortality. Instead, it is still a response built out of fear.

In another scene, Fedka accuses Petr Verkhovenskii of being the true murderer of the Lebiadkins, even though Fedka struck the deathly blows himself.<sup>148</sup> The parallels with Ivan and Smerdiakov in *The Brothers Karamazov* or Fedka and Stavrogin aside, this incident again demonstrates that Petr is fearful. Imagining Fedka capable of either causing him harm, or exposing him as the true murderer of the Lebiadkins, his response immediately turns towards his instinct for murder. 'Fedka leaped to his feet, his eyes fiercely flashing. Petr Stepanovich pulled out his revolver.'<sup>149</sup> Fedka escapes, only to be murdered later.

As already mentioned, Petr even boasts forebodingly to Liputin at the end of the scene that Fedka was 'drinking vodka for the last time in his life'.<sup>150</sup> He tells Liputin this in order to instil fear in him, so that he can keep this fact 'in mind for future consideration'.<sup>151</sup> This

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<sup>145</sup> *Demons*, p. 451, *PSS*, 10:315.

<sup>146</sup> *Demons*, p. 684, *PSS*, 10:470.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *PSS*, 10:428-9.

<sup>149</sup> *Demons*, p. 621, *PSS*, 10:429.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622, *PSS*, 10:430. Mentioned already on p. 228 of this thesis.

<sup>151</sup> *Demons*, p. 621, *PSS*, 10:429.

demonstrates that Petr uses the threat of murder to allay his own fears of being betrayed or harmed by others, and to inspire fear in others.

While gripped by similar rage, Petr also turns his gun on Kirillov.

‘If you have any idea of trying to run away tomorrow like that scoundrel Stavrogin,’ he swooped down on Kirillov in a frenzy, deathly pale, stammering and garbling his words, ‘then I’ll find you, even at the other end of the world... I’ll hang you... like a fly... I’ll squash you... you understand!’<sup>152</sup>

For Petr Verkhovenskii, whose essential relation to death is born of fear, this is one of his most intense experiences. He does not experience epiphany; perhaps as his capacity for revelation extends only as far as these emotions of raw fear and frenzied ‘deathly pale’ rage, as he stammers and garbles his words, fitfully expressing only his instinct for murder.

### 3.3.2 Prophecy

Certain characters exhibit a prophetic relation to death; the most prominent of these is Mar’ia Lebiadkina. In her meeting with Stavrogin, he proposes that they run away together to some mountains in Switzerland. She rejects his offer, and begins to mock him with cutting words and triumphant laughter, calling him an ‘imposter’ and a ‘poor actor’.<sup>153</sup> She also foresees her own death. “‘Get away, you imposter!’” she cried imperiously. “‘I am the wife of my prince, and I’m not afraid of your knife!’”<sup>154</sup> Anderson has noted that this statement is prophetic insofar as Mar’ia Lebiadkina is eventually murdered by Fedka’s knife, after he has

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> *Demons*, p. 308, PSS, 10:219.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

received money from Stavrogin.<sup>155</sup> This episode, composed of hysterical laughter, frenzied shrieking and fragmented, cryptic statements of intuitive insight and prophecy could also be seen to be a minor epiphany, demonstrating Mar'ia's revelatory and prophetic perception of her own impending demise.

Another character who has a prophetic relation to her own mortality is Liza. After Stavrogin has spent the night with her, she gains a noetic awareness of her own impending death. 'Listen, I've already told you, you know: I've given my life in exchange for just one hour, and I'm at peace.'<sup>156</sup> In this instant, Liza reveals that she is another example of an 'intensity addict'.<sup>157</sup> Liza is longing to experience the 'intensest possible moment'. She sought to give all her life for 'just one hour' of sublime pleasure.<sup>158</sup> The peculiar way in which characters react to a presentiment or even an explicit awareness of their own impending death is an exceptionally important motif in all Dostoevskii's work. Apart from the importance of this theme in *The Idiot*,<sup>159</sup> there are several references to Raskol'nikov living under a symbolic death sentence in *Crime and Punishment* which also deserve further attention.<sup>160</sup> It is in this context that Liza's prophetic presentiment about her impending death should be understood.

### 3.3.3 Leaping-forth into Death: Kirillov

Kirillov too, like Liza, seeks the intensest possible moment. But his quest is guided by more explicitly metaphysical goals. De Jonge's interpretation suits Kirillov well: he states that the escape from reality through intense sensation is often 'expressed as an escape from

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<sup>155</sup> Nancy Anderson, *Perverted Ideal*, p. 88.

<sup>156</sup> *Demons*, p. 580, *PSS*, 10:401.

<sup>157</sup> See subsection 1.6.2, 'Hankering After Intensity', in the Introduction.

<sup>158</sup> *Demons*, p. 580, *PSS*, 10:401.

<sup>159</sup> See opening section of chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>160</sup> See subsection 4.2.1 of this thesis.

time'.<sup>161</sup> Such an escape from the finitude and contingency of human time appears to be precisely what Kirillov seeks. De Jonge's central claim that the thirst for intense sensations is a search for metaphysical well-being in the nineteenth century, stripped as it had been of a 'framework of values and beliefs',<sup>162</sup> rooted in a feeling of wholeness derived from an active belief in God. Kirillov's thirst for an experience of death emerges out of a desire for metaphysical harmony in a world stripped of its divine meaning.

The *summum bonum* of Kirillov's life is to experience that which lies just beyond the boundary of all human experience — the nullity of death. He wants a lived experience of death. He considers this a moment worth giving his life for.<sup>163</sup> Kirillov characterises such a moment of primordial nullity as a state of timelessness, an exit from the contingency of life on earth — eternity momentarily lived through on earth. 'No, not in a future eternal life, but eternal life right here. There are moments, you reach moments, and time suddenly stops and it will become eternal.'<sup>164</sup>

Apart from his desire to escape time, and to recover a sense of whole meaning, why does Kirillov wish to experience the nullity of death? The answer is that he desires to liberate himself from the fear of the pain of death. Kirillov first explains this through a metaphor. He asks his audience to imagine being crushed by a stone as big as a house. He establishes that even though this experience would not be painful, since death would be instantaneous,

Stand there in reality, and while it's hanging, you'll be very much afraid that it will be painful. Every learned scholar, every first-rate doctor, everyone, everyone will be

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<sup>161</sup> De Jonge, p. 23.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>163</sup> *Demons*, p. 653, *PSS*, 10:450.

<sup>164</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188.

very much afraid. Everyone will know that it's not painful, and everyone will be very much afraid that it would be painful.<sup>165</sup>

Human life is fundamentally conditioned by the fear of the pain of death and this is so as long as humanity exists. It is because of this that

Life is pain, life is fear and man is unhappy. Now all is pain and fear. Now man loves life because he loves pain and fear. And that's how he's been made. Now life is given in exchange for pain and fear, and that's the basis of the whole deception.<sup>166</sup>

Kirillov wishes to bridge the absolute boundary between life and death — he wishes for the contradictory experience of a living death.

Kirillov aims to wordlessly experience the nullity of death, which, paradoxically, lies beyond human experience.<sup>167</sup> Perhaps he does experience such a nullity after all. In the final scene leading to his suicide, Petr Verkhovenskiï stands face-to-face with Kirillov, who appears to be hiding in a cupboard, in a strange trance-like state. Petr is struck by how,

the figure, despite all his shouts and his furious attack, hadn't even stirred, hadn't moved a single limb, as though it were made of stone or wax. The pallor of the face

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<sup>165</sup> *Demons*, p. 127, *PSS*, 10:93.

<sup>166</sup> *Demons*, p. 128, *PSS*, 10:94.

<sup>167</sup> For further discussion of the possible interpretations of this moment see Bilal Siddiqi, 'Existentialism, Epiphany, and Polyphony in Dostoevsky's Post-Siberian Novels', *Religions*, 10 (2019), <<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/1/59>> [accessed 30 March, 2020] (pp. 10 -13).

was unnatural, the black eyes were completely fixed and were staring at some point in space.<sup>168</sup>

Much in this description evokes a sense of death. ‘Stone’ or ‘wax’ both imply the inertia of death; the unnatural ‘pallor’ of his face also suggests a deathly color; and his notable lack of movement draws similar connotations.

Is this the moment where Kirillov is finally gaining cognizance, or being called towards, his experience of the nullity of death? His fixed stare ‘at some point in space’ does indeed suggest that there is something inexpressible and intangible occupying his attention in this moment. In Kirillov’s trance-like state, he appears to be in touch with forces pulling him out of finite time, bringing him into a motionless state of inertia akin to a living experience of death.

As Malcolm Jones recognises, the ‘silence at the core of the apophatic religion’ can be ‘interpreted or experienced either as a fullness or as an absence, as glorious plenitude or as desolate abyss, as a God-centred locus of meaning or as total chaos and meaninglessness.’<sup>169</sup> The experience is apophatic insofar as Kirillov could be said to be experiencing something that remains beyond novelistic expression. The presence of Kirillov’s primordial experience is only indicated in absence: in Kirillov’s deafening silence and inertia.

However, it is arguable that this is not the ‘moment’ itself. Kirillov has not yet made his final commitment — he has not shot himself. If the moment occurred as planned, it would have presumably occurred after Kirillov pulls the trigger, and just before he ceases to be. Kirillov’s final words, ‘Now, now, now, now...’, repeated about ten times,<sup>170</sup> are overheard by the retreating Petr Verkhovenskiï from outside the house. Thus, what actually transpires

<sup>168</sup> *Demons*, p. 691, *PSS*, 10:475.

<sup>169</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, p. 71.

<sup>170</sup> *Demons*, p. 691, *PSS*, 10:476.



for Kirillov remains outside the bounds of the novel. Once again, its presence is only indicated by quite radical absence.

The material evidence appears to suggest that Kirillov did not experience such a moment, as the narrator notes that ‘Death must have occurred instantaneously’, judging from the nature of the wound. However, I must restate that the experience of ‘eternity in an instant’ that Kirillov craves (‘there are moments, you reach moments, and time suddenly stops and it will become eternal.’)<sup>171</sup> refers to an event that transgresses the bounds of ordinary ‘instants’. As already mentioned, Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* describes a similar experience of eternity suddenly made intelligible in a ‘second’.<sup>172</sup> In Kirillov’s case, however, if this instant occurred, it would have had to take less than a ‘second’ of human time, perhaps only a millisecond, since the death was instantaneous. Indeed, since readers are granted no access to the event itself, and to Kirillov’s inner consciousness, it remains uncertain whether Kirillov’s desire for an experience of nullity is fulfilled or not.

Kirillov wants both an internal transformation (‘I want to take my life because that’s my idea, because I don’t want to be afraid of death...’<sup>173</sup>) and a liberation of society, allowing others to follow his terrible path to freedom. ‘Full freedom will come only when it makes no difference whether to live or not to live. That’s the goal for everyone.’<sup>174</sup> Kirillov’s story does not pan out in the way he appeared to expect. His suicide does not lead to his reemergence as a new man, physically transformed, immortal and unconditioned by fear of death. Furthermore, his apathetic indifference to undersigning a false suicide letter, dictated and planned by Petr Verkhovenskiï is also noteworthy, in this regard. The letter could have

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<sup>171</sup> *Demons*, p. 262, *PSS*, 10:188.

<sup>172</sup> *Idiot*, p. 238, *PSS*, 8:139. See section 2.4.1.3 for the first reference to Myshkin’s experience of eternity.

<sup>173</sup> *Demons*, p. 415, *PSS*, 10:290.

<sup>174</sup> *Demons*, p.127, *PSS*, 10:93.

ensured that Kirillov's theory would have been lost forever, replaced by a false written statement confessing to murdering one of his few friends. The cause of the renewal of mankind he claims to be championing is spurned in these actions before his suicide. His insistence on adding a mocking gesture also suggests that he dies with a hatred of humanity in his heart.

Thus, Kirillov has only his ambiguous moment of nullity before suicide to show for his efforts. Apart from that, his spiritual revolution fails as he neither sought nor acquired any followers to tell the story of his act of witness. Kirillov's living relation to mortality compels him towards seeking a primordial experience of the nullity of death. He leaps into death, hoping to live through and conquer it. This conquest is clearly a failure, but whether he is granted his eternal millisecond of death-like nullity is left for the reader to decide.

### 3.4 Immortality

Kirillov seeks to confront the nullity of death. He is aware that death, or the fear of death, threatens, consciously or subconsciously, throughout human life. But is this all there is at the basis of Dasein's existential relation to death? Is death only the nullity of ceasing to be? Williams has already positioned the novel as a battle between solipsistic, rootless and diabolic 'willing' and a faithful belief in immortality.<sup>175</sup> Even though I would not entirely endorse a binary approach to the work, as this would undermine the polyphonic nature of the novel, there are contrapuntal narratives in *Demons*, contrasting with those characters who are 'longing for death'. Their spiritual journey suggests that beyond one's own being-towards-death, lies commitment to eternity and immortality. As Dostoevskii says in the 16 April 1864 entry in his notebook,

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<sup>175</sup> Williams, p. 82.

The teaching of the materialists — universal stagnation and the mechanism of matter — means death. The teaching of true philosophy is the destruction of stagnation, that is: thought, that is the center and the Synthesis of the universe and its outer form — and of matter, that is: God, that is: eternal life.<sup>176</sup>

### 3.4.1 Death or Immortality?

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger warns that his ideas can be misinterpreted. He specifically states that to say human beings can only be for themselves when they are authentically related to death does not mean that one ought to seek to actualize death in the sense of ‘bringing about one’s demise’.<sup>177</sup> He would not agree with Kirillov’s logic at all. However, Heidegger’s narrative of authenticity through anxiety does share something with Kirillov’s quest. Both see a possibility of more ‘authentic’ life on the other side of an experience of the nullity or nothingness of non-being.

It is indisputably true that, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that a primordial encounter with the nothingness of one’s own ever-possible non-being (death) in an experience of anxiety can awaken a more authentic relation to oneself and one’s future. ‘The primordial and authentic future is the “towards-oneself” (to oneself!), existing as the possibility of nullity, the possibility which is not to be outstripped [death].’<sup>178</sup> In Kirillov’s case, it is not through anxiety, but through an act of will to suicide, that one can possess the nullity of death, and turn it into a moment of one’s own self-transcendence. In this sense, both Heidegger’s narrative of authenticity through anxiety in *Being and Time*, and Kirillov’s belief in the potential transcendence of the human form through suicide, seek to possess the nullity of death in order to return from it to the renewed subjectivity of the individual.

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<sup>176</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:41, 20:175.

<sup>177</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 305.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 378-79.

Levinas associates Heideggerian authenticity [*eigentlichkeit*] with subjectivity's desire to appropriate nullity, thereby taking possession of that which is radically other and beyond the bounds of human experience — death. Through this conquest, the authentic hero returns self-possessed and renewed. 'He [Heidegger] wants to grasp it [human existence] in the aspect by which it is in possession of itself, in which it is most properly itself, *eigentlich*. And this possession of self will be shown to be being-toward-death [...]'.<sup>179</sup> The word *eigentlichkeit* or 'authenticity' resonates with this nuance of proprietary ownership and exclusive selfhood as the word *eigen* [own] implies. Authentic living in *Being and Time* seeks to absorb the radically Other [death] into its own quest for renewed subjectivity, in order to have 'something of its own'.<sup>180</sup>

For Levinas, death does not simply signify 'my death in the sense of my *annihilation*',<sup>181</sup> as he states it does for Heidegger, but contains another meaning that is communicated to human beings in the response the death of another evokes in the self. Apart from indicating the solipsistic relation to *one's own* death, death as a social phenomenon also signifies hope for contact with the infinity of time.

The meaning of this hope (a priori hope) in despair does not undo the nothingness of death; it is a lending to death of a meaning other than that which it draws from the nothingness of being. It is not to a need to survive that this hope answers.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>180</sup> See footnote 14 in section 3.1, 'The State of Society: Corrupted Discourse', in this chapter for more detail on 'eigen'.

<sup>181</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, p. 50.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

It is worth noting that Dostoevskii had an ineradicable influence on Levinas' thinking. During Levinas' interview with Phillippe Nemo in the 1980s, Levinas cites Russian novels, and Dostoevskii by name on several occasions, as having had a formative influence on him. He even states that the human themes in Russian literature are what first piqued his interest in philosophy.<sup>183</sup> A few studies have already established a range of thematic connections between the two writers, specifically with regards to the asymmetrical interpersonal relation to the other and ethics.<sup>184</sup> Commentators have also explored the religious crossovers and fault-lines between the two thinkers' respective faiths and works.<sup>185</sup> However, this chapter constitutes the first time Levinas and Dostoevskii's thoughts on death and immortality have been compared.<sup>186</sup> The characters who best exemplify these possible experiences of death not as a nullity, but as a hope for a relation to infinity in *Demons*, are Shatov and Stepan

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<sup>183</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 22.

<sup>184</sup> Alain Toumayan, "I More than the Others": Dostoevsky and Levinas', *Yale French Studies*, no. 104, Encounters with Levinas (2004), 55-66 (pp. 55-57); Steven Shankman, *Turned Inside Out: Reading the Russian Novel in Prison* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 35.

<sup>185</sup> Val Vinokurov, 'Levinas's Dostoevsky: A Response to 'Dostoevskii's Derrida'', *Common Knowledge*, 9 (2003), 318-40 (p. 333).

<sup>186</sup> Although the title of Vinokurov's article (cited in full at the end of this footnote) suggests that his article also compares Dostoevskii and Levinas on this theme of 'death and immortality', Vinokurov makes clear that his analysis has little to do with 'immortality', and more to do with what the moment of demise (rather than the living relation to death) negatively signifies about the importance of ethical responsibility in Dostoevskii's novels. In his own words, Vinokurov's analysis turns not to 'questions of literary or spiritual *immortality* of consciousness [...] but more to questions about the *ends* of consciousness [...] its ethical dimension.' In this sense, Vinokurov and I start from very different points both in our conceptions of what Dostoevskii's novels reveal about the human relation to death and what this relation can potentially teach some Daseins about the relation to infinity. Val Vinokurov, 'The End of Consciousness and the Ends of Consciousness: A Reading of Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" and "Demons" after Levinas', *Russian Review* 59, 1 (2000), 21-37 (p. 22).

Trofimovich. I will now explore each of their moments of epiphany in this context, as revelations of eternity and immortality.

### 3.4.2 Shatov

Like others in the novel, Shatov has an experience prophetically prefiguring his death. He has a ‘nightmare’ allegorically foretelling his doom:

Little by little he subsided into a light sleep and he had something like a nightmare: he dreamt that he was tied down to his bed with ropes, was bound all over and couldn't move, and meanwhile there resounded throughout the house a frightful banging — at the fence, at the gate, at his door, at Kirillov's little house, making the whole house shake, and some distant, familiar, but tormenting voice was plaintively calling out to him.<sup>187</sup>

Even though the nightmare is clearly ominous, foreboding misfortune for Shatov, the ‘banging’ turns out to be quite the opposite of a threat — it is his estranged, pregnant wife Marie banging at the gate. At this juncture, where Shatov's terrible fate has already been decided by Petr Verkhovenski's circle, where death is announcing itself in his dreams, it is significant that it is not death, but a symbol of life, Marie, who is the source of the ‘frightful banging’ in his nightmare.

Marie's arrival causes Shatov's epiphany to begin to simmer. ‘Something unusual and entirely unexpected had begun to stir in his soul.’<sup>188</sup> It springs into full bloom after Marie gives birth to their child.

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<sup>187</sup> *Demons*, p. 626, *PSS*, 10:432.

<sup>188</sup> *Demons*, p. 629, *PSS*, 10:434.

Shatov was muttering incoherently, ecstatically, in a kind of stupor. Something seemed to be dislodging itself in his head and pouring out of his soul all on its own, apart from his will.

‘There were two, and suddenly there’s a third person, a new spirit, whole and finished as human hands couldn’t make him, a new thought and a new love — it’s even terrifying... And there’s nothing higher in the world!’<sup>189</sup>

The birth of the child is tied to Shatov’s overcoming of his ‘will’. The ‘will’ is of course what drove Kirillov to pursue his independence and his ‘terrible new freedom’. Shatov now senses ‘something’ overflowing his soul, something specifically, ‘apart from his will’. The birth of the child evokes in Shatov a sense of the continuation of the human spirit, beyond the limits of his own will and his finite existence.

In the 16 April 1864 entry, Dostoevskii explains the connection between procreation, the overcoming of death, and the continuation of life. He states that the birth of a child can be seen as a ‘presentiment’<sup>190</sup> of eternity.

In that case is there eternal life for every *I*? They say that man is destroyed and dies *completely*. We already know that it is not completely, because man as he physically gives birth to a son, transmits to him a part of his own personal individuality, and thus morally leaves a memory of himself to people... that is, he introduces a part of his former earthly personality into the future development of mankind.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> *Demons*, p. 655, *PSS*, 10:452.

<sup>190</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:41, 20:174.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

Procreation challenges the claim that death is absolute — that a human being ‘is destroyed and dies *completely*’. In the act of giving birth, humans survive death in the sense that ‘a part of their former earthly personality’ becomes a part of ‘the future development of mankind’<sup>192</sup> at least until the apocalypse.<sup>193</sup>

It is at this point that Shatov and Marie have a shared epiphany (of the kind Thompson identifies in *Brothers Karamazov*). The birth of a child symbolizes continuation of life, beyond Shatov’s ‘will’ and mortality, even though Shatov is not the child’s father. The child becomes a symbol for eternity and immortality.<sup>194</sup> This is accompanied by a personal transformation in both characters. ‘It was as if everything had been transformed.’<sup>195</sup> Shatov cries ‘like a little boy’ and speaks wildly in a ‘stunned and inspired way’. He kisses his wife’s hands, and she listens to him ‘in ecstasy... tenderly fingering his hair with a feeble hand, stroking it, admiring it’. They talk ‘rapturously’ about the new life they will begin to live

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> It is worth remembering that, in this famous entry, Dostoevskii claims procreation provides only a ‘presentiment’ of the truth of eternal life. Thus it is a *hint* of the possibility of the coming of the resurrection and the apocalypse. Procreation is not literally the manifestation of ‘eternal life’, but only a sign of the potential truth of this prophecy regarding the resurrection of the dead and the end of time, an event which ultimately cannot be directly described or fully comprehended in earthly life and language for Dostoevskii.

<sup>194</sup> I should note that the fact that Shatov is not the child’s biological father need not limit the scope of the argument about immortality. Shatov’s bond to the child is born of his love for Marie and his wonder at the ‘mystery of the appearance of a new being, a great and inexplicable mystery’. He thus senses a deep, although entirely affinal, kinship with the child. He sees himself as the child’s father, without further qualification: ‘He *is* my son.’ Thus Shatov does sense a paternal bond with the child. He certainly interprets the child to be a product — a continuation or development — of Marie and Shatov’s shared love for each other as already explained earlier. Furthermore, if readers bear in mind that Dostoevskii believed good childhood memories can profoundly shape a life, perhaps they would find it plausible that Dostoevskii too would have found grounds for suggesting that it is not only a blood relationship that can produce, in a parent, a perception of aspects of their own likeness in their child. *Demons*, pp. 655-56, *PSS*, 10:452.

<sup>195</sup> *Demons*, p. 657, *PSS*, 10:453.



‘now “again and forever” and about the existence of God.’<sup>196</sup> Their shared epiphany discloses the forces of eternity and immortality gestured by the revelatory words ‘ecstasy’ and ‘rapturously’ and signalled, as well, in the themes of the conversation mentioned above.

Shatov and Marie’s epiphany provides them with an ‘idea-feeling’ that is an indirect response to Kirillov’s pursuit of the nullity of death. Whereas Kirillov attempts to think of death in relation to individual time — as a boundary or radical limit that he wishes to transgress — Shatov and Marie’s epiphany allows them to momentarily hope for the continuation of their participation in human life, through the child beyond the limits of their biological deaths. As Dostoevskii says in the diary entry cited above, the child, ‘introduces a part of his former earthly personality into the future development of mankind.’ In other words, as Levinas says, ‘There is in all this an invitation to think death on the basis of time, and no longer time on the basis of death’.<sup>197</sup>

Levinas repeats Dostoevskii’s procreative proof of eternity in *Time and the Other* (1987).

Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me. The son, in effect, is not simply my work, like a poem or an artefact, neither is he my property [...] I do not *have* my child; I *am* in some way my child.<sup>198</sup>

In *God, Death, and Time* (1992), Levinas, citing Hegel, provides another concrete situation to exemplify how this hope for the continuation of life beyond individual human perishing is an

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, p. 104.

<sup>198</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and The Other*, trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 91. This quotation is also cited in Vinokurov, p. 336.

essential aspect of Dasein's living relation to death. It is not only the terror of my death which informs my understanding of mortality, but also a hope, embodied in the example of family burial, for a relation with what lies radically beyond my finite life, my possessive grasp or my cognition.

The living remove the dishonour of anonymous decomposition by way of the honor of the funeral rites. In this way, they transform the deceased into a living memory. In the act of burial there is an exceptional relationship of the living with the dead.<sup>199</sup>

The ideal role of memory in relation to the burial of a loved one in Dostoevskii is perhaps most clearly presented in Alesha's speech at the stone in *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>200</sup> Yet Levinas' idea bears relevance to Marie and Shatov's epiphany as well. Memory, whether in the child that will succeed us, or of a loved one who leaves us, provides hope in human existence, manifesting a desire to strive towards a connection not solely with the limits of my personal narrativised time, but with that which exceeds my time — with the infinity of time itself. As Levinas says, 'It is a term that above all would leave to time its own mode.'<sup>201</sup> Unlike Kirillov, who sought to possess the nullity of death as a means to his own individual self-transcendence, a relationship to the ungraspable infinity of time, is '[...] from the outset, a relationship with what is beyond possession, with the ungraspable wherein thought would tear itself apart'.<sup>202</sup>

This moment suggests a limit to the intrinsic polyphony of the novel as it implies that the forces of love and eternity have overpowered the forces of will and death. However,

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<sup>199</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, p. 86.

<sup>200</sup> PSS, 15:195.

<sup>201</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, p. 7.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

readers know that this is not the case. Not only does Shatov die following this episode, but his wife and child also die soon afterwards. Since the child's presence is meant to symbolize eternity on earth, his untimely death closes the door to any definitive sense of absolute redemption in the novel.<sup>203</sup> Nonetheless, Shatov and Marie's shared epiphany still resonates as a moment of contact with a primordial truth. In a different context, Susanne Fusso expresses this well by saying that their shared epiphany, 'if only for a moment',<sup>204</sup> provides a glimpse of the godly aspect of human nature, even though the chaos and seeming meaninglessness of life reasserts itself again in the tragic conclusion to their narratives.

### 3.4.3 Stepan Verkhovenskii

After Stepan Verkhovenskii is maligned by his son; banished from Varvara's home; questioned by the authorities and finally booed off stage by the raucous audience at the Gala event, he undergoes a change. Dostoevskii apparently prefigured this early in his notebooks for *Demons*, where Stepan Verkhovenskii or 'Granovsky'<sup>205</sup> says,

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<sup>203</sup> Muireann Maguire captures the nuances in the narrative significance of this child and its ultimate loss. On the one hand, an 'an accidental child which is nonetheless cared-for', Shatov's 'unstinting embrace of proxy fatherhood', has the potential to resolve 'the novel's core problem of abandonment', and the problems associated with the presence of 'forgotten children' in the novels and in their earlier unpublished drafts and plans. Yet, Maguire acknowledges, that, in the end, 'the baby vanishes' like the other forgotten children in Dostoevskii, and the problem of successful parentage, and generational continuity continues to haunt the works. Muireann Maguire, 'Dostoevskii's Forgotten Children', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 99, 1 (2021), 98-123 (pp. 112-13).

<sup>204</sup> Susanne Fusso, 'Maidens in Childbirth: The Sistine Madonna in Dostoevskii's *Devils*', *Slavic Review*, 54 (1995) 261-275 (p. 271).

<sup>205</sup> Timofei Granovskii was one of the major liberals of the 1840s. In his notebooks for *Demons*, Dostoevskii uses the name 'Granovsky' for Stepan Verkhovenskii, just as he uses the name 'Nechaev', the opportunist revolutionary whose murder of a student provided the inspiration for *Demons*, to stand in for Petr Verkhovenskii. *PSS*, 11:65, *PSS*, 11:100.

I don't know how I discovered in myself that source of inspiration which has been dry for so long. But my grief, and the outrage I have suffered from you have called it forth. You have heard me. That is the whole of me.<sup>206</sup>

Stepan Verkhovenskiï, overcome by grief and outrage, takes the 'high road' and walks forth from his comfortable yet vacuous life, filled as it was with idle chatter and gossip, to seek a new one. In this sense, Stepan's journey illustrates the idea that gaining an authentic understanding of one's own mortality often involves an attempt to pull oneself out of the blindness of one's own everyday 'fallen' state, where possibilities of genuine disclosure are limited by the conditioning forces of idle talk, curious frivolity, ambiguity and fear. Indeed, as Stepan begins his journey, the narrator speculates that Stepan must have been 'suffering terribly from fear'.<sup>207</sup> But he believes that even 'with the clearest apprehension of all the horrors that awaited him', Stepan Verkhovenskiï would still have set off.<sup>208</sup> This contrasts fundamentally with Kirillov's ethic, which sought to remove pain and fear altogether from human experience.

As he begins his journey, Stepan Verkhovenskiï becomes absorbed in 'fragmented thoughts and notions'.<sup>209</sup> He appears to be in a liminal state, not taking notice of where he is going, the rain overhead or the weight of the bag he has thrown over his shoulder. His broken thoughts turn to his own fears, guilt, past sins and his concern for others whom he loves. Although he develops a certain degree of compassion, it is important to note that he still does

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<sup>206</sup> *Notebooks for 'The Possessed'*, p. 95, *PSS*, 11:74.

<sup>207</sup> *Demons*, p. 698, *PSS*, 10:479.

<sup>208</sup> *Demons*, p. 698, *PSS*, 10:480.

<sup>209</sup> *Demons*, p. 701, *PSS*, 10:482.

not take responsibility for his worst crime — selling his serf to service a gambling debt; instead he implies that the action was more appropriate in those earlier times.<sup>210</sup>

Stepan Verkhovenskii encounters some muzhiks on the road, and appears to have an incipient minor epiphany. The muzhiks and their simple, idyllic image inspire a sense of personal guilt: ‘it’s strange that I seem to feel guilty before them, and I’m not guilty of anything before them’.<sup>211</sup> This phrase will remind readers of Dostoevskii’s fundamental ethical leitmotif of each person being responsible for everyone and everything, which is so often repeated in *Brothers Karamazov*<sup>212</sup> and makes appearances in *Demons*.

Even though, only moments ago, Stepan Verkhovenskii shirked responsibility for Fedka in his thoughts, he is suddenly struck by a feeling of universal guilt. He feels he is guilty, because he bears a share of the responsibility for all, not just for himself. This feeling appears new to him and he doesn’t fully understand it yet, as is clear from the fact that, despite feeling the guilt, he still believes, ‘I’m not guilty of anything before them’. It is only after he meets the bible-seller Sof’ia Matveevna that this moral feeling fully takes shape and he is able to form Dostoevskii’s full leitmotif more coherently.

Oh, let us forgive, let us forgive, let us first of all forgive everyone everywhere... We will hope that they will forgive us as well. Yes, because each and every one of us is guilty as far as others are concerned. All are guilty!<sup>213</sup>

It is worth noting that this axiom is another important point of crossover between Levinas and Dostoevskii. Levinas adopts Dostoevskii’s leitmotif as his own fundamental

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<sup>210</sup> *Demons*, p. 700, *PSS*, 10:481.

<sup>211</sup> *Demons*, p. 702, *PSS*, 10:483.

<sup>212</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 791, *PSS*, 15:31.

<sup>213</sup> *Demons*, p. 713, *PSS*, 10:491.

ethical axiom in *Otherwise than Being* (1974).<sup>214</sup> He also makes reference to its importance for his philosophy in interviews.

You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: *'We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.'* This is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.<sup>215</sup>

The sense of universal responsibility ('we are all guilty of all') and the asymmetry in the ethical relation of Self to Other ('I more than Others') become the cornerstone of Levinas' philosophical enterprise. However, this connection has already been explored to some degree.<sup>216</sup> I limit myself, here, to highlighting the relevance of this connection in the ethical aspect of Stepan Verkhovenskiï's epiphany — relating to his burgeoning sense of responsibility to others.

Stepan Verkhovenskiï's transformation is gradual, but he recognises that he is in the grips of it quite early. He says, 'I also think that I'm in a certain state of ecstasy. There is a lofty idea in the open road as well!'<sup>217</sup> Soon after this speech, Stepan falls into a 'feverish, shivering sleep'.<sup>218</sup> Sof'ia places a pillow under his head. It is this very same gesture, which triggers Dmitri's epiphany in *Brothers Karamazov*, leading him to similar ethical

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<sup>214</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 146.

<sup>215</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 99.

<sup>216</sup> Toumayan, p. 55.

<sup>217</sup> *Demons*, p. 713, PSS, 10:491.

<sup>218</sup> *Demons*, p. 714, 10:492.

formulations to the ones articulated by Stepan in this chapter.<sup>219</sup> As Apollonio and others have recognised, such gestures often mark moments of ‘wordless understanding’ and signpost a character coming into contact with ‘mysterious other worlds’.<sup>220</sup>

Although he appears to be in possession of new ethical ideas, Stepan Verkhovenskii continues to struggle with his former self. In the 16 April 1864 entry, Dostoevskii lays forth a central ethic of his that may help shed light on the specific transformation Stepan is undergoing.<sup>221</sup>

...the highest, final development of the individual should attain precisely the point... where man might find... that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I*, to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness.<sup>222</sup>

The highest moral purpose of human life, according to Dostoevskii, is to overcome the Self, and give oneself wholly and selflessly to the Other. Although Stepan Verkhovenskii is suddenly inspired by new moral ideas, he still appears to indulge in his old foibles. Once he awakens from his shivering sleep, he begins to ‘lay out his entire history’<sup>223</sup> for Sof’ia. The story is comical in its embellishments, self-aggrandizements, and full of ‘individuality’. It smacks of the old Stepan Verkhovenskii — vain, performative and gossipy.

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<sup>219</sup> *PSS*, 14:456.

<sup>220</sup> Apollonio, pp. 4-5.

<sup>221</sup> The significance of this diary entry can, perhaps, not be overstated. As Frank suggests, ‘Nowhere else does he tell us so unequivocally what he really thought about God, immortality, the role of Christ in human existence, and the meaning of human life on earth.’ Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 407.

<sup>222</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:39, *PSS*, 20:172.

<sup>223</sup> *Demons*, p. 717, *PSS*, 10:493.

After he has retold his long and exaggerated life narrative, he has an attack of ‘choleric’.<sup>224</sup> These attacks recur throughout the novel; the narrator suggests that they were ‘the usual outcome for him of nervous tension and moral shock’.<sup>225</sup> Stepan Verkhovenskiĭ and Sof’ia appear to go through a shared epiphany, as Stepan drifts through a ‘state of semi-consciousness’ and she cares for him in his illness.

About three o’clock in the morning he felt better. He sat up, let his legs down from the bed and, without thinking of anything in particular, fell on the floor at her feet. He was not kneeling as he had done earlier; he simply fell at her feet and kissed the hem of her dress.<sup>226</sup>

Following on from this moment, Stepan Verkhovenskiĭ constantly calls himself a ‘scoundrel’ and a liar. He realises that he did not speak for truth as he claimed to be doing, but only for his own selfish benefit.<sup>227</sup> This is the noetic understanding that results from Stepan’s epiphanic experience, which, unlike Kirillov’s moment of intensity, is a gradual journey towards self-realization, through physical illness and decline, in the face of fearful adversity and by the strength of love from a selfless other, Sof’ia.

Soon after this, Varvara, hearing word of Stepan Verkhovenskiĭ’s adventurous journey, arrives at the peasant’s hut where he is lodging. She notices ‘...that he didn’t have the slightest fear of death. Perhaps he simply didn’t believe that he would die, and continued to look on his illness as something insignificant.’<sup>228</sup> The observation that he did not have ‘the

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<sup>224</sup> *Demons*, p. 719, *PSS*, 10:496.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Demons*, p. 721, *PSS*, 10:497.

<sup>228</sup> *Demons*, p. 731, *PSS*, 10:504.



slightest fear of death' is perhaps unique in the novel. Almost every other character who is aware that their death is close by, feels a certain amount of fear or anger, but Stepan Verkhovenskiï feels neither. It is worth noting that in this final chapter, Stepan too, like Shatov previously, has a proleptic death dream, where he sees 'gaping jaws with teeth', which he finds 'repulsive'.<sup>229</sup> But despite such ominous warnings, Stepan remains oblivious to the threat of his impending demise.

At this point, I refer once again to Dostoevskii's non-fiction writing. In an entry in *A Writer's Diary*, he refers to a case of 'logical suicide' where an individual decides to take their life because no matter how rationally or joyously humanity may organise itself on earth, 'it will all be equated tomorrow to that same empty zero.'<sup>230</sup> A hatred of nature and humanity in its current state leads them to assume the only logical solution is to end one's own spiritually impoverished life. In Dostoevskii's analysis of this argument, he states that it is 'logically irrefutable' that a meaningless life is not worth living.<sup>231</sup> Dostoevskii does intend to refute these arguments, not through logic,

But by faith, by deducing the necessity of faith in the immortality of the human soul, by deducing the conviction that this faith is the single source of a genuine life on earth — of life, health, healthy ideas, and healthy deductions and conclusions.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> *Demons*, p. 714, *PSS*, 10:492.

<sup>230</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:655, *PSS*, 23:147.

<sup>231</sup> The reader may note some similarities with Kirillov here. Indeed, Kirillov would agree with the statement, 'a meaningless life is not worth living.' Perhaps Kirillov has something similar in mind when he confesses to Petr Verkhovenskiï that he is committing suicide because he believes both that 'God is necessary, and therefore must exist' and '[...] I know that he doesn't exist and cannot exist'. 'Don't you really understand that a man with two such ideas can't go on living?' (*Demons*, pp. 681-82, *PSS*, 10:409). Kirillov is saying that a world that has lost its meaning is not worth living in. He wishes to reinvest his world with meaning through his act of supreme will.

<sup>232</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:740, *PSS*, 24:53.

Similarly, Stepan Verkhovenskii's fear of death appears to be dispelled, not by logic, but by faith. After he is visited by a priest and invited to confess, Stepan has further significant revelations. "My friends," he announced, "God is necessary to me because he is the only being who is capable of eternal love..."<sup>233</sup>, and then further on:

My immortality is necessary if only because God would not want to commit an injustice and utterly quench the flame of love for him once it has been kindled in my heart. And what is more precious than love? Love is higher than existence, love is the crown of being, and how is it possible that existence is not subordinate to it?<sup>233</sup>

Thus, it is faith in immortality and eternal love that finally allow Stepan to cope with death, just as Dostoevskii described in his diary entry after the death of his first wife. 'Existence' — human life — may be conditioned fundamentally by the fear of the pain of death, but perhaps this is not all that 'death' signifies. As Levinas states, 'death might not be marked solely by the threat that weighs upon my being, and that death does not exhaust its meaning in being the sign of nothingness.'<sup>234</sup>

As he faces death without fear, Stepan appears to presume the existence of a meaningful universe — the continuation of life beyond the seeming nullity of death. His belief is derived from the awareness of his own inner striving towards a love of God. Whereas Kirillov appeared to display hatred for humanity in his final moments, Stepan Verkhovenskii feels a strong lust for life. 'Oh, I would very much like to live again!' he exclaims with a surge of energy. In his final reported speech in the novel, he states that belief

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<sup>233</sup> *Demons*, pp. 732-33, *PSS*, 10:505.

<sup>234</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, p. 105.

in something immeasurably greater than himself gives him solace. ‘If people are deprived of what is immeasurably great, they will cease to live and will die in despair.’<sup>235</sup>

By presenting this counterpoint to characters that seek to redefine man without God through an authentic relation to death, Dostoevskii may be polemically demonstrating that life without God will lead to annihilation and despair. As Irina Paperno states,

By using an experimental model, Dostoevskii... demonstrated that their [the positivists’] project of removing God from human consciousness would result in the collapse of morality and, ultimately, in the annihilation of humankind through suicide and murder.<sup>236</sup>

Three days after his final speech, Stepan Verkhovenskii passes away ‘quietly, like a guttering candle’. Although his end does appear to signify a response to Kirillov’s doctrine of Being-towards-death, and also contains some of Dostoevskii’s own most cherished ideas and notions, Stepan’s life and death cannot be read as an unequivocally positive parable. Stepan Verkhovenskii dies still dreaming of some ‘Great Idea’, reminding the reader of Schiller perhaps, and Stepan’s long held romantic Westernized beliefs.<sup>237</sup>

Dostoevskii grew apart from his youthful fascination with Schiller after returning from Siberia.<sup>238</sup> In *The Insulted and the Injured*, for instance, Prince Valkovskii ridicules the hypocrisy inherent in his son’s Schillerean ideals, arguing that he talks of ‘love of humanity’

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<sup>235</sup> *Demons*, p. 734, *PSS*, 10:506.

<sup>236</sup> Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 129.

<sup>237</sup> Nancy Anderson, *Perverved Ideal*, p. 157.

<sup>238</sup> Alexandra Lyngstad, *Dostoevskij and Schiller* (The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton, 1975), p. 16.

but yet is capable of committing a ‘sin against love’.<sup>239</sup> The discordance between thought and deed appear to be central to Dostoevskii’s critique of Schiller’s ‘abstract humanism’. Stepan Verkhovenskii’s inability to reform himself through deed rather than through word, as is his wont, once again suggests that he has not been fully transformed. Instead, Stepan appears, in one sense, to be repeating old behaviour patterns, seeking to allay his sense of personal responsibility by venerating ‘superior’ ideals and principles without the addition of concrete redemptive action.

Ultimately, I would agree with Williams who recognises that ‘no one is definitively redeemed’ in the novel, ‘though Stepan Trofimovich on his deathbed has made the first tentative steps towards truth...’<sup>240</sup> Nonetheless, in Stepan Verkhovenskii’s final testimony, he discovers a love for life, and a belief in immortality, which provides him with unquestionable comfort as he seeks not to conquer his own death, but instead to live from a sense of the infinite in the final adventures of his finite life. This is what differentiates his epiphanic experience and the revelations therein from those who are simply longing for the nullity of death.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The central purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how each of these major characters seeks out, or has thrust upon him/her, the question of their own mortality. These primordial experiences of death contrast with the everyday fearful relation to death exhibited by various characters and implicit in the idle chatter, and frivolous curiosity of high society in the town. Even though none of the characters brought into a deeper confrontation with their mortality are definitively redeemed, it is worth noting that Dostoevskii appears to have

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<sup>239</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Insulted and Injured*, trans. by Constance Garnett (London: William Heinemann, 1915), p. 180, *PSS*, 3:313. First published in 1861.

<sup>240</sup> Williams, p. 86.

encoded some of his most cherished ideas into the minds of each of these imperfect characters. Each falls short, yet each has also hit upon something fundamental about human life.

I have argued that Dostoevskii's *Demons* presents death as a limit or boundary that gives expression to the shaping influence of the constant threat of one's own non-being and thus the nullity underlying human nature. However, the death of the other, or the birth of the child also opens, through the power of memory, towards a relation of hope for the infinity of time, an infinity that always remains in its own mode, beyond human possession, and the nullity of individual non-being. Dasein's relation to death does not provide a definitive answer to the question of what comes (or does not come) after death.

Death, for Dostoevskii, is ultimately an unanswerable question. Lacking a definitive answer, however, does not mean that death is simply 'nothing'. Dostoevskii asserts something similar in the 16 April 1864 entry, as he tries to imagine a 'future, heavenly life' beyond death. The author asks, 'But if man is not man — what will his nature be? It is impossible to understand this on earth, but all humanity can have a presentiment about its law in direct emanations and so can each individual.'<sup>241</sup> Death is a relation to the unknowable. Dasein can only gain presentiments about it. In *Demons*, these presentiments reveal a variety of seemingly conflicting conditioning features embedded in Dasein's doubled relation to its own demise: *Demons* discloses death to ceaselessly, consciously or in precognitive terms, impact Dasein's life as an unbridgeable nullity, *and* as memory of, or hope for, the departed. In the first sense, it suggests radical finitude, in the second, it cultivates a hope for relation to the infinite.

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<sup>241</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:41, PSS, 20:174.

#### 4. Crime and Punishment: Metaphysical Guilt and the Death Sentence

One of the central questions in criticism on *Crime and Punishment* concerns whether to read the novel ideologically or metaphysically. Ideological readings seek to answer the question of motive: what drove Raskol'nikov to murder and, in sophisticated readings of this sort, how does his increasing awareness of his true motivation shape the intensifying complexities in the novel's narrative developments?<sup>1</sup> Metaphysical readings tend to focus on the presence of demonic or impersonal forces operative in the novel, elucidating the impact of these forces on Raskol'nikov's soul and lived experience.<sup>2</sup> My interpretation will have more in common with the metaphysical readings. However, instead of reading these forces as demonic, I see them primarily as manifestations of a deeper, always operative, necessary condition of human experience, what I have called, following Heidegger, '*existentialia*' in this thesis.

I am not suggesting that the ideological and metaphysical readings are necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, one could read the novel on two different planes — from Raskol'nikov's limited perspective, the novel appears to be an ideological one as he seeks to discover his own true motive for murder, whereas from the broader authorial perspective, the novel could take on metaphysical meanings, concerned with deciphering what Raskol'nikov is undergoing at a deeper, only partially conscious level, as he is subject to forces beyond his

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<sup>1</sup> 'The differing explanations offered by Raskol'nikov represent different phases of the inner metamorphosis he undergoes after committing the murders — a metamorphosis that results from his gradually dawning *grasp* of the full implications of what he has done. Not only does his horrified conscience continue to operate on the moral-psychological level, but he also comes to understand the inner contradictions contained in the ideas in which he has believed'. Frank, *Miraculous Years*, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> 'From the very moment of its conception this plan to portray a "theoretician-murderer" was divided into two distinct parts: the crime and its causes, and the effects of the crime upon the criminal's soul. The author sees the first part as an *introduction* to the second, the main part.' Mochulsky, p. 273.

direct comprehension. However, I suggest that commentators usually ground themselves in one or the other type of reading. Frank, for instance, centres his reading in the ideological narrative, whereas Mochulsky sees the ideological plot as merely an introduction to the metaphysical one.<sup>3</sup>

What is significant for my reading is that in grounding their interpretations in the originary idea of ‘motive’, or in a definitive conclusion to the interplay of cosmic or impersonal forces in Raskol’nikov’s soul, ideological *and* metaphysical readings of *Crime and Punishment* are often oriented towards resolution.<sup>4</sup> In seeking ‘motive’, ideological readings seek to finalize the meaning of the novel by identifying the root cause of action in Raskol’nikov’s conflicted motives.<sup>5</sup> His ideas are finally negated and resolved in the conversion experience in the epilogue. On the other hand, many, though not all, of the

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<sup>3</sup> See previous two footnotes. Furthermore, Frank makes clear on several occasions that, for him, the question of Raskol’nikov’s true motivation is the central question in this novel. ‘In fact, however, *Crime and Punishment* is focused on the solution of an enigma: the mystery of Raskolnikov’s motivation.’ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Joseph Frank’s interpretation is perhaps one of the most unrelentingly ideological readings of Dostoevskii’s novels. Frank sees no difference between the notion of an ideological ‘idea’ and ‘character’ in Dostoevskii: ‘The words “idea” and “character” are inseparable for Dostoevsky, and he uses them interchangeably. Such a character would incarnate the social-cultural tendencies of this period of ferment in Russian life’. Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 256. Although this idea logically follows from Frank’s methodology of seeking the meaning of the novels through contextualized socio-historical and political biography, perhaps the notion that Dostoevskii is primarily engaging in socio-political commentary does not do justice to the existential, psychological and metaphysical complexities encoded into both character and narrative in the works.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Raskolnikov will finally discover about himself – that he killed, not for the altruistic-humanitarian motives he believed he was acting upon, but solely because of a purely selfish need to test his own strength.’ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, p. 102.

metaphysical readings point towards a resolution of the drama of impersonal forces as the ultimate meaning of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, Mochulsky sees Raskol'nikov at battle against a demonic, external power operative within him, as he rises in revolt against God: '*Raskolnikov has been brought to destruction like a tragic hero in battle with blind Destiny.*'<sup>7</sup> It is certainly a definitive conclusion — Raskol'nikov and his demons have been defeated by fate, or the impersonal forces besieging him. This 'battle', of course, approaches a resolution in the epilogue. Thus, the significance of the novel is still located in the epilogue, even though Mochulsky rejects the novel's final redemptive conclusion as a 'pious lie'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, I cite Viacheslav Ivanov, a leading Symbolist poet, philosopher and literary critic, who sees the same conflict between the impersonal forces of good and evil, but asserts that Dostoevskii is arguing that it is possible for the individual to 'assert his freedom and responsibility, and thereby pass judgment upon himself'<sup>9</sup> as Raskol'nikov does in the final paragraphs of the epilogue.

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<sup>6</sup> Apart from Mochulsky and Viacheslav Ivanov, both discussed directly in this paragraph, one can also look at a variety of interpretations of *Crime and Punishment* exploring mythic, supra-temporal (historic), metaphysical, mystical forces at play in the undercurrents beneath the ideological surface of the novel. All these interpretations locate the fundamental meaning of these forces in their resolution in the epilogue. e.g. William Leatherbarrow, 'The Aesthetic Louse: Ethics and Aesthetics in Dostoevsky's *Prestuplenie i Nakazanie*', *The Modern Language Review*, 71, 4 (1976), 857-66; William Leatherbarrow, *A Devil's Vaudeville: The Demonic in Dostoevsky's Major Fiction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), pp. 69-70; Roger B. Anderson, *Myths of Duality* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1986); Liza Knapp, *The Annihilation of Inertia: Dostoevsky and Metaphysics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 64; Jenny Stellemen, 'Raskol'nikov and His Women', *Russian Literature* 54, no. 1-3 (2003), 279-96 (p. 290); Ivanits, *Dostoevsky and the Russian People*; Ilya Kliger, 'Shape of History and the Enigmatic Hero in Dostoevsky: The Case of *Crime and Punishment*', *Comparative Literature*, 62, 3 (2010), 228-45.

<sup>7</sup> Mochulsky, p. 312. Italics in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, trans. by Norman Cameron (London: Harvill, 1952), p. 83. First published in 1952.



To be sure, I will also locate some significance in the epilogue and the choices offered to Raskol'nikov between suicide and repentance in the final part of the narrative. Indeed, it would be imprudent to reject the epilogue wholesale, whatever its shortcomings, which have been felt by many readers. Michael Holquist, notably, seeks to accommodate both the ideological and metaphysical planes of reading in his interpretation. Holquist recognises that there is a 'disjunction between the temporal structure of the novel proper and its epilogue'.<sup>10</sup> He sees the body of the novel and the epilogue as belonging to separate genres — the body is a paradoxical form of a detective story, whereas the epilogue is a manifestation of the ancient form of a 'wisdom tale'.<sup>11</sup> He acknowledges that this deviation in form 'is experienced as a felt discontinuity between the narrative mode of the novel, on the one hand, and its epilogue, on the other'.<sup>12</sup> However, Holquist stresses that this disjunction, rather than suggesting a break in the unity of *Crime and Punishment*, implies 'that there is a bond between the parts, a bond that derives from the direction of time in the two story types that define the novel, on the one hand, and the epilogue, on the other'.<sup>13</sup>

It is the dialectical or dialogic interplay between these two genres — visible from a detached perspective taking in the whole of the novel — that forms the core substance of the work.<sup>14</sup> Yet Holquist's reading of these two discordant genres interplaying in this manner leads to interpreting the whole text, and not just the epilogue, as a wisdom tale. Rather than allowing for a dialectical and unresolved interpenetration of genres, the final meaning of the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> 'In Raskol'nikov's case this mystical suppression of self, the death of his old identity [in the epilogue] ("Love had raised (him) from the dead"), is just as decisive as was the death of an even earlier self, the one that died in the act of murder.' *Ibid.*, p. 95.

novel becomes teleologically determined by the resolution of Raskol'nikov's internal conflict in the wisdom tale. The body becomes simply a necessary preamble to the wisdom tale, which negates and sublates all that precedes it. This means that the irresolute process that occupies Raskol'nikov throughout the novel is once again passed over. In other words, the 'detective story' is read as ultimately being in service to the 'wisdom tale', by placing emphasis, as Holquist does, on 'the direction of time'<sup>15</sup> that forms the bond between the parts.

Instead of seeking closure in the epilogue, I emphasize how Raskol'nikov is held in a state of constant tension, awaiting some kind of transformation, throughout the whole novel. He only attains the *promise* of transformation in the epilogue. This interpretation will locate the true meaning of the novel neither in the resolution of its drama, nor in the paradox of its origin in Raskol'nikov's conflicting motives for murder. This chapter has a single aim: to hold firm and determine Raskol'nikov's 'in-between' state of irresolution that occupies almost the whole novel, without subordinating its meaning to the resolution offered in the epilogue.

Raskol'nikov's irresolution possesses a liminal quality connoting a deeper truth underpinning human experience, in itself. This interpretation, in unveiling an *existential* with notable metaphysical connotations, will pull further away from direct congruency with Heidegger's strictly ontological philosophy in *Being and Time*, and help bring into focus Dostoevskii's own particular form of 'Christian Existentialism'. This will also help refute earlier 'existentialist' readings of *Crime and Punishment*.

Jackson has already articulated the need for a study of this sort:

Some force that we call 'conscience' or 'guilt' (but that requires much more precise definition) does seem to drive him inexorably to confess his crime; some inner force

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

does track him down, compels him to seek out his persecutors and, finally, turn himself in.<sup>16</sup>

The reader can perceive the problem highlighted in the introduction here. Jackson recognises the gap in scholarship, but, due to the orientation of his reading here, notes only that this ‘force’ compels Raskol’nikov towards confession. The in-between state is, again, subordinated to the significance of the conversion-experience in the epilogue. Consequently, the ambiguous, almost undefinable process that Jackson calls ‘conscience’ or ‘guilt’, which constitutes the central mysterious appeal of the novel, conceals its own meaning.

However, Jackson’s collection of essays does collect a plethora of extracts from well-known interpreters of the novel, who provide a variety of insights into Raskol’nikov’s anxious and irresolute process. These articles support the claim that Raskol’nikov’s state of irresolution is the core processual event of the novel. Vadim Kozhinov, for example, recognises the importance of the word ‘irresolution [*nereshimost*]’ in the narrative of the novel, starting with the novel’s opening sentence, and placing particular emphasis on the intense repetition of the root of this word in the novel’s final scenes.<sup>17</sup> He concludes that irresolution is ‘one of the key words of the novel, one which speaks directly to its content, expresses its full meaning.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, ‘Introduction: The Clumsy White Flower’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of ‘Crime and Punishment’*, ed. by Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Vadim V. Kozhinov, ‘The First Sentence in “Crime and Punishment”, the Word “Crime,” and Other Matters’ in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 17-18. ‘В начале июля [...] один молодой человек вышел из своей каморки [...] на улицу и медленно, как бы в *нерешимости*, отправился к К—ну мосту’. [My italics] *PSS*, 6:5.

<sup>18</sup> Kozhinov, p. 18.

#### 4.1 Existential Guilt and Anxiety

Since I have called this process ambiguous and indefinite by nature, how do I propose to articulate its structure? In truth, the symptoms of this experience can help provide greater clarity about its deeper significance for human experience. In this respect, I will lean on Heidegger's narrative of existential authenticity, though at the same time stressing that Heidegger and Dostoevskii's narratives are not congruous in this regard.

Heidegger's aim in *Being and Time* was to provide an ontology of existence, bracketing off any potential deeper metaphysical dimension to lived experience,<sup>19</sup> whereas Dostoevskii implicitly and explicitly addresses religious aspects of existence, embedded within the necessary existential structures of human lived experience.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Heidegger's determination of concepts such as 'anxiety' and 'guilt' will serve my purpose in this analysis. Instead of making constant comparisons between their narratives, I will generally use Heidegger's concepts to gain a better understanding of Dostoevskii's 'Christian existentialist' narrative as it manifests itself in Raskol'nikov's lived experience. This is consistent with the overall aim of my thesis, which is to provide a clearer understanding of Dostoevskii's own form of existentialism for the first time.

One differentiation between Heidegger and Dostoevskii's narratives of authenticity is important to state at the beginning. For Heidegger, a person who is approaching an authentic relation to their deeper self first experiences existential guilt which then makes them resolute and prepared for a state of 'anxiety' where they come face-to-face with the possibility of their own non-existence. Through this experience, they become free to pursue their own authentic

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:39-41, PSS, 20:172-75. (16 April 1864 entry).

possibilities in the world.<sup>21</sup> Raskol'nikov, on the other hand, appears to feel both *existentialia* simultaneously.

During his state of delirium or irresolution, Raskol'nikov is in the grips of two *existentialia* — 'anxiety' and 'guilt'. 'Anxiety' for Heidegger induces a primordial awareness of the constant possibility of one's *own* non-existence,<sup>22</sup> and 'guilt' can be defined as a 'notness' which is existentially constitutive for all human existence.<sup>23</sup> Raskol'nikov's state-of-mind through most of the novel is characterised by anxiety and guilt and both these idea-feelings are evident in the thoughts, intuitions, impulses and images which preoccupy Raskol'nikov in his liminal state.

Although Raskol'nikov's awareness of these idea-feelings is intensified after the murder, he does display symptoms before the act. This suggests that these forces are growing within him from the very beginning. Some particularly prominent symptoms of Raskol'nikov's enripening illness, and his impending primordial experience of these forces include an extremely 'absent state of mind'<sup>24</sup> and a strong desire to distract himself from something unnameable, indefinite.

With something of an effort he began, almost unconsciously and under a sort of inner compulsion, to peer closely at everything he came across, as if searching hard for something to distract his thought; but he couldn't manage it, and kept falling into a reverie.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Being and Time*, p. 343.

<sup>22</sup> 'That which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-world itself'. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> 'What one has in view here is, rather a 'not' which is constitutive for this *Being* of Dasein'. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>24</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 4, *PSS*, 6:6.

<sup>25</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 48, *PSS*, 6:45.

In Raskol'nikov's 'pathological state',<sup>26</sup> he appears to be seeking to avoid coming face-to-face with some upsurgent force emerging from within his Being. This incubating period may also imply the ubiquity of anxiety in all human experience. For Heidegger, in everyday life, anxiety remains a dormant presence. 'This uncanniness [anxiety] pursues Dasein constantly and is a threat to its everyday lostness in the "they", though not explicitly.'<sup>27</sup> Raskol'nikov's attempt to 'distract his thought' from some unnamed, undefined force is a prominent example of how, in everyday life, Dasein 'flee[s] in the face of the uncanniness which lies in Dasein'.<sup>28</sup> Dasein seek to avoid that which disturbs it from the depths of its own Being, though it do so, for the most part, unknowingly. Examples of Raskol'nikov seeking to distract himself in this manner are pervasive throughout the novel, as I shall demonstrate later in the chapter in section 4.2.1.

#### 4.1.1 Metaphysical Guilt: Sacred Blood

It may be suggested that, for Dostoevskii, the roots of Raskol'nikov's anxiety and guilt are moral and metaphysical in nature, rather than being definable by Heidegger's category of 'guilt' — an existentially constitutive 'notness' in human existence. However, what I am suggesting is that guilt as an *existentiale* grounds and underpins everyday moral 'guilt'. Furthermore, such a guilt is, indeed, not very dissimilar to what could be called 'metaphysical guilt', that is, a guilt that is endemic to human life, that manifests a lack, 'notness' or nullity that Dasein always carries and that cannot be entirely overcome by any individual human act of goodness or will.

Before the murder, Raskol'nikov is not only fleeing in the face of his incubating anxiety, he is also being assailed from below the fully conscious threshold, by metaphysical

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<sup>26</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 9, PSS, 6:11.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 234.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

guilt. Consciously, Raskol'nikov only experiences everyday guilt at this stage. What is 'everyday guilt'? Heidegger provides an existential interpretation of this concept.

'Being-guilty' in the sense of 'owing', of 'having something due on account'. One is to give back to the Other something to which the latter has a claim. This 'Being-guilty' as *having debts* is a way of Being with Others in the field of concern, as in providing something or bringing it along.<sup>29</sup>

Everyday guilt also has the signification of '*being responsible for*',<sup>30</sup> that is being the cause or author of something in one's relation to others.

This kind of 'guilt-accounting' resonates strongly with the rationalistic-utilitarian reasoning that convinces Raskol'nikov that he can make up for one great sinful act (murder) through a lifetime filled with an accrual of good deeds, like a checkbook that needs to be balanced. This type of guilt can also be applied to the everyday debts that Raskol'nikov senses in relation to his family in the novel, for example, the guilt he feels upon reading his mother's letter — where she reveals the plan to marry Dunia off to Luzhin to save them from their poverty.

All the money they have comes from the hundred-rouble pension and a secured loan from Messrs Svidrigailov! How are you going to protect them from those Svidrigailovs, and from Afanasy Ivanovich Vakhrushin — you future millionaire, you Zeus who holds their fate in your hands? Will you do that in ten years' time? But in ten years your mother will have gone blind from knitting shawls, and probably from

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

her tears too; she'll be wasted away with fasting; and what about your sister? Just work it out — what's going to happen to your sister in ten years' time, or during those same ten years? Can't you see?<sup>31</sup>

Raskol'nikov feels the shame of knowing that his sister is being sold into a loveless marriage for his sake. He tortures himself with images of what may happen to them in the future without financial assistance. He feels personal responsibility for the event, and as a result, feels a moral debt to them. His guilt prompts him to try and redeem the situation by pursuing certain possibilities in the world, i.e. by committing the murder and enriching himself and his family. 'He had to do something, right now, as quickly as he could.'<sup>32</sup> This is the kind of guilt that human beings come across in their everyday lives. A guilt that can hypothetically be washed away by future acts, that can be healed, and erased from one's conscience once the debt is repaid.

However, as the prominent Russian literary historian, editor and critic, Alfred Bem recognises in *The Problem of Guilt* (1936), there is a deeper level of guilt that occupies a central position in Dostoevskii's narrative.

[W]hat has not been sufficiently stressed is that Dostoevsky's focus is not crime at all, but its corollary — guilt [...] we shall not be concerned here with any objective norms of guilt and crime, but only with those psychological substrata on which these norms rest.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 41, *PSS*, 6:38-39.

<sup>32</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 41-42, *PSS*, 6:39.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred L. Bem, 'The Problem of Guilt' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 77-80 (p. 77).



Bubbling below Raskol'nikov's consciousness, with its everyday guilt, which can be erased or 'paid back', is a more pervasive form of guilt. It manifests itself in his responses to 'blood' in the narrative.

Raskol'nikov's gruesome dream of the mare beaten brutally to death has many complex aspects that are well served by biographical, socio-cultural, religious, ideological interpretation, but, judging by Raskol'nikov's first thoughts as he awakens, the feature of the dream that leaves the most vivid impression on his consciousness is the blood that spills forth. He immediately and impulsively reflects on his own plans for murder:

'My God!' He exclaimed. "Am I really, really going to take an axe and start beating her on the head, and split her skull open... and slip on her warm, sticky blood, and break open the lock, and steal, and tremble — and hide, all covered in blood... with the axe... Oh my God, is that really true?"<sup>34</sup>

Mochulsky has already seen a connection here between the 'blood' and possession by a deeper force. 'The cruel deed fills him with mystical terror. He sees the murder for the first time not as an algebraic symbol, but as blood that has been poured forth, and he is appalled.'<sup>35</sup> This sense of 'sacred blood', which is warm and sticky, which he slips upon, which covers him whole, features as a prominent repeated motif in the broader narrative.

For instance, once Raskol'nikov commits the murder, the narrative makes several references to Raskol'nikov's attempts to wipe away blood. Furthermore, when he comes upon Marmeladov's dying body, he 'began sponging off the blood that covered

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<sup>34</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 54, PSS, 6:50.

<sup>35</sup> Mochulsky, p. 302.

Marmeladov's face'.<sup>36</sup> Later still, when explaining why he had not appeared immediately to see them, he says to Dunia and his mother, 'I couldn't go because of my clothes: I'd forgotten to tell her... Nastasia... to wash out that blood...'<sup>37</sup>

Another significant example of Raskol'nikov's desire to erase his guilt is a little subtler, and occurs when Raskol'nikov revisits the scene of the crime — the landlady's flat — simply 'to have a look'.<sup>38</sup> Raskol'nikov's guilt and anxiety are amplifying his state of irresolution at this stage of his delirium, and thus his motives for visiting the flat are not very clear. It is only suggested that he was '[d]rawn on by an irresistible, incomprehensible desire'.<sup>39</sup>

Once he reaches the flat, he pulls the little bell he rang when he arrived to murder the pawnbroker, and it evokes the 'old, excruciating, frightening, horrible feeling' he felt at the time of the crime. In his current state, this feeling of torment is even pleasurable to him: '[H]e winced with every pull at the bell, feeling more and more pleasure each time'.<sup>40</sup> But at the core of this scene is Raskol'nikov's fascination with the absence of blood: "'The floor's been washed; is it going to be painted?'" went on Raskolnikov. "No blood there?"<sup>41</sup> The workers ask 'What blood?'. Raskol'nikov clarifies: 'There was a whole pool of it here.'<sup>42</sup> It is unclear whether Raskol'nikov wants there to be blood on the floor or not, but he appears to be particularly interested in a rather mundane detail — has the blood really been washed away? Can the floor really be painted and made anew? Though the desire is not specified, it appears

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<sup>36</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 160-61, *PSS*, 6:140.

<sup>37</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 200, *PSS*, 6:173.

<sup>38</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 155, *PSS*, 6:135.

<sup>39</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 153, *PSS*, 6:133.

<sup>40</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 154, *PSS*, 6:134.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 155, *PSS*, 6:134.

that Raskol'nikov is hoping somewhere deeper in the recesses of his mind that he too, covered as he is in blood and guilt, can be wiped clean and made anew.

The most clear example of Raskol'nikov trying to wipe away blood is, of course, after the murder. Dostoevskii emphasizes how Raskol'nikov tries to avoid smearing any blood on himself.<sup>43</sup> His attempt at keeping himself unsullied fails as he grasps at the cord around the pawnbroker's neck. As he predicted after his dream of the mare, 'his hands were [now] sticky and covered in blood'.<sup>44</sup> He spends a laborious 'three minutes or so' carefully washing the blood off himself and the axe, he 'even attacked the blood with soap'.<sup>45</sup>

Later on, his fear of being covered in blood amplifies. He notices blood on his frayed trouser legs.

At this point a strange thought occurred to him. Perhaps all his clothing was bloodstained; perhaps there were a great many spots, but he just couldn't see them or wasn't noticing them, because his powers of observation were weakened, shattered... his mind was clouded...<sup>46</sup>

Raskol'nikov's involuntary fears of bloodstains, although seemingly a concern only because it may lead to others identifying him as the murderer, also implies that, at a deeper level, he is gaining an intuition of the metaphysical guilt that is symbolized by 'sacred blood'.

This 'guilt' was brewing within his blood before the murder, and Raskol'nikov's sense of it is now intensifying. This is why he imagines that 'perhaps all his clothing was bloodstained' and he simply cannot see it. He begins to notice the literal blood on him, in his

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<sup>43</sup> *PSS*, 6:62.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73, 6:65.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82, 6:72.

pocket-lining; on the purse; ‘the whole toe of the sock’. These sights again inspire a kind of anxious panic in him, reminding him of the deeper guilt written within him, a guilt that refuses to be wiped out or erased. He panics, wanting to hide the items, but lacking resolve, overwhelmed by the sight of blood on him, an ‘icy chill’ comes over him, and he helplessly falls asleep. When he awakens, he is clutching the bloodstained items in his right hand.<sup>47</sup> This motif of Raskol’nikov seeking to wipe away, or erase the blood that stains him and others, suggests a pervasive force welling up within him that he cannot repel. The literal blood spills forth from bodies around him, but the deeper spring lies within all humanity. This guilt cannot be ‘wiped away’.

From an existential point of view, the sacred spilled blood symbolizes a metaphysical guilt shared by all humanity, not just Raskol’nikov and other murderers. It is carried either passively or actively in every moment of every human life. Metaphysical guilt is an *existential* — a necessary condition of human experience. When Sonia confronts Raskol’nikov with his crime — ‘You’ve spilled blood!’ — Raskol’nikov replies, ‘Blood that everybody spills’.<sup>48</sup> This is not his complete reply. Raskol’nikov specifically means his mythic men of history, who spill blood for the greater good. However, Dostoevskii’s words here carry another accent within them, signifying not only the great men of history, but ‘everybody’. Metaphysical guilt, symbolized by blood in *Crime and Punishment*, is an *existential*.

Raskol’nikov contains symptoms of metaphysical guilt before the murder, as discussed already in his dream of the mare and in his attempts at distracting himself from something indefinable welling up within himself. This suggests that he carried the guilt passively even before the murder. The pervasive nature of metaphysical guilt in human

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 6:73.

<sup>48</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 459, PSS, 6:400.

experience is also exemplified in Katerina Marmeladova's experience. Her illness is, like Raskol'nikov's experience, doused in heavy strokes of blood symbolism.

It is known from very early on in the novel that Katerina, at this stage of her illness, is 'spitting blood' and that there are 'red patches' on her cheeks.<sup>49</sup> Towards the end of her life, Dostoevskii twice mentions that her 'parched lips' are covered in dried blood.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the narrative she regularly coughs blood onto her handkerchief. She also shows this bloodstained handkerchief to Raskol'nikov and thrusts it in front of a priest as her husband dies; gestures which cannot be responded to verbally by either of them.<sup>51</sup> Near the end of her life, she falls and 'the blood staining the pavement crimson had gushed out of her chest and throat'.<sup>52</sup>

Readers finally gain a diagnosis, which, though potentially a biologically accurate one at the time of writing, is presented in this way by Dostoevskii mainly for symbolic purposes: 'It's consumption — the blood pours out like that and chokes them.'<sup>53</sup> The blood spilling forth from Katerina in her coughing; onto her stained handkerchief to present to others; gushing, pouring out and choking her as she nears death, symbolizes a deeper, spiritual contamination, a 'notness' at the core of all human life — a metaphysical guilt — that the presence of 'sacred blood' in the narrative always points to.

#### 4.1.2 Anxiety

Anxiety, that is, a living relation to one's own impending death, is also an important *existential* in the novel. Raskol'nikov's dream in the epilogue of a 'dreadful, unheard-of

<sup>49</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 14-16, *PSS*, 6:15-17.

<sup>50</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 351, 384, *PSS*, 6:305, 6:333.

<sup>51</sup> *PSS*, 6:144, 6:294.

<sup>52</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 383, *PSS*, 6:332.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

pestilence' that had 'invaded human bodies',<sup>54</sup> as well as the famous epigraph to *Demons*, taken from Luke 8:32-6, about the 'large herd of swine'<sup>55</sup> and the overall apocalyptic tone of *The Idiot*, already explored in a previous chapter, all indicate that Dostoevskii imagined a pervasive deathly spirit dormant within civilization as a whole. As discussed in the chapter on *Demons*, being-towards-death is also an *existential* in Dostoevskii. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskol'nikov undergoes an extended experience of the certainty of living under a death sentence. He endures a kind of 'living death' in his state of irresolution. This will be brought out further in this chapter.

My argument is that this novel presents all humanity as existentially conditioned by anxiety (a fear of one's own non-being) and metaphysical guilt (a 'notness' underlying existence). Human beings are passive or active 'carriers' of primordial nullity. James Holquist comes closest to such an argument when he uses the metaphor of an illness in his interpretation of *Crime and Punishment*: 'Another way of putting it is to say that all the characters in the novel are sick in varying degrees, except for Sonia, Razumikhin, and Porfiry (although they may be carriers of a sort)'.<sup>56</sup>

This is one of the central points of differentiation between my reading, which has defined existential phenomenology as the attempt to catalogue various different *existentialia* that form the conditions for the possibility of human experience, and the nominally 'existentialist' reading of Paul Nuttall. For Nuttall, existentialism becomes a simple, nearly meaningless insistence on irrational freedom. 'The fundamental principle of Existentialism is that human freedom is prior to any system, and that must include any system of *values*. This

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<sup>54</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 482-3, *PSS*, 6:419.

<sup>55</sup> *Demons*, p. 2, 10:5.

<sup>56</sup> James Holquist, 'Disease as Dialectic in "Crime and Punishment"' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, pp. 109-18 (p. 111).

leaves freedom itself as the sole absolute value.<sup>57</sup> This is indeed a very reductive definition of existentialism, and essentially means that the philosophy offers no real insight into the human condition. Instead, all that is left is some kind of irrational remainder.

As a result of this definition, Nuttall reaches strange conclusions such as ‘The Underground Man’s malice is irrational and would so far seem to satisfy the existentialist requirements’,<sup>58</sup> or ‘The truth is that Raskolnikov did what he did in the name of freedom, and neither he nor his creator can bring himself to call that wrong’.<sup>59</sup> These readings are intensely obtuse. My hope would be that this thesis, with its focus on *existentialia* and what Dostoevskii was trying to reveal about the human condition, attempts to explain Dostoevskii’s broader contribution to existentialism, and counters the attempt to bind existentialism to Dostoevskii through some unscrutinised form of irrational willing.

#### 4.2 Raskol’nikov’s ‘in-between’ state

Once Raskol’nikov commits the murder, the dormant *existentialia* of anxiety and primordial guilt, of which he gains fleeting cognizance in his dreams, intensify and become activated. Mochulsky states that, ‘the murderer has stepped beyond something more than the moral law: *the very basis of the spiritual world itself*’.<sup>60</sup> Mochulsky is not alone in this view.<sup>61</sup> In other words, Raskol’nikov’s transgression is an overstepping which brings him face-to-face with terrifying *existentialia* that form part of ‘the very basis of the spiritual world itself’. In Raskol’nikov’s lived experience, these *existentialia* — activated anxiety and

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Nuttall, *‘Crime and Punishment’: Murder as a Philosophical Experiment* (Edinburgh: Sussex University Press, 1978), p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>60</sup> Mochulsky, p. 303. Italics in the original.

<sup>61</sup> Ivanits, *Russian People*, p. 53; Ivanov, p. 49.

metaphysical guilt — are accompanied by loss of rational cogency, hallucinations, and an inability to concentrate and formulate arguments.<sup>62</sup>

Roger Anderson's *Myths of Duality* is also an important precursor for my chapter. In it, he succinctly summarizes some of the symptoms of Raskol'nikov's state-of-mind after the murder.

Raskolnikov thought the murder would bring clarity to his life. Actually, he becomes subject to a disturbing sense of time, feverish hallucinations, lethargy, neurotic fixation on small details, lapses of memory about significant matters, dreams that are hard to disentangle from actual events, and an inability to concentrate on practical matters. He becomes, we read, especially attuned to the presence of ghosts, visions, and unusual coincidences. Life mutates into a fluid mass of free possibilities that constantly intersect and contradict each other.<sup>63</sup>

Anxiety and metaphysical guilt are now actively pounding on Raskol'nikov's consciousness after the crime. 'He was becoming agonizingly tormented by the conviction that everything, even his memory, even the simple faculty of thought, was deserting him. "Can it really have started already, is this really the beginning of my punishment?"'<sup>64</sup>

Raskol'nikov's anxious and guilt-ridden impressions convert the overtly ideological novel into a metaphysical one, engineering a shift from a 'novel of ideas' into one about agonizing feelings and torments. Metaphysical guilt, as has been said, is a feeling more

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<sup>62</sup> Although Raskol'nikov is not epileptic, it can be noted that Dostoevskii had personal experience of symptoms similar to the ones Raskol'nikov undergoes here, as prodromata or post-ictal epiphenomena related to the author's own epileptic condition. Such symptoms include hallucinations; absence of thought; disorientation, and mental fatigue amongst others. Rice, pp. 5, 10, 56, 88.

<sup>63</sup> Roger Anderson, *Myths of Duality*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>64</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 81-82, *PSS*, 6:72.



closely associated to a deeper, constant sense of ‘notness’ or primordial guilt than everyday guilt. Unlike the ‘debts’ owed in life to this or that person, metaphysical guilt is irreparable, existentially constitutive guilt, which cannot be wiped away.

After the murder, Raskol’nikov’s guilt and terror take on a sense of limitlessness and irrevocability in his consciousness. He starts ‘suffering an unbearable sense of boundless horror such as he had never before experienced’.<sup>65</sup> The association of this ‘boundless horror’ with the ‘sacred blood’ of metaphysical guilt is emphasized in this passage where Raskol’nikov hallucinates Ilya Petrovich beating the landlady on the stairs.<sup>66</sup> Nastasia’s brilliant short line, ‘That’s blood’<sup>67</sup> carries these associations in all their ambiguity and mystery to the pages of the novel, continuing the theme already established in Raskol’nikov’s dream of the mare.

It is not insignificant in this regard that Nastasia is not referring to Raskol’nikov’s specific crime, which she is unaware of, but to the physical, and perhaps spiritual, transformation of the literal blood flowing through Raskol’nikov.<sup>68</sup> This transformation causes his terrible hallucinations: ‘That’s the blood crying out in you.’<sup>69</sup> The liquid tissue, flowing through his body, is actualizing a possibility it always passively contains within

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<sup>65</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 105, PSS, 6:91.

<sup>66</sup> Again, I note that perhaps Dostoevskii did not have to create Raskol’nikov’s feelings here purely from imagination — he may have personally experienced something similar. As Rice states, Dostoevskii, across several diary entries, confesses to feeling, ‘an objectless hypochondriacal depression [*grust*’], ‘mystical depression [*grust*’], ‘pangs of conscience [*urgryzeniia*]; ‘guilt’ [*vinovnost*’] as post-ictal epiphenomena. Rice, pp. 88-89, 293-94, F. M. Dostoevskii, *Zapisnye tetradi F. M. Dostoevskogo* (Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1935), pp. 80-84.

<sup>67</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 105, PSS, 6:91.

<sup>68</sup> Frank notes that this scene survives, ‘almost unchanged’ from the very first draft of the novel. Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 474.

<sup>69</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 105, PSS, 6:91.

itself. She is describing an illness or malaise that all human beings always carry, generally in a dormant or inactive state.

#### 4.2.1 Raskol'nikov's Living Death

Just before and constantly after the murder, another dominant motif in this novel take fuller shape — Raskol'nikov as a man sentenced to death: 'He was only a few steps from his lodging. He entered it like a condemned man.'<sup>70</sup> In commentaries, critics generally associate this motif with *The Idiot*, especially in the passage where Myshkin explicitly discusses the phenomenon of a man being led to his death and in Ippolit's suicide plot.<sup>71</sup> However, I suggest that this motif is most narratologically significant in *Crime and Punishment*. It is constantly associated with Raskol'nikov's state-of-mind and behaviour, by the character himself, by the narrator and occasionally by other characters as well in matters concerning him.<sup>72</sup>

As Jacques Madaule has recognised, once Raskol'nikov commits the murder, 'The soul no longer seems to live, and this state resembles death — but one in which time would continue to flow with an inexpressible slowness; a death whose victim would be continually witnessing his own nothingness.'<sup>73</sup> As already mentioned, anxiety delivers a primordial awareness of the possibility of one's own non-existence. In essence, it is like a living experience of what it would be like to be dead. It is a paradoxical, seemingly contradictory

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<sup>70</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 57, PSS, 6:52.

<sup>71</sup> PSS, 8:51-52, 8:325-26.

<sup>72</sup> Some further examples of the motif: 'I suppose a man being led to his execution will fix his mind on every object he encounters on his way'; 'They both ran over to embrace him. But he stood there like a dead man'; 'What a nasty room you have, Rodia — it's like a coffin'; "'You sound as if you were burying me, or saying farewell for ever,'" he said in an odd voice'. *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 67, 172, 205, 276, PSS, 6:60, 6:150, 6:178, 6:239.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Madaule, 'Raskolnikov' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 41-48 (p. 47).

concept. This ‘living death’ is a very good characterisation of what Raskol’nikov is going through over the vast majority of the novel. The motif represents a major way in which Raskol’nikov’s anxiety makes its presence felt on his consciousness. He feels the force of an impending spiritual death — the gradual decomposition of his soul.

Anxiety severely impacts Raskol’nikov’s ability to maintain consistent and reliable thought processes. He suffers from memory loss, illness and weakness. His thinking becomes more impressionistic. Several terrifying and unforgettable images seem to take the place of utilitarian reasoning in his field of vision. Many of these images are connected to his state of anxiety — his ‘living death’ — and give artistic expression to this feeling. ‘Even if he’d been condemned to be burned that very minute, he still wouldn’t have moved from the spot, probably not even paid any attention to his sentence.’<sup>74</sup> Reflecting on this imagistic thought, he realises that he had never before experienced ‘such a strange and terrible sensation’ and he makes a point of noting that this impression was ‘more a sensation than an awareness of an idea; it was a direct feeling, the most agonizing feeling he had ever experienced in his life’.<sup>75</sup> A little further on there is another image relating to ‘living death’: ‘It felt as if someone was hammering a nail into the top of his skull.’<sup>76</sup>

But perhaps the most significant image from this trope directly connects his purgatorial, abyssal, anxious state of mind to the idea of a man condemned to death

‘Where was it,’ wondered Raskolnikov as he walked on, ‘where was it that I read about someone who was condemned to death, and an hour before his execution he said, or thought, that if he was made to live on some great height, on a cliff, on a platform so narrow that there was just room for his two feet, with the abyss all around,

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<sup>74</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 93, PSS, 6:81.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 94, PSS, 6:82.

the ocean below him, everlasting darkness, everlasting solitude, and everlasting storms — and he had to stay up there, standing on a foot of ground, for all his life, a thousand years, for all eternity — it would be better to live like that than die at once!<sup>77</sup>

It is a state where he seems to be awaiting an inevitable fall. Yet, this feeling also carries a sense of endlessness, an ‘everlasting darkness, everlasting solitude’. It is the experience’s tone of limitless torment that makes him feel as if he could be waiting in this in-between state ‘for all eternity’.

This is another paradoxical aspect of the peculiar temporality of a lived experience of impending death when it is presumed to be certain and unavoidable. Myshkin confirms this special experience of time as eternal and limitless when living under a death sentence explicit in *The Idiot*,

It worked out that he had five minutes to live, no more. He used to say that those five minutes seemed to him an eternity, an immense richness. It seemed that in those five minutes he could live through so many lives.<sup>78</sup>

This motif is repeated towards the end of Part 5 of *Crime and Punishment*, when he again imagines an ‘everlasting “one square yard of space”’.<sup>79</sup> In this passage, specifically the feeling of permanence and eternity that he associates with this purgatorial feeling of ‘living death’ is emphasized in his mind.

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<sup>77</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 142, PSS, 6:123.

<sup>78</sup> *Idiot*, p. 63, PSS, 8:52.

<sup>79</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 378, PSS, 6:327.

Raskol'nikov's desire to distract himself can also be linked to his sense of living under a death sentence. 'But gradually he was succumbing to a kind of distraction, even pensiveness; at times he seemed to forget himself, or rather to forget the most important things while clinging to trivial details.'<sup>80</sup> As Anderson notes, this feature is particularly prominent towards the end of the novel and is generally associated in Dostoevskii with a man walking towards his execution: 'So, as Raskol'nikov approaches the crossroads to confess, he is distracted by minor details in exactly the same way as a condemned man being led to his execution.'<sup>81</sup> As mentioned earlier, diverted attention expresses Raskol'nikov's desire to turn away from his anxiety and primordial guilt. This tendency intensifies in Raskol'nikov through the narrative as he attempts to flee in the face of the threat of being awoken from his somnambulant state.

Just like the motifs, metaphors and thoughts related to his state of 'living terror', Raskol'nikov's compulsion towards distraction is pervasive throughout the narrative.<sup>82</sup> However, as the examples in the last footnote all show, as the narrative progresses, his attempts at evasion begin to fail. This is also reflected in the texture of the narrative. In the first two parts, readers gain access to Raskol'nikov's observations of the world beyond his

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<sup>80</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 73, PSS, 6:65.

<sup>81</sup> Roger B. Anderson, 'Raskol'nikov and the Myth Experience', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 20, 1 (1976) 1-17 (p. 14).

<sup>82</sup> Apart from the ones already mentioned: 'Scraps and fragments of thoughts were swirling around in his head, but try as he might, he couldn't catch hold of a single one'; 'But *that* — *that* was something he had completely forgotten; though he constantly kept remembering that he had forgotten something which he mustn't forget. He racked his brains and tormented himself trying to remember it, and groaned and got into rages or fell into horrible, unbearable terrors'; 'His thoughts, sick and incoherent as they were, became more and more confused, and soon he succumbed to a light, pleasant somnolence'; 'He felt that everything inside him was in a terrible state of confusion, and he was afraid of losing control of himself. He tried to concentrate on something, think about something completely irrelevant, but utterly failed'. *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 79, 106, 115, 86, PSS, 6:70, 6:92, 6:100, 6:75.

mind through descriptions of street life, including of the Haymarket; his impression of the city during his solitary walks and of bridges in the glow of the sunset, set against darkening buildings.<sup>83</sup> In the final three parts of the novel, such observations tend to vanish, as Raskol'nikov draws deeper into the vortex of his inner dialogue.<sup>84</sup>

This inability to become absorbed in the everyday world is also a hallmark of anxiety for Heidegger. When in its grips, one is unable to look away from it in the way that Dasein usually does in everyday life.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, it is not only through absent-mindedness, curiosity and scattered thought that one attempts to look away, but through one's engagement or comportment in the everyday world. Distraction is precisely what Raskol'nikov is pursuing as he feels compelled to 'battle' other characters throughout the novel — Razumikhin; Porfirii; Zametov; Luzhin; his own family. These 'battles' are stimulating for him. He always wants someone to fight, so that he does not have to think about the images, feelings, unnameable terrors assailing him from without. This is why, in part 6, he feels reinvigorated at having a definite enemy in his sights again. 'He felt quite renewed. Another battle for him to fight — so there was a way out!'<sup>86</sup> It is also one of the multiple meanings contained in Porfirii's phrase in the final part of the novel. '*You can't do without us.*'<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 140-41, 48-49, 151, *PSS*, 6:122, 6:45, 6:131.

<sup>84</sup> For more on how Raskol'nikov's observations about the city contribute to the 'social production and understanding of space' through literary representation, and how the expansive, detailed, seemingly incidental descriptions of the spaces of the city in part one and two of *Crime and Punishment* contract in the final three parts of the novel, see: John Levin and Sarah J. Young, 'Mapping Machines: Transformations of the Petersburg Text', *Primerjalna Književnost*, 36, 2 (2013), 151-61 (pp. 154-57).

<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 232.

<sup>86</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 394, *PSS*, 6:341.

<sup>87</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 407, *PSS*, 6:352.

#### 4.2.2 Irresolution

If readers look at the unorthodox interrogation of Raskonikov through this lens, an insight is gained into why Porfirii refuses to conduct a conventional interrogation. What Raskol'nikov craves more than anything is a concrete compartment — a definite enemy, position, sentence, allows him to build a narrative for himself and thereby distract himself from this strange and terrible, non-relational 'sense of boundless horror' assailing him.

Porfirii argues that if he simply arrests a suspect on a strong suspicion, he will be unable to gather any further evidence from him. This is because, 'I'll have put him in a definite position, so to speak; I'll have psychologically defined him and ended his suspense, and now he'll go and withdraw into his shell — he'll realize he's a prisoner'.<sup>88</sup> Instead, what Porfirii wishes to do is keep him in a state of irresolution, a state of suspense — is he suspected or not? Has he been pronounced guilty or innocent?

Porfirii plays on Raskol'nikov's anxious state, where he is unable to distract himself from his primordial guilt, by removing from him the convenience of a definitive position, he keeps him hanging over the abyss, face-to-face with the existential nullity rising up from within his being.

And if I leave some particular gentleman quite alone, without pulling him in or bothering him, but making sure he knows, or at least suspects, every minute of every day, that I know all about it, every last detail, and that I'm watching him day and night, never sleeping, following his every move, and if he's aware that he's under constant suspicion, and terrified of it, then he's bound to lose his head, he'll come to me of his own accord.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 300, PSS, 6:261.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

The analogy with the complex, seemingly paradoxical experience of a man living under a death sentence would further serve to clarify what is going on here.

Once again, I turn to the explicit exposition of this notion in *The Idiot* to spell out the implicit inner mechanics of Raskol'nikov's experience, throughout the novel, of a man whose soul is being gradually destroyed, who feels the impending certainty of a death sentence.

After all, the great, the most intense pain lies not so much in injuries perhaps, so much as the fact that you know for certain that in an hour's time, then in ten minutes, then thirty seconds, then now, at this moment, the soul will take wing from the body and you will cease to be a man, and that this is certain to happen; the main thing is that it's *certain* [...] the sentence is pronounced and the whole agony resides in the fact that there's no escape. There's no greater torture in the world than that.<sup>90</sup>

Raskol'nikov feels within him the certain threat to his whole being, that this threat is unavoidable and absolutely will come without fail, yet while he witnesses the gradual decomposition of his soul, he must endure the most unimaginable form of 'spiritual suffering', which seems as if it will go on forever. It is not in the moment of spiritual execution itself that suffering is most intense, but 'in the fact that you know for certain' that death will come. This is the prime terror of the death sentence for Dostoevskii.

Furthermore, this is the opposition of impending certain death and the seemingly eternally endless spiritual torment before death arrives, playing out in Raskol'nikov's soul at this time, and this is precisely the dialectic that Porfirii exploits to push him further into direct confrontation with his own anxiety and guilt in order to elicit a volitional confession from him. He is allowing him no escape, no distraction, no definite position through which to

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<sup>90</sup> *Idiot*, p. 23, PSS, 8:20.



divert his attention from the indiscernible terror brewing within him at every unimaginably elongated moment. Finally, his crime, and the metaphysical, non-relational terror inflicted upon him, mean that he can also not relate to others. He is unable to meaningfully comport himself with others, not just about his crime, but about anything: ‘he could never, ever again, even *talk* about anything, with anyone at all. This agonizing realization was so powerful that for a moment he almost completely forgot himself.’<sup>91</sup>

Porfirii’s method of inducing ‘spiritual suffering’ by refusing to offer Raskol’nikov a premature resolution of his inner torment is also apparent in Dostoevskii’s wider oeuvre. Readers can find it in Ivan’s encounter with the devil, and in Stavrogin’s torturous inability to believe in anything. As Ivan’s devil tells us, his approach is to make ambiguous his own ontological status — to ensure that Ivan cannot be sure whether the devil exists or not. ‘Precisely. But uncertainty, worry, the conflict between belief and disbelief — all that is sometimes such torture to a conscientious man like yourself that it could be enough to make you hang yourself.’<sup>92</sup>

Stavrogin’s irresolution, more consciously cultivated than Raskol’nikov’s, also holds him in this indefinite place, between ideologies, between directions, between beliefs. Kirillov states, ‘If Stavrogin believes, then he doesn’t believe that he believes. But if he doesn’t believe, then he doesn’t believe that he doesn’t believe.’<sup>93</sup> Although each of these three characters go through unique experiences, dealing with a variety of different ideologies, beliefs, problems, they all maintain themselves in this peculiar nebulous state of irresolution, and this is precisely what the devil, in Ivan’s case, and Porfirii, in Raskol’nikov’s case, exploit in order to intensify the anxiety, guilt, madness, arising from within their own being.

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<sup>91</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 203, *PSS*, 6:176.

<sup>92</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 809, *PSS*, 15:80.

<sup>93</sup> *Demons*, p. 682, *PSS*, 10:469.

What all this means structurally in *Crime and Punishment* is that there are a countless number of oppositions constantly at play in the novel. As Jackson notes, there is ‘a constant struggle and debate on all levels of Raskol’nikov’s consciousness. Each episode [...] is marked by a double movement: a motion of sympathy and a motion of disgust, of attraction and recoil’.<sup>94</sup> However, Jackson appears to mainly have the opposition between compassion and cynicism in mind in this passage and how this double movement creates a tragic tension toward crime. Raskol’nikov, anxious and guilty, oscillates between numerous different oppositions throughout the novel, unable to attain a definite position and relieve himself of this inscrutable, nebulous ‘in-between’ state that plagues and terrifies him constantly.

Many of these oppositions have already been highlighted in the literature. The first, most obvious opposition is the one between love of self and love for the other. This is the foundation for the overtly ideological, and implicitly theological, opposition in the novel — between intuitive compassion for the suffering of others and rationalistic egoism, indifference to individual cases of suffering and cynicism. A clear example of Raskol’nikov oscillating between these two idea-feelings comes when he attempts to rescue the ‘young drunken girl being eyed up by a lecherous stranger’<sup>95</sup> but then suddenly changes his tone and opinion to one of cynicism and apathy. ‘He’s gone off with my twenty kopeks’.<sup>96</sup>

It is evident that this fundamental opposition in his being between self and other and utilitarian theory and intuitive compassion is caused by his ‘monomaniacal’ obsession with an abstract love for humanity which suppresses his intuitive compassion for the human being before him.

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, ‘Philosophical Pro and Contra in Part One of “Crime and Punishment”’ in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 26-40 (p. 27).

<sup>95</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 46, PSS, 6:42.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

And although he had previously been overcome by a longing for human contact of any kind whatever, he now, at the very first word actually addressed to him, suddenly experienced his usual feeling of disagreeable irritation and revulsion towards any stranger who intruded or merely threatened to intrude, on his personal world.<sup>97</sup>

This is also something Ivan suffers from in *The Brothers Karamazov*. ‘One can love a man only when he’s out of sight; as soon as he shows his face, that’s the end of love.’<sup>98</sup> Thus, implicitly this ideological opposition is grounded in the more fundamental opposition between self/other. Many commentators rely on this undoubtedly central opposition to, explicitly or implicitly, structure their interpretation of the novel.<sup>99</sup>

Several other oppositions ground the motivation-based reading — the one between Raskol’nikov’s egoistic pride and his love for humanity, and then, after the murder, between his pride and his guilt for the act (everyday, not primordial guilt) — between conscious and unconscious motive. There is also a tension operating between fate and freedom.<sup>100</sup> Yet

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<sup>97</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 11, PSS, 6:13.

<sup>98</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 297, PSS, 14:215.

<sup>99</sup> For example, ‘One way of expressing Dostoyevsky’s fear is that, granting a certain level of breakdown in human communication and relationships, men will have thereafter deprived themselves of the possibility of human society: the isolation will become total. The future of society, of cooperation between men, will no longer be in the hands of men. In that sense impersonal forces will hold sway.’ Stewart Sutherland, ‘Language and Interpretation in *Crime and Punishment*’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 2 (1978), pp. 223-36 (p. 233); ‘As opposed to Svidrigailov, Dostoevsky allows Raskolnikov to develop a mode of listening that transcends the narrow boundaries of selfish, animal-like, competitive listening. This type of listening is a reciprocal mode of perception’. Daniel Schumann, ‘Raskolnikov’s Aural Conversion: From Hearing to Listening’, *Urbandus Review*, 16 (2014) pp. 6-23 (p. 17); ‘Love becomes the means to annihilate inertia.’ Knapp, *Metaphysics of Inertia*, p. 62.

<sup>100</sup> Roger L. Cox, *Between Heaven and Earth: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1969), p. 150.

another opposition operative throughout the novel is between the pull of the rational, the theoretical, the abstract and the grips of life and the living soul.

Perhaps this can also be seen as derived from a simpler opposition between life and death. Clearly this is a relevant opposition for us, and in Raskol'nikov's existential experience of anxiety and primordial guilt, this manifests itself particularly as an opposition between 'living death' and resurrection through life or the power of the living soul. Raskol'nikov's only fleeting moments of reprieve from his death sentence are connected to the largely silent healing power of Sonia and the Marmeladovs, associated here with 'life' or the 'living soul'. For instance, after Marmeladov's death, Raskol'nikov, having given Katerina Ivanovna twenty rubles for the funeral expenses, feels a renewal. 'It was such a feeling as a man condemned to death might have if he was suddenly told that he had been reprieved.'<sup>101</sup>

Another time, when 'a strange sensation of almost bitter hatred towards Sonia' passes through his heart, her look of troubled and anguished concern heals him. 'There was love in it; and his hatred vanished like a phantom'.<sup>102</sup> This opposition between a living death and a renewal through life also clearly connects with the Lazarus theme. Ivanits deals primarily not with the Gospel narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-45) but with the 'Lazarus song',<sup>103</sup> yet she recognises that commentators 'almost universally perceive the novel's central religious meaning in the Gospel narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus, which Sonia

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<sup>101</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 167, PSS, 6:146.

<sup>102</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 361, PSS, 6:314.

<sup>103</sup> The 'Lazarus Song' is a 'spiritual song (*dukhovnyi stikh*) that retells the Gospel parable of the beggar Lazarus and the unmerciful rich man (Luke 16:19-31). [...] The Lazarus song [...], summed up Russian popular notions about justice; it expressed the belief of the narod that the relations between rich and poor should be governed by concrete charity as manifested in almsgiving'. Linda Ivanits, 'The Other Lazarus in *Crime and Punishment*', *The Russian Review*, 61 (2002) 341-57 (p. 343).

reads to Raskol'nikov. John's narrative, they argue, contains the pledge that Raskol'nikov, like the dead Lazarus, can awaken to new life.<sup>104</sup> Thus there is a fundamental opposition operative in Raskol'nikov's consciousness between the power of living death and life.

Here Svidrigailov and Sonia represent ideals on either side of the opposition between death and life in Raskol'nikov's consciousness, as coordinates symbolizing potential resolutions of his internal conflict. Svidrigailov is also possessed by a sense of 'living death'. Both he and Raskol'nikov have hallucinations, both have (potentially) committed murders, and both appear to be tormented by something indiscernible and inscrutable in the air they breathe. After Dunia fires a shot that grazes his temple, Svidrigailov too, like Raskol'nikov, tries to wipe the blood from himself.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, Svidrigailov's eternal village bathhouse<sup>106</sup> could be compared to Raskol'nikov's 'one yard of space' since both visions imply a sense of limitlessness and purgatorial spiritual torture. Perhaps they are both swimming in the same violent river, but Svidrigailov has been partially desensitized to its currents and thrashes, though they envelop him finally in the end. In this sense the cannon signalling a flood warning in the city on the night of Svidrigailov suicide may be comparable to the 'sacred blood' that threatens to overwhelm Raskol'nikov's soul. 'Aha! The signal! The water is rising'.<sup>107</sup>

It can be noted here that Nuttall's reading sees Svidrigailov as the true existential hero of the novel. 'We note only that in Svidrigailov's case the truth is borne, and in Raskol'nikov's it is not. Svidrigailov kills himself but at least he is the author of his own

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<sup>104</sup> Ivanits, 'The Other Lazarus in *Crime and Punishment*', p. 344. See also, Frank, *Miraculous Years*, p. 131; Tat'iana Kasatkina, 'Lazarus Resurrected: A Proposed Exegetical Reading of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 40 (2004) 6-37.

<sup>105</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, 6:382.

<sup>106</sup> *PSS*, 6:221.

<sup>107</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 450, *PSS*, 6:392

action.’<sup>108</sup> This again demonstrates the interpretive dangers of incorrectly assuming existentialism simply means ‘absolute freedom’ or ‘freedom from rationality’ or something of this sort. However, any further comparison of Raskol’nikov and Svidrigailov would not only mean stomping upon trodden ground,<sup>109</sup> but also divert readers from the main subject matter of this chapter. The general conclusion, inferable from the novel as a whole, is that Svidrigailov believes Raskol’nikov could end up like him, ‘a great scoundrel’ if he simply loses his intrinsic love for life.<sup>110</sup>

Raskol’nikov’s first conscious articulation of his state of living death is elicited by the symbol of living life, Sonia. In conversation with her, he acknowledges ‘Was it the old woman I killed? It was myself I killed, not the old woman! Finished myself off on the spot, once and for all!’<sup>111</sup> All of these themes find their proper instantiation, or the promise of their triumph, only in the wordless love of Sonia or in the epilogue. Harriet Murav states that it is ‘Sonia’s mute iconic authority’ that inarticulately empowers Raskol’nikov to wrench ‘out the first sounds of confession’ at the end of the novel.<sup>112</sup> Further on, Murav states, ‘*Crime and Punishment* moves from speech to silence, from quoting the ideas and opinions of its time to pointing beyond itself.’<sup>113</sup>

I mention these oppositions for one central reason only. They help exemplify how Raskol’nikov is constantly torn between definite positions, between resolutions and maintains

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<sup>108</sup> Nuttall, p. 66.

<sup>109</sup> Leatherbarrow, *A Devil’s Vaudeville*, p. 67.

<sup>110</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 447, 6:390.

<sup>111</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 371, PSS, 6:322.

<sup>112</sup> Murav, pp. 68-69. I note that Elizabeth Blake puts forward an alternative reading of Sonia’s silence, stating that ‘Sonya’s silencing treatment is part of a greater tendency in *Crime and Punishment* to portray women characters through the eyes of their male counterparts’. Elizabeth Blake, ‘Sonya, Silent No More: A Response to the Women Question in Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment”’, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 50 (2006), 252-71 (p. 254).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

himself in an ‘in-between’ state throughout the novel — in between love of others and self; in between pride and repentance; in between life and death. In truth it is not any particular term within an opposition but this process of irresolute movement between them that is the most fascinating aspect of the novel.

#### 4.2.3 The Final Part: Consolidation of Insights

In Part 6 of the novel, the ideas, oppositions, mysterious feelings which have been operative in Raskol’nikov’s experience become fully crystallized and articulated, either in his own self-awareness or through the narrator’s reflections on Raskol’nikov’s experience. Many of these secret threads running through the novel are repeated or enunciated more unequivocally in this part of the novel.

In the very first paragraph of the final part, the narrator discusses many of the key themes elaborated in this thesis, directly. He states that when Raskol’nikov looked back at this period of his life he realises that his mind was ‘clouded from time to time,’ confusing one event with a different one or losing sense of the causal chain of events.<sup>114</sup> He also experienced a strange, distorted sense of temporality. The narrator explains,

Sometimes he fell prey to morbid, agonizing anxiety, which might grow into sheer panic. But he also remembered that there were some minutes, hours, even perhaps whole days, filled with apathy that took hold of him as though in reaction against his earlier terror; apathy that resembled the pathological indifference of some dying men. All in all, he himself had recently seemed to be trying to avoid understanding his situation fully and clearly.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 387, PSS, 6:335.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

Anxiety [*trevoga*] is directly mentioned here. As discussed, Raskol'nikov is unable to meaningfully comport himself to others, or concentrate on his daily affairs. The world as such and all his dealings within it sink into indifference, as he is face-to-face with this limitless, inscrutable terror emerging from within and this is what the narrator means by his 'apathy' in response to 'terror'. It is stated clearly that he has been trying to 'avoid understanding his situation' as I have also mentioned and finally, readers are told that his apathy 'resembled the pathological indifference of some dying men.'

It is significant that this summarizing exposition of Raskol'nikov's state-of-mind appears at the beginning of the final part, as if decoding to some extent what has preceded it in the vast majority of the novel. Soon after this passage, readers also gain a biographical explanation of sorts, which again emphasizes Raskol'nikov's obsession with living death. 'Ever since he was a child, he had always found something oppressive, something mystically dreadful, in the awareness and presence of death'.<sup>116</sup>

Dostoevskii himself was obsessed and terrified by the possibility of a living death, even before his infamous near-death experience at his mock-execution. As already mentioned, Dostoevskii's friends and family members recount that, in the 1840s, he was neurotically fearful that he may suffer a cataleptic seizure, and be accidentally buried alive. Vsevolod Solov'ev even reports Dostoevskii's own account of his phobia. Dostoevskii is said to have confessed: '[i]t often seemed to me that I was dying, indeed it was as if actual death came upon me and then departed again.'<sup>117</sup> Thus, the dominance and centrality of this motif of the 'awareness and presence of death' in Raskol'nikov's — and Dostoevskii's own — consciousness should not be underestimated.

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<sup>116</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 388, 6:337.

<sup>117</sup> *F. M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 2:204-5. Translation taken from an unpublished paper: Alexis Klimoff, *A Lazarus Manqué: A Neglected Theme in Dostoevsky's 'Notes from Underground'*, p. 2. My thanks to the author for providing access to this.



The final dialogue with Porfirii also solidifies some of the other themes I have discussed. This metaphysical and all pervasive guilt manifest in the idea of ‘sacred blood’, symbolizing the ‘darkness of the human heart’, is tied to the profanatory act committed against life in spilling blood.

No, my dear old Rodion Romanich, this isn’t about Mikolka! This is a fantastic, murky business, a modern affair, a sign of our times, of the darkness of the human heart; when people quote the idea that blood “refreshes”; when life is supposed to be all about comfort.<sup>118</sup>

There is more in this passage than immediately meets the eye. Indeed, it is the life of ‘comfort’ that the uncanniness of anxiety interrupts and makes impossible by its strangeness. Heidegger indeed describes anxiety as disturbing Dasein’s sense of comfortable ignorance, by making one feel ‘not-at-home’.<sup>119</sup>

The ‘darkness of the human heart’ suggests that Porfirii is talking about a necessary condition of human life, even though directly, he is only talking about the ‘modern affair’, the murder and the crime. For Ivanov, the ‘mythical element’ which he sees as ‘the fundamental idea presented by *Crime and Punishment*’ could be better expressed in ‘the technical language of ancient tragedy’ than in the ‘concepts of modern ethics’.<sup>120</sup> The mythical element in the novel produces a plot that would not be out of place in a ‘play by Aeschylus’, representing, as it does,

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<sup>118</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 402, PSS, 6:348.

<sup>119</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 234.

<sup>120</sup> Ivanov, p. 77.

[T]he turbulent revolt of human arrogance and insolence against the primitively-sacred decrees of Mother Earth; the preordained insanity of the evil-doer; the wrath of the Earth over the blood that has been shed; the ritual purification of the murderer — who is hunted by the Erinyes of spiritual anxiety.<sup>121</sup>

In Ivanov's picture, it is Raskol'nikov's transgression that has caused the wrath of the Earth over spilled blood, but perhaps, the eternal recurrence of this theme in literature, the mythologisation of such transgressions against the natural order in the embodiment of the Erinyes and the cyclical, recurrent pattern of vengeance they embody, suggests that Raskol'nikov's transgression simply activates what lies eternally dormant in the human condition — a metaphysical guilt shared by all and a nullity that all humanity 'carries' — but which bares its terrifying face with special ritualistic force only to a condemned few.<sup>122</sup>

In Porfirii's final dialogue with Raskol'nikov, the opposition and interdependence of life and death re-emerges. This time, it hints at the possibility of resurrection implicitly anticipated in the idea of 'living through death'.

'That's what I was afraid of — that you wouldn't need our remission of sentence.'

Raskolnikov gave him a sad, solemn look.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> See also Roger B. Anderson's reading of Raskol'nikov's narrative journey in terms of myth experience. Anderson's work provides support to the idea that *Crime and Punishment* bears some structural similarities to mythological narratives — it possesses some of the core characteristics of 'traditional mythologems, which recur over the ages'. Anderson, *Myths of Duality*, p. 162. For me, this suggests that the mythical element in Dostoevskii resounds with a truth that transcends the ideological plot of the novel, and reaches towards something more universally human. See also Anderson, 'Raskol'nikov and the Myth Experience', pp. 1-17.

Hey, don't write off your life!' Porfiry went on. 'There's a lot of it ahead of you. How can you not need a remission — whatever do you mean? What an impatient man you are!'

'There's a lot of what, ahead of me?'

'Your life! You're not a prophet, are you — what do you know? Seek and ye shall find. Perhaps God has just been waiting to find you here. Those shackles aren't for ever, you know.'<sup>123</sup>

Perhaps the reason Raskol'nikov does not require a remission of his sentence is because he feels now that he is already dead. Hence he feels the need to remind him that his 'shackles', both the actual ones awaiting him in Siberia, and the ones he is already wearing, as he suffers through the torment of a living death, will not hold him forever.

Porfirii also provides readers with a final image, evoking the central motif of the novel — this idea of a 'living death' — and connecting it with the promise of renewal that appears in the epilogue.

What do you think I take you for? I take you for the sort of person who — even if he's being disembowelled alive — will stand there smiling at his torturers — so long as he finds a faith or a God. So — find yourself one, and you'll live.<sup>124</sup>

He also repeats the idea that what Raskol'nikov needs most of all is definiteness — an escape from his ambiguous, non-relational terror. This will come again in the form of an affirmation

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<sup>123</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 405-6, PSS, 6:351.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

of life, here embodied in the metaphor of ‘air’, which, of course, constantly interacts with blood as it flows through the human body.

‘Air’ is thus a metaphor repeated several times in the novel, positioned as the antidote to Raskol’nikov’s tortured state-of-mind. ‘A runaway’s life is difficult and horrible; while what you need most of all is a life, and a definite situation and enough air.’<sup>125</sup> The connection between air and blood in Raskol’nikov’s consciousness suggests that they work as oppositional symbols in symbiosis. Of course, this appeal for definiteness is a call back to Raskol’nikov’s general anxious and primordially guilty irresolution, oscillating constantly from extremity to extremity in a variety of different ideological, intuitive, spiritual oppositions, without being able to come to rest at any particular position. In Porfirii’s final speech, of course, it is the opposition between a living death and a renewed life that has taken centre stage.

Leading up to the epilogue, a final opposition is set up for Raskol’nikov. This is the choice offered to him, the freedom to opt for one of two paths. This is the choice between suicide and confession. ‘Rodion Romanovich has one of two ways to go — either a bullet through the head, or off along the Vladimirka [road to Siberia]’.<sup>126</sup> In the novel, as many critics have pointed out, Svidrigailov and Sonia express concrete manifestations, even possible ideals, for these two choices open to Raskol’nikov. In Anderson’s study, demonstrating the applicability of a mythic narrative to *Crime and Punishment*, he recognises the role of these two characters in Raskol’nikov’s journey:

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<sup>125</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 405-7, PSS, 6:351-52.

<sup>126</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 443, PSS, 6:385.

The emerging hero is thus called on to achieve a higher synthesis of these figures but in a way that avoids submission to the power each holds for him. His “task” is to take the gifts and assistance of both while avoiding the dangers of each.<sup>127</sup>

Raskol’nikov chooses the other side — confession, exile to Siberia and eventually a spiritual resurrection through an affirmation of life — rather than allying himself with Svidrigailov, surrendering his life in the face of the nullity underlying existence, and plunging from his terrifying state of ‘living death’ into suicide.

#### **4.3 Epilogue Time: Promise of Resolution**

It is in the epilogue that Raskol’nikov has his final epiphany. Throughout the novel, he has been in an epiphanic state of delirium, disclosing to him the twin nullities of anxiety and primordial guilt underlying all human life. Here, by contrast, his final epiphany explores the possibility of a transformation. Though this transformation appears to promise healing, this does not mean that it can erase or wipe out anxiety and guilt in human life.

Raskol’nikov continues to oscillate between confession and suicide up to the very last moment. His final decision to offer a formal confession is induced by the wordless, pained, tormented and despairing eyes of Sonia Marmeladova.<sup>128</sup> In the epilogue, Raskol’nikov is still trying to distract himself from what stirs within him. ‘Oh, what did he care about all those trials and hardships! On the contrary, he was glad to have to work; physically exhausted by it, he at least earned a few hours of peaceful sleep.’<sup>129</sup> Incidentally, his mother’s insanity also manifests a desire to distract herself somehow from the horror of Raskol’nikov’s spilled blood. She willingly seeks to avoid this terror which cannot be confronted by her consciously,

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<sup>127</sup> Roger Anderson, *Myths of Duality*, p. 60.

<sup>128</sup> *PSS*, 6:409.

<sup>129</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 479, *PSS*, 6:416.

even though she is aware of it deep down in her Being.<sup>130</sup> '[P]erhaps she realised clearly enough that she was just being humoured yet still she talked on...'<sup>131</sup> This is, of course, nominally similar to what occurred with Raskol'nikov throughout the course of the novel.

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Dostoevskii and Heidegger's narratives differ. For Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, a person experiences primordial guilt in an experience known as the 'call of conscience'. During this phase, one is called by one's own future self into a state of anxiety. The nullity that confronts one in anxiety then propels one to being free for one's own possibilities. This is because Heidegger's ontological narrative locates the possibility of an 'authentic' life precisely in the recognition of the boundless nullity surrounding existence — a nullity evident both in the fact that one was not there and did not choose to be thrown into the world at birth, and that one cannot ever experience life beyond death. These are the fundamental limits of the human existential horizon for Heidegger and a primordial experience of them can free one to pursue one's authentic possibilities in the world.

In Dostoevskii's Christian existentialism, there is indeed an undeniable nullity that is always a necessary part of human existence. But there is also an affirmative power, the power of life itself and the living soul. For Dostoevskii, therefore, though anxiety and primordial guilt reveal the nullity of existence, there is also the possibility of being called forward in a call of conscience, not by a future anxious self, but by life itself, towards a spiritual resurrection that takes one beyond dialectics, beyond the nebulous oscillations between contradictory positions, promising an overflowing of meaningfulness and life rather than the nullity and emptiness of a living death.

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<sup>130</sup> PSS, 6:415.

<sup>131</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 475, PSS, 6:413.

Thus what Raskol'nikov experiences in the epilogue is a call of conscience, beckoning him forward towards an epiphany. He realises that even very early after the murder, this call was a possibility that lay dormant and unperceived within him. 'He could not understand that this premonition [*predchuvstvie*] might be the harbinger [*predvestnikom budushchevo*] of a future break in his life, of his future resurrection, of a future new view of life.'<sup>132</sup> It is the power of life, or the beauty of the natural world itself that beckons him forward to this new future.

How could a man find so much meaning in a single ray of sunlight, a deep forest, a cool spring somewhere in the trackless wilderness [...] As he went on thinking about this, he found examples that were even more inexplicable.<sup>133</sup>

However, I note here that the epiphany itself is also a doubled experience. On the one hand, it comes in the form of prophecy — the apocalyptic dream mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: 'A new strain of parasitic worms had emerged, microscopic creatures that invaded human bodies. But these organisms were spirits, endowed with a mind and a will. The people they invaded went mad at once, as though possessed.'<sup>134</sup> This is allegory of human existence. Life, for a human being, will always be characterised by a sense of metaphysical guilt, or nullity, that one carries within oneself like a disease, as long as one remains a human.

At the end of the dream,

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<sup>132</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 481, *PSS*, 6:418. (translation amended).

<sup>133</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 481, *PSS*, 6:418.

<sup>134</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 483, *PSS*, 6:419-420.

Only a few people in the whole world could save themselves. They were the chosen few — pure souls destined to found a new race of men and a new life, to renew and purify the earth. But no one had seen those people anywhere, nor heard their words or their voices.<sup>135</sup>

Here the allegory drifts into apocalyptic time, or as Michael Holquist puts it, in the vertical time characteristic of the genre of the wisdom tale.<sup>136</sup> It is the recovery of life that Dostoevskii believes is destined to come, but this newfound harmony, as suggested by the 16 April 1864 entry, will bring forth an age where the human form itself will be fundamentally transformed.<sup>137</sup> In this sense, metaphysical guilt characterises human life until human life transforms into something other than human. It will then properly correspond to the human soul. This is the prophecy expressed in the dreamed aspect of his epiphany.

But what of human life itself? Here the second aspect of the epiphany gives readers a glimpse into the possibility of striving towards a higher ideal in human life. Something pierces Raskol'nikov's heart suddenly. He sees stretches of the steppe, the sunlight and nomads' yurts scattered far in the distance. His perception is idealized and romantic, and he senses it as if it possessed some original purity, 'as if the age of Abraham and his flocks had never passed away'. Sonia comes to him. And finally, through her wordless presence his state of 'living death' gives way to a living life:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, p. 90.

<sup>137</sup> 'It will be, but it will be after the attainment of the goal, when man is finally reborn according to the laws of nature into another form which neither marries nor is given in marriage'. *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:40, *PSS*, 20:173.



How it happened he didn't know, but suddenly something seemed to seize him and throw him down at her feet. He was weeping and clasping her knees [...] They tried to speak, but couldn't. Their eyes were full of tears [...] those pale, sick faces of theirs were already shining with the dawn of a renewed [*obnovlennovo*] future, a complete [*polnovo*] resurrection into a new life.<sup>138</sup>

It is worth noting that the novel ends not with the concrete manifestation of an apocalyptic emergence of a new age beyond the human, but with Sonia and Raskol'nikov patiently striving towards an unrealised future ideal. Their resurrection has occurred, but yet there is still something unachieved in it as they strive towards a future end. Ultimately, Dostoevskii is trying to point to a truth beyond language, to 'the wordless power of existence itself: life'.<sup>139</sup> However, as readers know from the final lines of the novel, this is a subject for 'a new tale' which will involve much further suffering and some 'great exploit in the future'.<sup>140</sup>

Although it is undoubtedly a religious conversion, an epiphany where Raskol'nikov prepares to listen in a different kind of way to the affirmative powers of life and the living soul within him, this is not what the novel *Crime and Punishment* is primarily about. As John Jones has already recognised, what is witnessed in the final section of the book is, 'a grand and dread apocalypse. But this occurs in the Epilogue. It is aftermath rather than the novel itself. And the Epilogue also points forward in its closing words to "a new tale", because "our present one is ended"'.<sup>141</sup> The new tale would concern, 'the slow regeneration of

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<sup>138</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 484-5, *PSS*, 6:421. (translation amended).

<sup>139</sup> Jenny Stelleman, p. 290.

<sup>140</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 486, *PSS*, 6:422.

<sup>141</sup> John Jones, *Dostoevsky*, p. 201.

Raskol'nikov, now in prison, through love and suffering'.<sup>142</sup> The novel itself, rather than its 'aftermath', is instead about metaphysical guilt and anxiety, showcasing the lived experience of these terrifying forces that subsist constantly, dormant or active, within every human experience, until the arrival of the apocalypse — the inexpressible and unknowable beyond that signals the end of time and human life in its present form.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

I have sought to delineate Raskol'nikov's 'in-between', irresolute state-of-mind throughout the course of the novel. In this state, Raskol'nikov comes face-to-face with anxiety and primordial guilt — two necessary conditions for human existence. His anxiety, largely exhibited in the form of the extended metaphor of a spiritual death-sentence brings him face-to-face with the constant possibility of one's own non-existence or death while one is alive. The intensification and activation of his primordial guilt shows him the inscrutable, and inexpressible nullity or 'notness' that underlies and forms a fundamental aspect of human existence at all times in Dostoevskii's apocalyptic imagination.

Having said this, I do not suggest that the epilogue is simply nothing, an error, a misconception or a fantasy. I simply insist that the 'in-between' state should not be retrospectively invested with meaning based on the conclusions that appear in the epilogue. Instead, this state reveals fundamental aspects of human experience in-itself, divorced from the promise of resolution offered in the final few pages of the novel. As David Danow recognises, in a different context, Raskol'nikov's process does approach a form of self-discovery in the end, 'but this is something which, like a birth, occurs gradually and

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

painfully, and is only hinted at towards the close of the novel, whose overall purpose is to document instead the self-ordained trial leading to that potential self-discovery'.<sup>143</sup>

I also reassert here that the conclusion is not definitive, and indicates only a promise of a path leading in a certain direction, without a guarantee of irrevocability or further oscillation in Raskol'nikov's state of mind in the unknown future beyond the pages of the novel. In this sense, I agree in principle with Aileen Kelly's semi-biographical interpretation of the broader conclusions implied in Dostoevskii's literary works,

There could be no final resolution of the conflict between the moral data of empirical experience and an ethic rooted in the invisible world of faith because they shared no common ground. If one took one's stand with Christ against logic, it must be without the comforting belief that one has thereby scored a victory over logic.<sup>144</sup>

My caveat being that it is not the victory over 'logic' — in the ideological narrative — that bears primary relevance for this thesis, but instead the assumption that the metaphysical guilt that Raskol'nikov exhibits can simply be erased through a renewed affirmation of life. Instead, as long as a human being exists as a human being, they will be subject to an awareness, to a greater or lesser degree, of the constant possibility of death. They will also carry within themselves metaphysical guilt, passively or actively, as a necessary, fundamental aspect of human existence.

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<sup>143</sup> David K. Danow, *The Dialogic Sign: Essays on the Major Novels of Dostoevsky* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 113.

<sup>144</sup> Aileen Kelly, 'Dostoevskii and the Divided Conscience' *Slavic Review*, 47 (1988) 239-60 (p. 259).

## 5. Being-with: Desire in *The Brothers Karamazov*

For Heidegger, ‘Being-with’ [*Mitsein*], Dasein’s internal other-relatedness, is an *existentiale*. Dasein is always ‘with-others’, even when it is alone. Dasein’s awareness of itself is always conditioned by its inner sociality and the presence of the other never truly leaves Dasein in human life. ‘Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein’s Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can be missing only in and for a Being-with.’<sup>1</sup>

Bakhtin has already demonstrated the pervasive nature of human internal other-relatedness in Dostoevskii’s fiction. He has shown that this *existentiale* is operative in all of his novels. Indeed, this represents the central plank of Bakhtin’s theoretical writings throughout his career. From his earliest work in *Philosophy of the Act*, where he presents an internally dialogic construction of the human personality by isolating structures of consciousness — ‘I-for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other’<sup>2</sup> — as the basic architectonic points in the performed act, to notes from the very end of his career — ‘Not-I in me, that is, existence in me; something larger than me in me’<sup>3</sup> — Bakhtin is constantly concerned with how the self, rather than being an exclusively self-subsistent and self-identical entity, is thoroughly and entirely conditioned by the other from within itself.

Specifically with regards to Dostoevskii, Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and interpenetrative discourse provide the groundwork for him to be able to famously say in the epilogue to the 1961 edition of the Dostoevskii book, ‘To be means to communicate [...] A

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, *Philosophy of the Act*, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 146.

person has no internal sovereign territory.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is no need to establish the fact that the Heideggerian *existentiale* of ‘Being-with’, which recognises Dasein’s internal sociality as a necessary condition of human existence, is operative in Dostoevskii’s fiction. Bakhtin has already done this without making direct reference to Heidegger.

Indeed, Bakhtin is not the only commentator to recognise this feature of sociality in Dostoevskii. Post-Bakhtin, it is a commonly accepted truth of Dostoevskii’s fiction that characters are internally socialized, regardless of whether another person is present before us. Alina Wyman, for instance, uses Scheler’s philosophy to elucidate this idea and its importance to Dostoevskii.<sup>5</sup> Others such as Emerson, Malcolm Jones, Corrigan also recognise this as a fundamental aspect of consciousness for Dostoevskian characters. However, all the above commentators also recognise that Bakhtin’s Dostoevskii fails to account for the darker aspects of dialogism.

Jones presents an overarching criticism: ‘Bakhtin declines to see, and therefore to theorize adequately, that abyss which for many readers is more characteristic of Dostoyevsky than any other single feature: the point, one might say, where polyphony threatens to become cacophony.’<sup>6</sup> Jones’ book provides a thorough examination of the stygian aspects of dialogic interpenetration in Dostoevskii, demonstrating, amongst other things, how characters often seek to do epistemic violence to their interlocutors, or ‘drive the other person crazy’.<sup>7</sup> Jones states that what Bakhtin’s theory lacks is a deeper psychological rationale that provides a

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<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> Alina Wyman, *The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin and Dostoevsky* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoyevsky After Bakhtin*, Preface, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

principle of emotional interaction between characters — one that would account for the often violent nature of internal other-relatedness in Dostoevskii's world.<sup>8</sup>

Emerson, too, across several works, brings into question Bakhtin's framework by stating that the latter presumes that dialogic relations between characters in Dostoevskii are ultimately 'always benign'<sup>9</sup> or cannot account for the 'pain, loneliness, and dull confusion'<sup>10</sup> experienced by characters in Dostoevskii. Corrigan builds on these criticisms, arguing, as Jones does, against Bakhtin's claim that consciousnesses in dialogic interaction remain 'unmerged' and 'sovereign'. He shows how various characters seek to avoid painful trauma from their past and escape from their own interiority by merging with others in debilitating collective selves. In Corrigan's words, the 'need to enact his personality intersubjectively is the result of pathologically suppressed or erased interior life'.<sup>11</sup> Girard, too, recognises the convulsions of unhealthy desire in the relations between characters in Dostoevskii.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this line of criticism is almost as old as Dostoevskii's fiction itself. Nikolai Mikhailovskii gives specific attention to the cruelty of Dostoevskii's talent, that is, the presence of grotesquery, evil, sadism and masochism in the relations between Dostoevskian characters,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Caryl Emerson, 'Russian Orthodoxy and the Early Bakhtin', *Religion and Literature*, 22 (1990) 109-31 (p. 116).

<sup>10</sup> Caryl Emerson, 'Zosima's Mysterious Visitor: Again Bakhtin on Dostoevsky and Dostoevsky on Heaven and Hell', in *A New Word on "The Brothers Karamazov"*, ed. by Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), pp. 155-179 (p. 159).

<sup>11</sup> Corrigan, pp. 24-5.

<sup>12</sup> René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, ed. and trans. by James Williams (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2012), p. 84. First published in 1863.

<sup>13</sup> Nikolai Mikhailovsky, *A Cruel Talent: An Essay on Dostoevsky*, trans. by Spencer Cadmus, Jr. (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978), p. 36.

thus subverting, in his view, the idea that Dostoevskii was a ‘spiritual leader of his people [...] Dostoevsky was the prophet of God!’<sup>14</sup>

What all these criticisms share in common is the idea that simply the fact that human beings are internally related to others, as Bakhtin recognised, does not ensure the emergence of the seemingly innocuous Bakhtinian image of an overarchingly harmonious, socially dialogized life as a ‘communion of unmerged souls’.<sup>15</sup> The often violent, sadistic or cruel dialogic relations between characters in Dostoevskii appear to suggest otherwise. Characters do throw themselves into others. However, they do so not to find themselves, but to lose themselves or escape the torments of their interior spaces. They often merge with others, inflicting onto others their wayward thirst for self-transcendence. They give expression to their insatiable desire to escape their own consciousnesses through possession of or surrender to the other.

Despite these criticisms, readers may still sense that, for Dostoevskii, the secret to humanity’s salvation has something fundamental to do with Dasein’s internal other-relatedness. In this chapter, I look at Dostoevskii’s presentation of this theme. I will predominantly focus on *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Zosima and Alesha’s particular form of Christian existentialism provides a blueprint for potential authentic experiences or epiphanies disclosing Dasein’s internal other-relatedness.

I can refer here to the words of the young Zosima’s (Zinovii’s) mysterious visitor:

But it is certain that this terrible isolation will come to an end, and everyone will realize at a stroke how unnatural it is for one man to cut himself off from another.

This will indeed be the spirit of the times, and people will be surprised how long they

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<sup>14</sup> Mikhailovsky, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, pp. 26-7.

have remained in darkness and not seen the light. It is then that the sign of the Son of man will appear in heaven...<sup>16</sup>

This passage suggests that human interconnectedness is the foundation for the path to the salvation of mankind. This idea appears on the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* on several occasions in a variety of different forms, whether it be in Dostoevskii's favoured leitmotif of 'each person being guilty for all' or in the doctrine of active love for everyone and everything.

The mysterious visitor's words above imply that overcoming humanity's age of isolation will involve a recognition of what humankind has always been, but has failed to recognise itself as. This is evident in the quotation as the speaker claims that isolation is 'unnatural' for human beings and recognition of this will result in amazement that humankind has 'sat in darkness and refused to see the light'. This implies that the self turned away or 'refused' to see something that was already there within itself and in its world. Thus, there appears to be a connection here between ontology and ethics, between the 'is' (human beings are internally other-related) and the 'ought' (humanity should overcome its isolation and love one another as themselves).

However, all this leads to a further question: If the self is radically other than itself, and human life is deeply marked by the *existential* of the self's internal other-relatedness, and this *existential* is somehow connected to humankind overcoming their isolation by striving towards love for the other, why do our natures appear to strive towards fragmentation, isolation and exclusive self-affirmation? In other words, why has the kingdom of heaven not appeared on earth, if it already dwells within Dasein?

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<sup>16</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 380, PSS, 14:275.



In the 16 April 1864 entry, written around 16 years before the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevskii appears to have a similar view about the redemption of the world, contrasting isolated self-affirmation with a sense of striving to give oneself completely to each and all. He identifies two principles at work in the human personality. On the one hand, as finite human beings governed by ‘the law of individuality’, Dasein seek to affirm and develop its own self, and appears to exclusively affirm the ‘I’ — “‘I’ is the stumbling block.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is impossible, in present form ‘To love a person *as one’s own self* according to the commandment of Christ’.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Dostoevskii also states that Christ is ‘an eternal ideal towards which man strives and should by the laws of nature strive’. Although this means that loving the self appears more natural to Dasein than loving others, Dasein also simultaneously strives towards Christ. The self is internally other than itself and also strives to give itself to others. Striving towards others is an *existentiale* in human life, and such striving is an imitation of humanity’s striving towards Christ.

As a result of these insights into the existential condition, Dostoevskii concludes that, the highest final development of the individual should attain precisely the point (at the very end of his development, at the very point of reaching the goal) [...] where man might find, recognize and with all the strength of his nature be convinced that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I*, to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:39, PSS, 20:172.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, Dostoevskii's response to why humanity has not yet reached the kingdom of heaven is that it is impossible to do so in contingent human life, which is still in development, and has not yet reached its goal. But the proof of where humanity's goal lies, for Dostoevskii, is in its own existentiality. Dasein is necessarily conditioned by its striving towards self-othering. 'And thus on earth mankind strives toward an ideal *opposed* to his nature.'<sup>20</sup> In other words, humanity contains within itself the seeds of its own transcendence.

The *existential* of 'being-with' is, therefore, doubled in Dostoevskii. Unlike in *Being and Time*, 'Being-with', for Dostoevskii, refers both to human internal other-relatedness, and also to a desire, a striving to give oneself to others or to become other than oneself. However, the question now has become even more urgent — if it is a necessary condition of human nature to strive to give oneself to others, 'to each and every one' in accordance with the commandment of Christ, why does reality tend towards fragmentation and self-affirmation? In order to demonstrate that human striving towards self-othering is an *existential*, and not simply an ideal that one can sometimes follow and sometimes disregard, it must be shown that, despite Dostoevskii's characters' ample desire for self-affirmation, they also always desire to give themselves to others. There appears to be a paradox here. In order to proceed further, I must outline the nature of desire in Dostoevskii's fiction.

### 5.1 Striving for Alterity

If I am arguing that the *existential* of 'being-with' names not only Dasein's internal other-relatedness, but also its desire to give itself to others, then I must demonstrate how this second feature — the desire for self-othering — is apparent in Dostoevskii's everyday fictional world, and apparent in such a way as to constitute the 'meaning and ground'<sup>21</sup> of this apparent reality. The question raised earlier still stands — how can I claim that this desire for

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:41, *PSS*, 20:175.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

self-othering is operative in a world marked by the exact opposite — fragmentation, chaos and exclusive self-affirmation? To answer this, I will have to look in more detail at the work of two theorists of Dostoevskii that have already been mentioned, Corrigan and Girard.

The central theses of these two thinkers in their work on Dostoevskii are as follows. For Corrigan, individuals throw themselves into debilitating collective selves in order to escape the terror of their own interiority, and the unnamable psychic wound they carry within themselves, what Corrigan identifies as the ‘Vasia Shumkov paradigm’.<sup>22</sup> For Girard, the self, conditioned by a certain form of desiring prevalent in the works of Dostoevskii, known as ‘metaphysical’ or ‘mimetic’ desire, has substituted human models for divine ones, and desires in a mediated fashion by imitating the desires of the human idol he/she has adopted.

To say that our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in their objects nor in ourselves but in a third party, the *model* or *mediator*, whose desire we imitate in the hope of resembling him or her, in the hope that our two beings will be ‘fused,’ as some Dostoevskian characters love to say.<sup>23</sup>

Although Girard does not discuss *The Brothers Karamazov* in as much detail as he does *Notes from the Underground*, *Demons*, or *The Adolescent*, his ideas are certainly applicable to Dostoevskii’s final novel as well. At least three of the four brothers are firmly in the grips of mimetic desire. It may be argued that Alesha too tends partially towards metaphysical desire insofar as he turns Zosima into a human idol,<sup>24</sup> and this is the source of

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<sup>22</sup> Corrigan, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Girard, *Dostoevsky*, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model.’ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 58. First published in 1961.

the suffering that leads to the wavering of his faith after Zosima's body starts to decay. The three remaining brothers — Dmitrii, Ivan, Smerdiakov — display the typical rhythms of metaphysical desire.

Each of them, although consciously seeking to gain a kind of self-possession through satisfaction of desire, actually ends up losing himself by becoming his own mediator — the one presumed to already be in possession of the object of their desire. In other words, they seek to gain the self by becoming other than the self. Girard has already recognised this as the core 'desire' within metaphysical desire. 'Imitative desire is always a desire to be another. There is only one metaphysical desire but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety.'<sup>25</sup> At its basic level, mimetic desire is a desire for what the other desires. Readers shall now see how this desire for self-othering manifests itself in the experiences of the three brothers.

The clearest example of mimetic desire in *The Brothers Karamazov* is the relationship between Smerdiakov and Ivan. Smerdiakov has ambivalent feelings towards Ivan. In a conversation between Fedor Karamazov and Ivan, this admiration is made explicit. "It's you he's so curious about — what have you done to charm him?"<sup>26</sup> asks Fedor. In the pre-history of the novel, Ivan has had a pedagogical influence on Smerdiakov. The latter strives to imitate Ivan's desire for moral transgression. Nonetheless, only a few moments after Fedor discusses Smerdiakov's admiration for Ivan, he also states of his illegitimate son: 'That's as may be, but I know he can't abide me, or anybody else for that matter, including you, even though you might think he's decided to "look up to you".'<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Ivan is both a revered other who Smerdiakov admires and wishes to emulate, and a hated rival who he wishes to supplant.

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<sup>25</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 167, PSS, 14:122.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

In Smerdiakov's three conversations with Ivan towards the end of the novel, this ambivalence in his feelings for his former mentor becomes more directly evident. At this stage, Smerdiakov's being has been fused to a certain extent with Ivan's. The thoroughly double-voiced nature of dialogue in these scenes reflects this, as both Ivan and Smerdiakov repeat phrases they have heard from each other.<sup>28</sup> Both of them colluded in an act of ultimate moral transgression, but only Smerdiakov is fully aware that they have been merged in this intention. Thus, Smerdiakov has the upper hand in the relationship now.

During these three meetings, Smerdiakov gradually brings Ivan to a realization of his complicity in the murder. He begins to challenge his former mentor and revered teacher. 'Although Smerdyakov spoke unhurriedly and was obviously in control of himself, there was a hint of something malicious and insolently provocative. He stared insolently at Ivan Fyodorovich, and for a moment the latter lost his self-control.'<sup>29</sup> It is also known that Smerdiakov takes pleasure from crushing his rival in this fashion. 'Smerdyakov was watching him almost with glee.'<sup>30</sup> Once he has finally made the revelation unequivocally clear to Ivan, Smerdiakov begins his downward spiral towards suicide.

Smerdiakov becomes aware that Ivan is actually unable to transgress the moral law in the manner his teachings prescribe. According to the logic Smerdiakov has been taught by his mediator, perhaps this indicates Ivan's cowardice, his not belonging to the future generation of man-Gods.

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<sup>28</sup> Ivan: 'So that means '[I]t's always interesting to talk to an intelligent person' all over again, eh?'; Smerdiakov: 'I got that idea, sir, mainly from "everything is permitted" — it was you who taught me that, sir, because you used to say it a lot' *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 774, 793, PSS, 15:54, 15:67.

<sup>29</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 770, PSS, 15:51.

<sup>30</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 773, PSS, 15:53.

‘Go on then, sir, kill me. Kill me now,’ said Smerdiakov suddenly in an odd tone, and looking strangely at Ivan. ‘You daren’t even do that, sir,’ he added, smiling bitterly, ‘you daren’t do anything, you who used to be so bold, sir!’<sup>31</sup>

Smerdiakov’s suicide is not born of guilt, or of fear that the law may punish him for his transgression. He follows this path because he believes he has achieved his desire, and supplanted his rival, yet despite this, he is not filled with the exultation of conquest, nor with a reinvigorated sense of self, but with the emptiness that invariably lies at the end of metaphysical desire. The bond broken, he pays homage to their relationship in his final spoken words in the novel. “Ivan Fyodorovich!” He shouted after him suddenly. “What do you want?” [...] “Goodbye, sir!”<sup>32</sup>

At several points in Girard’s study, the author recognises that metaphysical desire ultimately aims at the complete disintegration of the subject, at nothingness, at the zero point.

To perceive the metaphysical structure of desire is to foresee its catastrophic conclusion. Apocalypse means development. The Dostoyevskian apocalypse is a development that ends in the destruction of what it has developed. Whether one sees it as a whole or isolates a part of it, the metaphysical structure can always be defined as an apocalypse.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Smerdiakov’s central desire in *The Brothers Karamazov* is to become other than himself — to become Ivan Karamazov. Once he has fulfilled this desire by supplanting Ivan, he does not feel exultation or ecstasy, but an empty satiety. The fulfilment of metaphysical

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<sup>31</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 794, *PSS*, 15:68.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p. 288.

desire leads to ‘the destruction of what it has developed’ and leaves Smerdiakov with nothing more to do or think. His room resembles Svidrigailov’s eternal bathhouse for the damned.<sup>34</sup> They are both waiting rooms where nothing further can happen. This is the reason why Smerdiakov kills himself.

Dmitrii’s triangulated desires are less obvious than Smerdiakov’s. Unlike Smerdiakov, who clearly both wishes to become and to supplant Ivan, Dmitrii does not wish to become Fedor Karamazov. There is no reverence mixed in with his hatred of his father. Instead, what Dmitrii appears to desire while he is in the grips of metaphysical desire is an awareness of the abyss within himself, of his own nothingness in the face of the object of his desire.

Although Girard does not discuss this directly, there is an analogous example that he does elaborate briefly. Analysing *The Gambler* (1866), Girard states that the main character, Aleksei,

experiences an underground passion for the general’s daughter, Pauline, who treats him with a contemptuous indifference. It is his awareness of being regarded as *nothing* that renders her as *everything* in the eyes of this new underground character.

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<sup>34</sup> Smerdiakov’s lodgings: ‘This room had a tiled stove which gave out a lot of heat. The walls were decorated with sky-blue wallpaper, admittedly all torn and peeling, and under it, in the cracks, cockroaches swarmed in such profusion that they produced a constant rustling noise.’ *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 768, PSS, 15:50. Svidrigailov’s eternal bathhouse: “We always imagine eternity as an idea that can’t be grasped, as something enormous, simply enormous. But why does it have to be enormous? Just suppose, instead of all that, it’s nothing but a single little room, something like a village bathhouse, all grimy with soot, with spiders in all the corners — and that’s eternity for you! You know, I sometimes find myself imagining it like that.” *Crime and Punishment*, p. 256, PSS, 6:221.

In her the goal and the obstacle merge, the desired object and the haunting rival become one.<sup>35</sup>

Dmitrii's feelings for Grushenka reflect the ambivalence the subject feels for his mediator in metaphysical desire. Thinking of his desire for Grushenka, he states, 'But to fall in love is not the same as to love. You can be in love even while hating someone. Remember that!'<sup>36</sup>

These are not empty words — despite thirsting deeply after Grushenka and seeking to possess her, his passion could also very easily cause him to do her harm, even murder her, something he had explicitly threatened to do.<sup>37</sup> However, it is also clear that it is not Grushenka herself who uniquely causes these feelings in Dmitrii, but that this ambivalence, this splitting of his feelings between poles of love and hatred, is an essential aspect of the rhythms of his desire, regardless of which object this desire has attached itself to at a particular time in his life.<sup>38</sup>

To prove this, I can turn to the scene which can be regarded as the point where another triangulated arrangement of desire is born — the scene where Katerina first offers herself to Dmitrii to save her father's reputation and life. Here too Dmitrii's feelings towards Katerina are deeply ambivalent. On the one hand,

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<sup>35</sup> Girard, *Dostoevsky*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>36</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 132, *PSS*, 14:96.

<sup>37</sup> *PSS*, 14:312. Resonances of Rogozhin's ambivalent desire for Nastas'ia Filippovna can also be felt here.

<sup>38</sup> One of the ways in which Dmitri interprets the ambivalently split, fluctuating, broad rhythms of his own mimetic desire is through his appreciation of his particular aesthetic sense — in 'beauty', he perceives both the ideal of the Madonna and that of Sodom. *PSS*, 14:100.



I had never looked at any woman with such hatred — I swear by all that's holy, I looked at her then for two or three seconds with a terrible hatred — a hatred that's only a hair's breadth away from love, from the most desperate love.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, once he has decided to give her the money: 'Then I [...] took a step back and bowed'.<sup>40</sup> What Dmitrii craves is not the specific object of desire he is pursuing — Grushenka or Katerina — but, as stated earlier, the exultation or ecstasy of feeling his own humiliation, his own nothingness before them — his lovers and rivals, 'What made her particularly attractive at that moment was that she was pure and I was a scoundrel, she was magnificent [...] and I was just a louse.'<sup>41</sup>

Once he has given Katerina the money, bowed before her and allowed her to leave, he experiences such a feeling of moribund ecstasy. He draws his sabre, and is about to thrust it into his chest. 'Why — I don't know. Of course it was utter stupidity, but it must have been from sheer ecstasy. Do you realize, there are times when one can kill oneself from ecstasy?'<sup>42</sup> This is not an isolated confession. Dmitrii repeatedly gives expression to these moments of exultation which are inextricably linked with his decision to commit suicide and thus towards his self-annihilation or erasure.

Because I am a Karamazov. Because if I fall into the abyss, I go head first and even take pleasure in the extent of my own degradation, even find beauty in it. And from those depths of degradation, I begin to sing a hymn.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 144, *PSS*, 14:105.

<sup>40</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 145, *PSS*, 14:106.

<sup>41</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 143, *PSS*, 14:105.

<sup>42</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 145, *PSS*, 14:106.

<sup>43</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 135, *PSS*, 14:99.

It is clear that Dmitrii Karamazov strives to become other than himself, not by supplanting a mediator, but through the super-saturated moment of death-driven exultation, induced by his own perverse self-abasement before the other. ‘Ah, Alyosha, what a pity you’ve never discovered ecstasy!’<sup>44</sup> This moment of exultation is part of the rhythms of metaphysical desire.<sup>45</sup> It is another route to self-othering since it allows Dmitrii to, for an instant, escape his life and be possessed by a force, by an aesthetic experience, delivering him over to his own desire for nothingness, for an intense sensation that nullifies his existence.

Ivan’s mediators are the Grand Inquisitor and the Devil. What he aims at is what they appear to possess — a world stripped of its divine meaning. Alesha intuits that Ivan is ‘striving towards some goal’,<sup>46</sup> something within himself that remains undefined. Ivan wishes to overcome religious meaning. He wishes to destabilize religious narratives — make them ambivalent and double-voiced — by demonstrating that they contain their opposite within themselves. Readers can take his written texts — articles and poems — and his dialectical arguments, as his doctrine in this task. It is where his ideas about ultimate reality are encoded.

For example, as Alexander Gibson recognises, in Ivan’s article on the ecclesiastical courts, he proposes an institutionalized version of the Slavophile idea of *sobornost*. This is a view that could be attributed not only to Zosima, Father Paisii and Dostoevskii himself, but here the reader finds Ivan, a ‘professing atheist’ coming to set out one of ‘Dostoevsky’s most cherished convictions’. This leads Gibson to speculate as follows.

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<sup>44</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 133, *PSS*, 14:97.

<sup>45</sup> Girard, *Dostoevsky*, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 39, *PSS*, 14:30.

But it means that Orthodox belief can be simulated by atheists, and how do we then distinguish between atheists and believers? Never did Dostoevsky find a more disconcerting way of ‘distributing his voices.’<sup>47</sup>

Ivan’s goal here is not to confess a latent belief in God, but to make indeterminate the boundary between belief and disbelief, so that belief is made to imply its opposite and vice versa. Similarly, Malcolm Jones also recognises that the Grand Inquisitor’s response to Jesus in Ivan’s mythical poem is ‘the result of a double suppression’<sup>48</sup> — the suppression of God in his re-interpretation of the Gospel narrative and the suppression of Divine Grace in Jesus’ discourse. This, once again, demonstrates how Ivan’s method involves the melding together of two disparate narratives, so that one is made to speak the language of the other. In this case, the Gospels come to speak the language of the disbelieving authoritarian and once again God is conflated with Godlessness.

Further evidence of his desire to de-stabilize self-subsistent categories comes in the form of his rejection of God’s world. Ivan claims that he does not reject God, but the world with all its suffering and evil. Clearly here, he is involved in another set of intermingling narratives insofar as he accepts the existence of God, but rejects God’s world, therefore making his belief in God an empty husk.

In this sense, I can re-read Ivan’s nihilistic axiom in metaphysical, or perhaps anti-metaphysical, terms. I share Jones’ reading of Ivan’s ‘all is permitted’ insofar as I believe that, for Ivan, it implies that since there is no God and immortality (there is no transcendental signifier), everything is permitted (there is no ultimate sanction for human values).<sup>49</sup> As a result of the absence of a univocal ultimate meaning or transcendental signifier, all meaning

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<sup>47</sup> Alexander Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 189.

<sup>48</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky after Bakhtin*, p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, pp. 84-85.

drifts into its opposite and is determined, or ‘made meaningful’ only through its linguistic context in a text. This could plausibly be Ivan’s ‘secret’ and the key to understanding his methodology for overcoming God.

I can briefly touch, here, on another insight from the 16 April 1864 entry. Dostoevskii’s key argument for immortality is that without it the world would lack sense and meaning.

But in my judgment it is completely senseless to attain such a great goal if upon attaining it everything is extinguished and disappears, that is, if man will no longer have life when he attains the goal. Consequently, there is a future, heavenly life.<sup>50</sup>

Frank recognises that what Dostoevskii means here is that immortality must be true because if this were not the case then the visible human struggle to fulfil the law of Christ would have ‘no point’.<sup>51</sup> Both Frank and Jackson recognise that what Dostoevskii appeared to fear above all else was the threat of a meaningless world.<sup>52</sup> Royce Grubic, citing Reinhold Neibuhr, also states a viewpoint that, perhaps, Dostoevskii too would have agreed with: ‘In so far as it is impossible to live without presupposing a meaningful existence, the life of every person is

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<sup>50</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:40, *PSS*, 20:173.

<sup>51</sup> Frank, *The Stir of Liberation*, p. 301.

<sup>52</sup> Frank, *The Stir of Liberation*, p. 301; Robert Louis Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 251.

religious.<sup>53</sup> For Heidegger too, one of the fundamental presuppositions of his analysis is that human beings strive to make sense of their existence in the world.<sup>54</sup>

Ivan's attempt to dialectically subvert the divine sense of the world by destabilizing religious narratives presages the idea of a meaningless universe. This would be one of Dostoevskii's greatest fears. Ivan does this to bring about the age of the 'Man-God', to overcome the form of humanity that strives to make sense of the world. This is his deepest metaphysical desire, and the devil gives voice to it as he summarizes the meaning of Ivan's poem, 'The Geological Upheaval':

Once humanity has unanimously rejected God (and I believe that age will come to pass in step with the geological ages) then all former conceptions of the world and, most importantly, all former morality, will collapse of its own accord [...] Man will extol himself spiritually in godlike titanic pride, and the man-god will be born.<sup>55</sup>

Ivan's eventual descent into madness should be viewed in this context as the inevitable result of his desire to supplant God. Girard is acutely cognizant of this rhythm of metaphysical desire: 'The affirmation of the self ends in the negation of self. The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized.'<sup>56</sup> Thus where Smerdiakov strives to be other than himself by becoming Ivan and where Dmitrii seeks to

<sup>53</sup> Royce Grubic, 'Cosmos or Chaos: Theodicy, love, and existential choice' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2004), p. 48. <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/docview/305123541?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 3 Jun. 2021].

<sup>54</sup> 'Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards the Being — a relationship which itself is one of Being.' Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 813-4, *PSS*, 15:83.

<sup>56</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p. 287.

transcend the self and escape to alterity in aesthetic exultation, Ivan strives to a radical alterity, the alterity of a 'new geological age', the age of the man-god, which promises 'great joy' that can replace the pleasures of heaven. Each brother, believing that they seek self-affirmation and the pleasurable fulfilment of desire, ironically end up annihilating the self as they strive, consciously or unconsciously, to become other than themselves.

It may be objected that I have not taken 'everyday', but instead extraordinary examples of desire as examples in this study. But mimetic desire is more widespread in the novel than it first appears. The various triadic relationships of desire in the novel, apart from the examples cited above, include Ivan — Dmitrii — Katerina; Katerina — Grushenka — Dmitrii; Dmitrii — Grushenka — Fedor; Ivan — Alesha — Liza; Rakitin — Mdme. Khokhlakova — Perkhotin; Dmitrii — Polish lover — Grushenka.

In Madame Khokhlakova's romanticism, there is perhaps something of Emma Bovary, about whose desires Girard also has much to say.<sup>57</sup> Madme Khokhlakova clearly displays symptoms of metaphysical desire. She seeks out Zosima as a mediator to fill the lack of faith she feels within herself. She soothes herself in her anguish, and, in a manner similar to Katerina, takes pleasure in her own self-lacerations. Thus, Zosima counsels her, "Do not worry about my opinion," replied the *starets*. "I truly can believe your anguish is genuine."<sup>58</sup> She is also constantly occupied by wild fantasies, betraying a desire to want to instantaneously transform into a new person, with a new life.

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<sup>57</sup> 'Therefore at the origin of bovarysm, as of Dostoyevskian madness, is the failure of a more or less conscious attempt at an apotheosis of the self.' Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 70, PSS, 14:52.

I sometimes dream of giving up everything, giving up everything I have, leaving Lise and becoming a sister of mercy. I shut my eyes, I think and I dream, and in those moments I feel an insuperable strength within me.<sup>59</sup>

Her fanciful desires for Dmitrii to run off to the gold mines also clearly indicate this tendency towards stimulation through fantasized desire.

Rakitin's desire to advance in his literary career<sup>60</sup> and his socialist ideals indicate the spiritual idols and possible mediators whose place in society he reveres and covets. The 'hysterical, avid, almost pathological curiosity'<sup>61</sup> with which some in the audience at Dmitrii's trial seek to fulfil voyeuristic desires by living through the drama of the accused's violent passions and sensuality is also an example of metaphysical desire. Father Ferapont's desire to be idolized, venerated, worshipped by the people is also mimetic. He craves to be worshipped as he imagines his mediator Zosima to have been.<sup>62</sup> Miusov's desire to be regarded by others as a 'sincere lover of mankind' implies idealized mediators or human idols whom he is imitating. Fedor Karamazov's debauched, exaggeratedly foolish and provocative behaviour, stems from a mimetic desire for aesthetic exultation through performativity. His public and demonstrative foolishness is often 'delivered in a fit of pique, as a flamboyant gesture, one might say'.<sup>63</sup> Much everyday desire in the novel is mimetic. Furthermore, even when desires are not mimetic in *The Brothers Karamazov*, such as desires rooted not in human idolatry, but in love or care, they still imply a sense of striving towards the other. Striving to other oneself is a foundational condition of human desire in this novel.

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<sup>59</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 71, *PSS*, 14:52.

<sup>60</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 104, *PSS*, 14:77.

<sup>61</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 824, *PSS*, 15:90.

<sup>62</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, pp. 422-23, *PSS*, 14:303-4.

<sup>63</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 128, *PSS*, 14:93.

One other final point to note here is that the structure of such desire intrinsically connotes the idea of a 'lack' in the subject that must be overcome through pursuit of the object of one's desire. Ivan, Smerdiakov and Dmitrii each find themselves lacking in a certain sense, and the rhythms of desire are the rhythms of a creature originally in need, seeking to overcome that need by possessing that which they desire. Each seeks to overcome their lack. Each seeks to heal themselves in their own particular way. Each desires to fill the void within themselves by possessing the object of their desire. Thus, paradoxically, the three brothers under the grips of metaphysical desire, seek to repossess the self through the other just as they latently strive to lose themselves in the other.

Overall, I have sought to demonstrate in this section how, in Dostoevskii's fictional universe, even characters who appear to seek exclusive self-affirmation in the chaotic and fragmented world of debilitating relations with others, still strive to become other than themselves in a deeper sense. This striving is at the very heart of everyday desire in Dostoevskii.

## 5.2 Active Love and Authentic 'Being-with'

The desire to other oneself is an *existentiale*. However, the true phenomenon is disguised under the apparent reality of exclusive self-affirmation and the alluring rhythms of metaphysical desire. What is required for characters to overcome metaphysical desire is a complete transformation of one's relation to oneself and to others. 'Metaphysical desire brings into being a certain relationship to others and to oneself. True conversion engenders a new relationship to others and to oneself.'<sup>64</sup>

The 16 April 1864 entry outlines a tension between the tendency towards self-affirmation and the desire to become other than oneself in human nature. The entry recognises that 'the highest use which a person [*chelovek*] can make of their individuality, of the full

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<sup>64</sup> Girard, *Dostoevsky*, p. 295.



development of [their] *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I*, to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness.<sup>65</sup> The ‘wholeheartedly and selflessly’ part of this command is the key difference between those who, under the grips of metaphysical desire, unknowingly strive to other themselves and those who, with an awareness of their deepest self as desiring alterity, consciously and faithfully seek to give themselves to others.

Thus, as characters strive towards the likeness of Christ that dwells within them, their outward actions reflect their inner striving, and they will desire to consciously ‘love a person *as one’s own self*’,<sup>66</sup> though, at the same time, realizing that this task cannot be completed on earth. In other words, striving to be like Christ means loving one’s neighbour with an active love. This is the only possible path out of metaphysical desire in Dostoevskii.

Dasein can activate the passive kernel of divinity within itself, and the sign that it has done this lies precisely in how it shows love for itself as self-othering and love for others as autonomous beings who cannot be possessed by its own desire. What is required is a transformation of Dasein’s relation to itself and to others in its world.<sup>67</sup> The path to authentic self-othering is through active love. This will be the core noetic revelation for the epiphanies in this chapter.

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<sup>65</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:39, *PSS*, 20:172. (translation amended).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> See also Alina Wyman, ‘in Dostoevsky a hero’s relationship with his human other is always a reflection of his fundamental relationship with his Divine Other’ and ‘The identification of Christ with the ultimate other, or ‘the innermost other in me’ (*chelovek v cheloveke*)’, results in a special appreciation of *otherness* as an ontological category in Dostoevsky’s world.’ Wyman, pp. 7, 66-67. ‘If love is extinguished, then also is extinguished the sense of the reality of the once loved Being. Once the personality has lost its love towards God, it begins to love itself, its desires are turned inward upon itself, and it destroys itself. It forgets and betrays its own divine element, by striving only after the human — which melts beneath its hands and flees like a shadow.’ Ivanov, p. 135-36.

Both Raskol'nikov and Ivan, although, in their own way, expressing love for mankind in general, struggle to love the actual other before them.<sup>68</sup> This is a symptom of their immersion in metaphysical desire, unable to access an authentic understanding of their deeper interconnectedness with real others before them. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, however, there are characters who have 'authentic' epiphanies communicating the truth of their 'being-with' or their striving to become other than themselves. I will now explore a range of these epiphanies, with the aim of understanding what is communicated therein.

In such 'authentic' epiphanies of Dasein's 'Being-with', characters find rather than lose themselves in otherness. Acts of active love signpost their path towards epiphanies where another person, nature, or a memory or vision of an other nourishes them, allowing them to find themselves in alterity. Some of these relations can be summarized as follows: Alesha through Grushenka's onion; Dmitrii through a stranger's pillow and through his dream of the mother and her babe; Zosima in his memory of Markel's words, and through Afanasii and nature; Markel through his love for the hidden 'striving towards the word' inherent in nature and in others, in his guilt 'for each and for all', finds his place in everything that is outside himself, which is also reflected within himself; Alesha through the 'someone' who 'visits his soul';<sup>69</sup> the boys with Alesha at the speech at the stone and vice versa.

However, along this path, each of these characters also must lose themselves, that is, annihilate their former personalities and selves. The loss of self, in these narrative journeys towards their deeper selves, is followed by a transformation of the self in the moment of epiphany. This is, of course the rhythm of conversion experience. The narrative of conversion in epiphanies of Dasein's 'Being-with' involves an initial self-othering (self-annihilation) that

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<sup>68</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, p. 46, *PSS*, 6:42 and *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 297, *PSS*, 14:215.

<sup>69</sup> During Alesha's epiphany, he experiences various different forms of relation to alterity in his grand ecstatic epiphany. After the epiphany, he does not specify, 'who', but claims that 'someone' visited his soul during the experience. *PSS*, 14:328.

leads to a deeper self-othering in the moment of epiphany, where Dasein discover itself as other than itself and desiring to find itself in alterity.

My focus on *The Brothers Karamazov* notwithstanding, it may be asked why I do not include Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot* in this list of epiphanies to do with Dasein's 'Being-with'. After all, this character does seek to love others and possesses an intuitive understanding of the suffering of others. He also has had moments of epiphanic intensity, just before his epileptic seizures, within which his 'mind and heart were bathed in an extraordinary illumination'. His anxieties and doubts are reconciled into a 'lofty serenity, filled with pure, harmonious gladness and hope'.<sup>70</sup> I must clarify why Myshkin's practice of love, or his epileptic revelations of harmony, are not included in this chapter.

Many commentators, bearing in mind Dostoevskii's famous letter to Sof'ia Ivanova, his niece, about portraying 'a positively beautiful man',<sup>71</sup> see in Myshkin a 'failed Christ figure'<sup>72</sup> or an 'imperfectly incarnated Christ'.<sup>73</sup> Mochulsky has already recognised that Alesha and Myshkin are genealogically connected in this regard. If the first attempt in Myshkin failed, 'in *Karamazov* once again he reworks his draft. Prince Myshkin is a holy fool, epileptic, is 'not fully embodied'; Alesha 'radiates with health,' is red cheeked, stands firmly on the ground and is full of *Karamazov* elemental vitality.'<sup>74</sup>

Commentators have also identified other dissimilarities between Myshkin and Alesha's forces of love. Alesha and Myshkin both have presentiments and intuitions which prove, through narrative, to be true. However, unlike Alesha, Myshkin struggles to hold the weight of this prophetic burden. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, Myshkin's various

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<sup>70</sup> *Idiot*, p. 237, *PSS*, 8:188.

<sup>71</sup> *Letters*, 3:17, *PSS*, 28.2:251 (13/1 January 1868).

<sup>72</sup> Williams, p. 47.

<sup>73</sup> Wyman, p. 142.

<sup>74</sup> Mochulsky, p. 627.

presentiments do reveal future calamity and allegorically imply the coming of the end of time, however, he is unable to decipher, face, or accept these presentiments as they are revealed to him during his absentminded wanderings.<sup>75</sup> ““Tell me, if you dare, of what?” He asked himself incessantly, challenging and reproachful — “Formulate it, dare to express all you think, clearly, precisely, without hesitation! Oh, how dishonourable I am!””<sup>76</sup> I can contrast this with how Alesha thinks about the consequences of his acting in the world:

Having become absorbed in other matters, he stopped brooding and decided not to think about the ‘calamity’ he had just caused, nor to torture himself with remorse, but to be positive and to tackle each situation as it arose. This decision finally restored his good humour.<sup>77</sup>

The distinction is stark. As Wyman states, Myshkin’s premonitions are absentminded, Alesha’s are ‘practical, goal-oriented itineraries’.<sup>78</sup>

Wyman also recognises that Alesha’s knowledge of the town’s secret byways and short-cuts, ‘his ability to leap over fences in one jump and to find advantageous shortcuts is deeply symbolic’,<sup>79</sup> suggesting that Alesha can find the best route to another’s heart. This signals another deep contrast with Myshkin. There is a sense in which Myshkin’s relations to others stems from a perspective that neither truly respects the alterity of the other nor recognises something ‘firm and unshakeable’ within themselves. The evidence for this is that Myshkin often seeks to finalize and define others, to speak the last word over them.

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<sup>75</sup> See subsection 2.4.1.2, ‘The Knife’, of this thesis.

<sup>76</sup> *Idiot*, p. 244, *PSS*, 8:194.

<sup>77</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 247, *PSS*, 14:179.

<sup>78</sup> Wyman, p. 191.

<sup>79</sup> Wyman, p. 192.

As Sarah Young has recognised, Myshkin's interpretation of Nastas'ia Fillipovna shapes the central plot line in *The Idiot*.<sup>80</sup> Myshkin, along with Rogozhin, plays a role in finalizing the space within which Nastas'ia is able to script her own self-definition in relation to others. This suggests that Myshkin's efforts at helping Nastas'ia are destructive for both parties, and do not respect the autonomy of Nastas'ia's personality or the trauma conditioning her behaviour, seeking instead only to 'reform' Nastas'ia without acknowledging the source of her pain and real personality. Williams too recognises that Myshkin has difficulty attending to others in a manner that would provoke the possibility of self-healing.<sup>81</sup> Wyman points out that 'by predicting Ippolit's renunciation of his own confession Myshkin finalizes him, placing his living soul in a strait-jacket of psychological laws'.<sup>82</sup> In relation to this, it is worth noting, as Wyman does, that Alesha 'is both an exemplary giver and receiver of love'<sup>83</sup>, also unlike Myshkin.

As a result of these flaws in Myshkin's relations with others, he often ends up in debilitating collective selves which lead all parties to murder, annihilation or madness. This contrasts with a relation where the parties are able to lift one another to a sense of unity in each other as Grushenka and Alesha, Alesha and the boys at the end of the novel, Zosima and Alesha, to name a few healthier relations grounded in moments of prosaic active love, do. For all the above reasons, I do not include Myshkin's form of love for others, nor his epileptic revelations in this chapter on epiphanies to do with Dasein's real and ideal relation to others. This is a relation that is gradually cultivated through the practice of active love for the real other before us, as the examples in the following sections will show.

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<sup>80</sup> Young, *Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Wyman, p. 116.

<sup>83</sup> Wyman, pp. 176-77.

### 5.2.1 Markel's Epiphany: The World Striving towards the Word

Markel is Zinovii's (Zosima's) brother, who died at the age of seventeen in the pre-history of the novel. Markel's epiphany, occurring over the last few days of his life, is recalled by Zosima, scribed by Alesha, and presented to the reader by the narrator. There is ample reason already to suggest that this incident is marked by the strong impressions it has left on those who play a part in retelling it to the reader. This chain of retelling primarily points to the power of living memory and its importance to the preservation of the truth of human interconnectedness with others and with nature. This role of memory will be explored, reinforced and developed as I make progress in the interpretations of these epiphanies, all of which aim at the same core truth of Dasein's desire to become other than itself, and to find itself in otherness.

Markel's epiphany is a blueprint for all the other epiphanies of 'Being-with' in the novel. It is, like all the epiphanies considered in this chapter, a conversion experience. It results in a transformed relation to oneself and to others. 'He was completely changed spiritually — such was the wonderful metamorphosis he had suddenly undergone!'<sup>84</sup> It is chronologically speaking, the first in *The Brothers Karamazov* to disclose the true beauty of nature and its occlusion in everyday human experience. It lays down the ethical leitmotif discussed briefly earlier, 'Each one of us is guilty before everyone of everything, and I more than others.'<sup>85</sup>

This leitmotif, which lies at the heart of the majority of the epiphanies in this chapter, is clearly the core of Markel's epiphany as he repeats it several times over the few pages where this memory is recounted. This commonality in sentiment and language across a range

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<sup>84</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 360, *PSS*, 14:261.

<sup>85</sup> 'Всякий из нас пред всеми во всем виноват а я более всех'. *PSS*, 14:262. I refer to the Russian here as translations often vary in how they render this phrase. I am presenting a very literal translation here to avoid confusion.

of different epiphanies in the novel suggests that, even though each character appears to emphasize different aspects of this feeling, they have gained access to a shared source of love or a desire to strive towards alterity.

Although Markel's epiphany, in its broadness, provides several references to his shared guilt with other people, and the asymmetrical responsibility he carries for others, one of the particular aspects of relation to alterity that it emphasizes is humanity's connection to God through the natural world. 'And as he looked at them, and admired them he suddenly began to ask their forgiveness too. "Little birds of God, little birds of joy, forgive me, you too, because I have sinned against you as well."'”<sup>86</sup> In this epiphany (setting aside for the moment the role played by his mother, which will be mentioned later), the otherness Markel strives towards is that of the entire natural world. His conversion allows him to overcome his isolation and sense his interconnection with all beings, as well as their participation in nature, which itself intuitively strives towards the Word of God, as Zosima states in the following chapter:

All the world and all that lives on it yearns for the Word, every tiny leaf yearns for the Word, sings in praise of God, weeps for Christ without knowing it, and it does so through the mystery of its own guiltless existence.<sup>87</sup>

Markel also directly gives voice to his renewed perception of the natural world. 'I was surrounded by such divine glory — birds, trees, meadows, skies, I alone lived an abject life, I alone desecrated everything and did not even notice the beauty and the glory'.<sup>88</sup> Markel strives towards alterity by pursuing a desire to find his place in that which appears to be

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<sup>86</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 361, *PSS*, 14:263.

<sup>87</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 369, *PSS*, 14:268.

<sup>88</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 361, *PSS*, 14:263.

entirely other than himself — the natural world — which, itself, strives towards the Word of God, simply by dint of its sinless participation in the cycle of death and rebirth.

By way of comparison, Myshkin's 'long forgotten memory', which comes back to him during his wanderings, suggests a very different relation with nature. It was a memory from his first year in Switzerland, where he had been severely incapacitated by his illness, 'hardly capable of speaking properly, sometimes unable to comprehend what was being asked of him'. He perceives the limitlessness and brilliance of the elements of nature — sky, lake, horizon — but instead of feeling a sense of union with it, Myshkin gazes at it, tormented by his separation from it.

What was tormenting him was that he was completely alien to all this. What was this feast, what was this permanent grand festival, which had no end, to which he had for long been drawn always — ever since childhood, but could not join.<sup>89</sup>

Though Myshkin too recognises the world striving towards the Word as Markel does,<sup>90</sup> he cannot overcome this feeling of separation from the incarnated earth. This is another reason his visions are not a part of this chapter. His feeling of separation from nature evokes again the dissonance between Myshkin and this world, and suggest his belonging instead to an otherworldly apocalyptic time, presentiments of which assail him throughout the narrative.<sup>91</sup>

As was expressed in chapter 3 in relation to *Demons*, Dostoevskii was well aware that human life is conditioned by an always operative awareness of one's own mortality.

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<sup>89</sup> *Idiot*, p. 446, *PSS*, 8:351.

<sup>90</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 361, *PSS*, 14:263.

<sup>91</sup> See section 2.4, 'The Premonitory Object in *The Idiot*', of this thesis for more on Myshkin's presentiments of catastrophe and their relation to the closed temporality of the apocalypse.



Dostoevskii appeared to suggest that only faith in immortality can save one from the suicidal paralysis or impulse towards destruction arising from fear of one's own demise.<sup>92</sup> Encoded in Markel's experience, though this aspect is not particularly emphasized in the narrative, is Markel's acceptance of his own mortality.

Markel is given to understand in his epiphany that his death need not mean the end of everything. He recognises in his love for others and for nature the same striving towards God that he perceives in nature. His death becomes not a perishing or annihilation without return, but instead a promise of immortal harmony with all the universe in their shared loving striving towards alterity. Grubic, in a different context, describes a truth that could be used here to describe the full noetic understanding that comes to Markel in his epiphany. 'The love in a person *is* the eternal. The lover in agape saves both the beloved and himself from death, and is emancipated from Time. Spiritual love "remains eternally young."<sup>93</sup> Thus, Markel's active love for others and for nature connects him to the underlying truth concerning the entire world — the interconnectedness of everything and everyone in their shared desire or striving towards the Word, that is, striving towards absolute alterity, towards what Dostoevskii in the 1864 entry calls 'being, full in [its] synthesis' [*bytie, polnoe sinteticheskii*].<sup>94</sup>

### 5.2.2 Restorative Memory

Since readers only receive a second-hand account of Markel's epiphany from Zosima, they do not gain direct access to Markel's epiphanic moment itself. Readers gain scant information about events that led to his conversion. However, through his brother Zinovii's (Zosima's) recollections, readers gain an insight into Markel's epiphany. Zosima's retelling

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<sup>92</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:41, PSS, 20:175 (16 April 1864 entry).

<sup>93</sup> Grubic, p. 1050.

<sup>94</sup> PSS, 20:173.

also makes clear how the nourishing memories he preserves of his brother — the seeds Markel planted in his interactions with Zinovii — ultimately blossomed in the latter’s soul, and alighted his path towards his own epiphanic revelation of active love.

I earlier referenced Corrigan with regards to how characters seek to escape an ‘unnameable psychic wound’<sup>95</sup> at the foundation of their consciousness. In order to avoid confronting this original trauma, characters throw themselves into debilitating collective selves. Corrigan notes that many characters in Dostoevskii are ‘wilful amnesiacs’,<sup>96</sup> fleeing from their repressed traumatic memories. They seek to escape the themselves through others. However, as Thompson notes, apart from negative memory systems, there are also ‘affirmative memory motifs’<sup>97</sup> structuring the narrative of *The Brothers Karamazov*: ‘Good memories in *The Brothers Karamazov* grounded on love and faith in themselves retain salvational powers. They are not simply objects of fond, sentimental rumination, but are potential instruments of salvation, guarding against evil and temptation.’<sup>98</sup>

Such memories are seeds planted in the heart, able to sustain characters through adversity in a fragmented and chaotic world. As Zosima says,

All that is needed is a small, a tiny seed: if he sows it in the heart of the common man, it will not die, but will live in his soul all his life; it will hide there in the darkness, in the stench of his sins, as a glimmer of light, a sublime reminder.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Corrigan, p. 49.

<sup>96</sup> Corrigan, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Thompson, p. 122.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 367, *PSS*, 14:266.

Thompson lists several pairs of characters whose ‘spiritual catharsis and renewal takes place on the basis of remembrances of living spiritual models.’<sup>100</sup> Thompson has in mind, what she describes as, ‘divine prototypes’<sup>101</sup> such as the Mother of God, Guardian Angels, God the Father, Mary Magdalene and Christ. Instead of focusing on how these epiphanies prefigure divine narratives, however, I will pay attention to the role of good memories in preserving the existentially determinative truth of Dasein’s ‘Being-with’ in human life.

Central to my focus are memories of maternal love in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Mochulsky has already recognised that ‘Maternal love *resurrects* the image of the dead child; the concreteness of its vision verges on a miracle.’<sup>102</sup> Morson, too, recognises the existentially conditioning role of maternal love on the human condition: ‘Humanity is also defined by the gaze of a mother at her infant.’<sup>103</sup> Of course, maternal love is critical in *The Brothers Karamazov* to the establishing of memories — seeds — with salvational powers. Little is known about what led to Markel’s conversion but readers do know that his mother played a crucial role in his transformation. Her tears and pleas, initially inducing anger and blasphemy in the young Markel, eventually elicit a softer response from him.

He flew into a rage and poured all manner of scorn on the Church, but then he started to think: he had realized at once that he was dangerously ill, and that that was why mother had wanted him to fast and to receive the Sacrament while he still had the strength.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Thompson, p. 123.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Mochulsky, p. 573.

<sup>103</sup> Gary Saul Morson, ‘Misanthropology’ in *New Literary History*, 27 (1996), pp. 57-72 (p. 70).

<sup>104</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 359, PSS, 14:261.

Zosima too is conditioned by his mother's love. In his recollections, he still remembers the sacrifice his mother made for his happiness by sending him to the Petersburg Cadet Corps School. She weeps, and hesitates but does it finally for his future. She dies three years later, having never seen Zinovii again.<sup>105</sup>

Though Alesha's mother died when he was three, he always remembered how she looked at him and caressed him. The narrator adds 'such memories from an even earlier age, from say two, [...] continue erupting throughout one's life like points of light in the darkness, like a fragment torn out of a vast canvas which, except for this one tiny corner, has faded and disappeared.'<sup>106</sup> It is also known that Alesha's reason for returning to the town of his birth was that he came 'seeking his mother's grave'.<sup>107</sup>

Dmitrii is also confronted with the 'gaze of the mother at the infant' in his epiphanic dream, where he sees an emaciated peasant woman in a burnt out village holding her frozen baby. Though this is a dream, Dmitrii's memory of this dream lodges in his heart, and leads to the transformation of Dmitrii's metaphysical desire into a desire to strive towards others. I can also note the significance of the mother who comes to Zosima in the chapter 'Women of Great Faith', mourning the death of her child.<sup>108</sup> This moving scene must have been cathartic for Dostoevskii as well, and surely is borne of his love for, and memories of, his own lost son, Aleksei. The gaze of the mother upon the infant conditions humanity, and one such good memory can nourish a child throughout their life.

It should also be noted that Dostoevskii himself had a nourishing memory of 'maternal' love from childhood. His vision of the peasant Marei is recounted in *A Writer's Diary* in February 1876. Dostoevskii writes of how a memory from when he was nine years

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<sup>105</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 362, PSS, 14:263.

<sup>106</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 23, PSS, 14:18.

<sup>107</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 27, PSS, 14:21.

<sup>108</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 60-02, PSS, 14:45-7.

old, came back to him and nourished him in prison during a particularly dark time. The recalled memory transforms Dostoevskii's outlook at that time. In other words, it is an epiphany and, similar to the fictional accounts in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it communicates to Dostoevskii his primordial connection to and love for others, even those who seem violent, unruly and terrifying in the prison environment where this recollection appears to him. In the original memory, the young Dostoevskii is playing outdoors in the bushes. Suddenly he thinks he hears a wolf and, terrified, runs straight to a plowing peasant. The peasant Marei comforts the young Dostoevskii, soothing his fears. Dostoevskii particularly remembers his 'tender, maternal smile'.<sup>109</sup>

In this entry on the peasant Marei in *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevskii also notes the serendipity of this memory coming back to him, 'suddenly, twenty years later, in Siberia',<sup>110</sup> precisely when he needed it. 'That means it had settled unnoticed in my heart, all by itself with no will of mine, and had suddenly come back to me at a time when it was needed'.<sup>111</sup> It is evident how deeply and sincerely Dostoevskii believed, from first-hand experience, that childhood memories grounded in maternal love can nourish people, perhaps even play an active role in their salvation, and protect them when they face cruelty or adversity that is difficult to understand.

Zinovii, too, is nourished in this way by one of his final memories of his dying brother. One of Zinovii's final good memories of his brother is as follows. 'He beckoned me to him and, seeing this, I approached him, whereupon he placed both hands on my shoulders and gazed into my face tenderly and lovingly; for about a minute he said nothing, just looked at me: "Well," he said, "off you go now, go and play and live for me!"'<sup>112</sup> Markel gazes at

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<sup>109</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, 1:355, PSS, 22:49.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 362, PSS, 14:263.

Zinovii here ‘tenderly and lovingly’ [*umilanno, liubovno*].<sup>113</sup> Significantly, Zosima, in his recollections, notes that these final memories of his brother were ‘all indelibly imprinted on [his] heart, and the feeling stayed with me. It was all bound to come to the surface some time and manifest itself. And that, in fact, is what happened.’<sup>114</sup>

Markel’s words of love come back to Zinovii in the Cadet Corps precisely at the point where he has his epiphany.

And I remembered my brother Markel and his words [...] This question struck me for the first time in my life. ‘Mother dear, joy of my heart, each of us is truly guilty of the other’s sin, only people don’t want to acknowledge it, but if they were to acknowledge it — there’d be paradise on earth immediately!’<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. It is worth noting that some epiphanic experiences of Dasein’s ‘Being-with’, though providing a kind of noetic understanding, enigmatically communicate in silence. Prominent examples of silent epiphanies in *The Brothers Karamazov* include intense gazes, such as the mysterious stranger’s two minutes of silence sitting opposite Zosima in their penultimate meeting, Alesha’s kiss for Ivan, repeating Christ’s kiss of the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan’s poem, and here, Markel wordlessly staring at Zinovii ‘for a whole minute’. What is striking about these silent epiphanies is their gratuitousness. If the Grand Inquisitor represents humanity from the perspective of metaphysical desire, as primarily deficient, hungry, needy, fulfilling a fundamental ‘lack’ in Dasein through material satisfaction — through the acquisition of bread, even at the price of freedom — Christ and Alesha’s wordless kisses communicate the opposite. They evoke excess, overflow, gratuitousness, plentitude, in a simple act of love, though Dasein does not speak here in language. Markel and Zinovii’s shared moment of silent love communicates something of this as well. In the silence the two share, Markel transmits a living sense of love and responsibility to everyone and for everything to the young Zinovii. It is the plentitude of love, imagined in Dostoevskii’s central leitmotif, manifest in Markel’s loving gaze, that allows for seeds of new life to blossom in his brother’s heart. Silence, in these epiphanies, communicates — it gives something. In such experiences, love is not born of unfulfilled need, but is a gift, a gratuity, freely given in a discourse beyond words.

<sup>114</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 362, PSS, 14:263.

<sup>115</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 372-73, PSS, 14:270.

In this sense, Zinovii breathes new life into Markel's words. He renews and reaffirms the truth of the desire to find oneself in alterity precisely as he re-accentuates and thus preserves, yet transforms the essential meaning of Markel's epiphany in his own life. He is following Markel's command to the letter and is now ready to 'live some of life' for, and indeed, spiritually, 'with' his lost brother. This is what a 'good memory' is capable of in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Clearly, the same temporal dynamic is apparent in Zosima's retelling of this moment of epiphany and in Dostoevskii's retelling of his memory of the peasant Marei. In both situations, the author of the memory is recalling a particularly significant remembrance of a memory that took place in the past. Each author is twice removed from the original event in their retelling of it. The memory returns to each precisely when they most need it and results in a transformation in their outlook towards others, grounding them in love and a striving for the other before them.

The final epiphany I can refer to with regards to memory is Alesha's speech at the stone in the epilogue of the novel. Here, Alesha and the young boys he has befriended have gathered for Iliusha's funeral. During this event, Alesha and the boys have a shared epiphany in Thompson's mould. As mentioned in previous chapters, this is a dialogic relationship where the interlocutor's 'uttered words and inner feelings come into a rare and harmonious focus on the basis of shared, subliminal recognitions.'<sup>116</sup> What comes into view for them in this epiphany is, directly and explicitly, the salvational role of memory in preserving the truth of their inner sociality and desire or love for their lost friend, Iliusha.

[T]he very best upbringing, perhaps, is some lovely, holy memory preserved from one's childhood. If a man carries many such memories with him, they will keep him

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<sup>116</sup> Thompson, p. 109.

safe throughout his life. And even if only one such memory stays in our hearts, it may prove to be our salvation one day.<sup>117</sup>

Throughout Alesha's speech to the boys, he discusses the importance of the present moment, as they all stand together mourning the loss of Iliusha. He takes pains to emphasize how they must

never forget, my friends, how good it was to be together here, united by that feeling of kindness and generosity which now, while we are conscious of our love for that poor boy, has perhaps made us better than we really are.<sup>118</sup>

Alesha also states twice that their future memory of this moment could potentially protect them from sin and remind them that once, they were good in their striving and loving the boy who has passed.

Once again, the peculiar temporality of this moment comes to the fore, as Alesha is asking his young friends to imagine a future remembrance of this particular moment, where they are remembering their love for their dead friend, Iliusha, whom they loved, despite having once pelted stones at him in the past. As Jackson says, 'The categories of past, present, and future merge in Alesha's exhortation to the boys much as they do in the dream journey to a star of Dostoevsky's ridiculous man in *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*'.<sup>119</sup>

Reader can think about the role of memory here again with reference to the 16 April 1864 entry. As already mentioned in the chapter on *Demons*, Dostoevskii states in this

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<sup>117</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 972, PSS, 16:195.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Louis Jackson, 'Alyosha's Speech at the stone: "The Whole Picture"' in *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 234-53 (p. 244).



passage that, though the form humanity will take once they have ‘attained their goal’, is largely unknowable on earth, human beings ‘can have a presentiment about its law’,<sup>120</sup> and one such presentiment attesting to the truth of eternal life after death is in the fact of the regeneration of life through procreation. Humanity provides a presentiment or a ‘hint’ of the truth of eternity in the seemingly eternal continuation of a human personality in their progeny. ‘Man as he physically gives birth to a son, transmits to him a part of his own personal individuality, and thus morally leaves a memory of himself to people.’<sup>121</sup>

Leaving aside the genetic or biological grounds for this argument, I note that *The Brothers Karamazov* presents the conclusion that ‘good memories’ from childhood, such as the ones discussed above, are also able to attest to the truth of immortality. ‘Good memories’ provide a route to the overcoming of individual annihilation and perishing that does not depend on biological connections. Memory allows for the preservation of a sense of inner striving towards others through love, despite the perishing of practitioners of active love such as Markel and Zosima. In a macro-sense, each iteration — each epiphany — connects the experiencer with others who came before them. Such a recurrence of epiphanies through time concerning the inner desire to find oneself in alterity, often mysteriously seeded and nurtured by memory, connect each link in the chain beyond the limits of their individual lives and into the seemingly infinite stream of human history. Human beings find themselves in alterity, in the movement of Being which subsists beyond any individual consciousness. This will explain why Alesha says, at the very end of the novel, ‘And eternal remembrance for the dead boy!’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:41, PSS, 20:174.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 974, PSS, 14:197.

### 5.2.3 Alesha's Epiphany

From Alesha's memory-based, shared epiphany at the end of the novel, I turn to his other, more widely celebrated, epiphanic experience in the 'Cana of Galilee' chapter. Different aspects of Alesha's major epiphany lend themselves to different interpretive threads. The experience responds well to pressure induced by a variety of contexts. The nature mysticism and earth-worship, though a common phenomenon in Russian sectarian or popular religious practices from at least the fourteenth century onwards, may point towards Alesha's epiphany being a 'cosmophany'<sup>123</sup> or a form of pantheism or ancient mythic spirituality,<sup>124</sup> the biblical source material may indicate a theophany,<sup>125</sup> the gradually intensifying abstraction of the vision — starting with Zosima's definite voice and ending simply as a force that has taken over his soul — evokes a 'post-atheist, minimalist religious experience'.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Sergei Hackel, 'The Religious Dimension: Vision or Evasion? Zosima's Discourse in *The Brothers Karamazov*' in *New Essays on Dostoyevsky*, ed. by Malcolm Jones and Garth Terry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 148-49 (p. 162).

<sup>124</sup> Roger B. Anderson, 'Mythical Implications of Father Zosima's Religious Teachings', *Slavic Review*, 38 (1979), 272-89 (p. 280).

<sup>125</sup> Thompson, p. 294; Julian W. Connolly, 'Dostoevskij's guide to spiritual epiphany in "The Brothers Karamazov"', *Studies in East European Thought*, 59 (2007) 39-54 (p. 45).

<sup>126</sup> Malcolm Jones, *Religious Experience*, p. 80. Apart from the various interpretations mentioned above, there are some readings of Alesha's epiphany that add little to the reader's understanding. Paul Fung, for instance, states that the 'someone' who visits Alesha during his epiphany is his debauched father, Fedor Pavlovich. Fung justifies this assertion by focusing on the detail that Alesha's epiphanic vision takes place in a banquet. He states that this is a 'carnavalesque detail of the dream' and parallels what would happen 'in an orgy organized by Alyosha's other father, that is, the old Karamazov'. Thus, he concludes, the father figure in the vision actually stands for three of Alesha's 'fathers', 'Zosima, Christ, and the Old Karamazov'. Of course, anyone familiar with Alesha's vision would find this to be an absurd conclusion. The vision occurs as Alesha is mourning the death of his mentor, the Holy Father Zosima, who is most closely associated with the living spirit of Christ. There is no sense of debauchery, villainy, or cynicism in the vision at all, and it is probably the most unambiguously

One of the implicit questions asked in this area of debate is, ‘What is the source of Alesha’s epiphany?’ As Alesha recollects the vision, the varied forms adopted by the other who visited him suggests that the source cannot be determined specifically as a ‘who’ or a ‘what’. He only affirms the truth of the otherness of his visitor, as ‘someone’. Throughout the epiphany, Alesha is involved in a living union with alterity. First, with the real other before him — Zosima; then, in the earth mysticism, manifesting a desire to connect with the alterity of the natural world, as Markel did; the Other then appears as an anonymous commanding or guiding voice and finally, simply as an indestructible presence that has taken over his own soul, ‘forever and ever’. The entire epiphany is thus a dialogue between Alesha and different forms of alterity.

The noetic understanding, given repeatedly throughout the epiphany, affirms Alesha’s desire to give himself wholeheartedly and selflessly to the Other and to establish his connection to alterity in his desiring and striving towards it. As his vision approaches, he notices an alteration in the natural rhythm of his stream of consciousness. He appears to gain a new perspective with regards to how he conceives this never-ending procession of thoughts in his mind.

Fragmented thoughts kept flashing through his mind and flaring up, like shooting stars, in quick succession, but he himself was well aware of something whole, steadfast, and comforting in his soul. Every now and again he would begin a fervent prayer; he so much wanted to offer thanks and love...<sup>127</sup>

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sacred of Dostoevskii’s epiphanies. Paul Fung, *Dostoevsky and the Epileptic Mode of Being* (London: Legenda, 2015), p. 123.

<sup>127</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 453, *PSS*, 14:325.

Successive fragmented thoughts flash and disappear in his consciousness, however, he also senses something ‘whole, steadfast’ subsisting beyond the perishing of individual thoughts.

Here readers see another iteration of this central idea of the continuance of a greater whole beyond individual perishing, which was important in the discussion of the role of memory in the preservation of the truth of humanity’s desire for a loving union with alterity through the broader passage of historical time. It was also important in chapter 3 concerning *Demons*, in the context of the continuation of life beyond one’s individual death through the procreative cycle. The notion is now manifest in Alesha’s peculiar stream of consciousness. What this idea, across its varied applications, really aims at is inferring a connection between individual, finite time and infinite time. Primordial attestations of this feeling point towards the possibility of ‘closing the gap’, in the instant of epiphany, between finitude and infinity. This marks out Alesha’s epiphany as an instance of hagiography. As Kate Holland says, ‘Alyosha’s conversion experience, unfolds according to the conventions of hagiography; the inclusion of a miracle, suggesting transcendence of the space of incomprehension separating man from God’.<sup>128</sup>

This is why, at the end of the epiphany, the narrator describes the sensation in Alesha in the following way.

Oh, in his ecstasy he was weeping even for those stars which shone upon him from infinity [...] It was as though threads from all of God’s countless worlds had converged in his soul, and it quivered ‘on contact with these distant worlds’.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Kate Holland, *The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 175.

<sup>129</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 456, *PSS*, 14:328.

I can here refer to another connection with the 16 April 1864 entry. There Dostoevskii distinguishes human, earthly life from Pure Being itself: '[here] on earth life is in development, but [over] there [is] being, full in [its] synthesis, eternally joyful and fulfilled, for which, evidently, "time will no longer exist"'.<sup>130</sup> Alesha momentarily closes the gap between developing, earthly, finite life — marked by becoming and perishing — and absolute alterity, the unbridgeable beyond, of timeless infinity itself. In Alesha's 'yearning to express his gratitude and love', a connection is established in his personal imitation of the earth's striving for connection to alterity.

The attestations of Alesha's desire for otherness continue as he drifts gently into his vision. A memory of Zosima's words concerning desire for the real other before oneself, comes into focus for Alesha. He remembers Zosima saying 'Whosoever loves the people, loves their joy too',<sup>131</sup> and states that this was one of Zosima's main teachings. Further on, the leitmotif of loving the happiness of one's fellow human beings is repeated. Christ is said to 'have taken on our likeness through his love for us'.<sup>132</sup> He desired to give himself to others without preconditions or expectation of reward, and humanity imitates this ideal of Christ — the model for the producing of infinity within finitude, which he accomplished during his sojourn on earth — insofar as human beings too 'wholeheartedly and selflessly' desire and strive to be for the other and find themselves in alterity. The importance of the prosaic act of goodness is also repeated here by Zosima, emphasizing the importance of small acts of kindness for the other. 'I offered an onion and that's why I'm here too. And many people here have offered just one onion, just one little onion each'.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, 1:40, *PSS*, 20:173-74. (translation amended).

<sup>131</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 453, *PSS*, 14:326.

<sup>132</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 455, *PSS*, 14:327.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet what marks out Alesha's hagiographic epiphany here is the invitation issuing from alterity to Alesha. It is the active welcome issuing from the Other that appears to be unique to Alesha's epiphany in *The Brothers Karamazov* and perhaps in Dostoevskii's entire oeuvre. Zosima explains his presence at the feast during Alesha's vision:

'I was, my friend, I was indeed called and invited,' he heard a soft voice sigh over him. 'Why are you hiding from us here?... Come and join us.' 'That's his voice, Starets Zosima's voice... Yes, who else could it be, calling?'.<sup>134</sup>

Being called, bidden, or welcomed by the Other in this manner, and the conclusion of the epiphany, which states unequivocally that something 'firm and immutable [...] was entering his soul [...] taking possession of his mind — and it would be for his whole life and for eternity',<sup>135</sup> does suggest, as Holland recognises, that Alesha's epiphany is a 'kairotic moment, a point of conversion located outside ordinary temporal experience. In this moment, the saint ceases to inhabit the fallen world of flux and fragmentation. Past, present and future fuse in the experience of oneness with God.'<sup>136</sup>

I note here that Alesha too, like Dmitrii, Zosima and Markel, has had to lose his former self, only to eventually find himself in and through the alterity of the Other, through the 'someone' who visits and takes up permanent residence ('for his whole life and for eternity') in Alesha's personality.

He fell to the ground a weak adolescent, but when he rose to his feet he was a hardened warrior for life, and he felt and recognized this in a flash of ecstasy. And

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 456, PSS, 14:328.

<sup>136</sup> Holland, p. 174.

never, never in his whole life would Alesha be able to forget this moment. “Someone visited my soul on that occasion”, he would repeat later, firmly believing his own words...<sup>137</sup>

Alesha reiterates many of the aspects of this unity with alterity expressed by other epiphanies in the novel: continuation beyond perishing allies him to Markel’s epiphany; his dialogue with Zosima, which refers to the leitmotif of collective guilt and responsibility, as well as to loving the happiness of others, refers back to Markel, Zosima and Dmitrii’s epiphanies; the reverence of acts of prosaic goodness connects not only to the onion in Grushenka and Alesha’s shared epiphany, but also to the pillow, the pound of nuts and of course, the grain of wheat in the epigraph to the novel. Finally, the narrative of conversion: loss of self, followed by a resurrection, or the emergence of a ‘new man’ or a ‘strong and determined fighter’, which arguably approaches its most resounding note here in Dostoevskii, is also common to all these other epiphanies. Strikingly, the entire epiphany, and not simply certain parts of it, as was the case with its interpretation as theophany, cosmophany or post-atheist religious experience, respond to an interpretation which recognises that, at the core of Alesha’s epiphany is his striving to become; to be for; to find himself in the alterity of the Other.

### 5.3 Conclusion

It may appear as if I have gone beyond the limits of ‘existentialism’ in this chapter. Individuals appear to bear within them an essence — a metonymic imitation — of what lies beyond human existence. This may suggest an ‘essentialist’ picture of Dostoevskii, where Dasein’s core ‘essence’ is understood in its correspondence to an ideal ‘form’ that exceeds

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<sup>137</sup> *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 456-57, PSS, 14:328.

worldly reality. This appears to contravene the existentialist principle that ‘existence precedes essence’.

However, I would argue that this simply marks the features of Dostoevskii’s own form of ‘Christian existentialism’. I have attempted to demonstrate, in Dostoevskii’s fictional universe, the presence of a Christian *existentiale*. I have not attempted to deduce it through logic or dialectics, but shown it to be operative in the rhythms of human experience itself in the novel. The inner impulse to become other than oneself is a necessary existential condition of human desire in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevskii, by presenting these various epiphanies of Dasein ‘Being-with’ or its internal other-relatedness, contributes to the phenomenological investigation of religious experience.

It may be further contended that birth and death mark necessary limits to human experience in existentialism — Dasein’s thrownness into life, and its givenness unto death are boundaries for its understanding. For Dostoevskii too, these are fundamental limits for human thinking. By presenting ‘authentic’ experience of Dasein’s ‘Being-with’ as experienced by Markel, Zosima, Dmitrii, Alesha and others, where belief in immortality becomes a prerequisite for authenticity, Dostoevskii does not claim to have proven immortality. He insists in the notebook entry of 16 April 1864 that nearly nothing can be known of the world underlying human life. It is only the seeds of this other world, which Dostoevskii perceives in the necessary existential rhythms of this world, that have occupied my attention in this chapter.

Dostoevskii infers the presence of immortality by perceiving the desire for it in the rhythms of human experience, but this is most certainly an inference and not a proof. It is subject to doubt in the contingent and fragmented world, full of chaos and evil. The famous quotation from his letter to Mme Fonvizina,



I have been a child of the age, a child of disbelief and doubt up until now and will be even (I know this) to the grave [...] Moreover, if someone proved to me that Christ were outside the truth, and it *really* were that the truth lay outside Christ, I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth<sup>138</sup>

speaks of a mind convinced in faith and not by proof. Thus, for Dostoevskii too, death marks an unbridgeable limit to human understanding.

Human beings cannot know the shape of the life that will follow them. Dasein can only desire to be in harmony with what lies beyond, by attuning itself in a particular way to its own inner striving for alterity. Dasein is always only on the path towards salvation. The desire for infinity, for absolute alterity, is an unfulfillable desire. It overflows Dasein and its capacity to possess it. Frank makes the case: ‘since human egoism will *always* prevent the ideal of Christ from being fully realized on earth, this type of suffering will not (and cannot) cease before the end of time.’<sup>139</sup>

In this sense, Dostoevskii does not promise the acquisition of salvation as a reward for authentic desire of alterity. He offers nothing more than ‘hope, freedom, and a warning’.<sup>140</sup> He offers only desire for alterity itself and not the unequivocal validation or possession of the desired object. In other words, he offers faith. He does not offer salvation, but only the promise of it manifest in desire. Zosima gives expression to this idea of an overflowing desire for infinity — a striving towards that which exceeds any attempt to grasp it.<sup>141</sup> The ridiculous

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<sup>138</sup> *Letters*, 1:195, *PSS*, 28.1:176 (End of January—20 February 1854).

<sup>139</sup> Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 410.

<sup>140</sup> Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and “The Brothers Karamazov”* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 139.

<sup>141</sup> ‘Believe to the end, even if it should come to pass that everyone on earth falls into error and that you alone remain true, make your sacrifice even then and praise the Lord, you who are the lone survivor. And if you come together with one other person like yourself, there you have a whole world,

man does the same,<sup>142</sup> as do Sonia and Raskol'nikov in their shared epiphany at the end of *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>143</sup>

Even though Alesha, in the hagiographic time of his epiphany, momentarily appears to come into contact with other worlds. He returns to ordinary, lived time, and though there is no further internal conflict between faith and faithlessness in his heart after his epiphany, it is not inconceivable that at some future point beyond the novel, he could slip into another conflict. Indeed, if hearsay is to be believed, a great future conflict for Alesha was in Dostoevskii's plans, which, according to a conversation with the journalist, Suvorin, included a second volume for *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Alesha would become a revolutionary, commit a political crime and be executed.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, this is why, in Alesha's final epiphany, he does not see his spiritual journey as complete. During this shared experience, Alesha and the children profess faith in the future harmony of humankind, rooted in their love for their departed friend, for each other, and for themselves as loving one another. Alesha and the children are still in the realms of faith and desire for infinity. Each expresses only the desire for infinity in their striving towards the other. It is a faith in the future, in another world grounded in active love for the other and oneself as desiring alterity that appears in Alesha, Sonia, Raskol'nikov, and the ridiculous man's hearts. For Dostoevskii, an attestation of the 'religious *existentiale*', though rooted in a necessary condition of human experience, requires

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a world of vibrant love; embrace each other in tenderness and praise the Lord, for His truth will have been accomplished, if only in just the two of you.' *Karamazov Brothers*, p. 403, *PSS*, 14:291.

<sup>142</sup> 'What's a dream? Is our very life not a dream? I'll say even more: suppose this never comes to pass, suppose paradise never is realized (that much I do understand, after all) — well, I shall still go on preaching.' *A Writer's Diary*, 2:960, *PSS*, 25:118-19.

<sup>143</sup> 'At the beginning of their happiness, there were moments when they were both ready to look on those seven years as if they were seven days. He wasn't even aware that this new life would not be his for nothing: he was going to have to pay dearly for it, to redeem it by some great exploit in the future...' *Crime and Punishment*, p. 486, *PSS*, 6:422.

<sup>144</sup> Frank, *A Writer in his Time*, p. 808.

an act of faith in another world. This is the shape of Dostoevskii's 'Christian Existentialism' in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

## 6. Conclusion

I have maintained a clear focus on one particular theme throughout this thesis: ‘Dostoevskii and the Human’. This theme names a topic of central significance for Dostoevskii studies, interested as the discipline is in finding secrets about human psychology, existentiality, religious experience encoded in Dostoevskii’s literary work. This allows me to return to the first research question set forth at the beginning of the thesis: What do the post-Siberian novels disclose about the nature of human existence? Perhaps the discipline takes for granted that Dostoevskii has *something* fundamental to reveal about the human condition, and that he is able to communicate these truths about real lived experience in the world through fictional forms. My thesis explores the terrain of this underlying assumption. It seeks to disclose some of Dostoevskii’s key insights into the human condition. Reading Dostoevskii as an existential phenomenologist allows this thesis to articulate how Dostoevskii is able to depict a range of *existentialia* conditioning and underpinning human experience in the novels.

My study began by exploring the ‘things’ that form the networks or relational webs of instrumentality that make up characters’ worlds in Dostoevskii’s fiction. In short, I sought to disclose the existential materiality of the object in Dostoevskii. I demonstrated that the object escapes Dasein’s understanding when it tries to understand the object from the perspective of a detached observer, simply by beholding or looking at it. I presented the object as revealing its existential materiality to characters when it is ‘unready-to-hand’, that is, when it breaks, goes missing or is sensed to be absent in some other way. The object becomes conspicuous and discloses its true Being in the very relation it is intended to bear or signify to human beings.

I showed how several such ‘things’ in Dostoevskii’s post-Siberian oeuvre, across a broad range of classes or types of objects in a variety of works, manifest precisely this mode

of disclosure — they reveal what they are when they are *not* functioning as expected for some reason. In this sense, they disclose themselves, and announce their presence to characters in and through their perceived absence. Through this broadly applicable interpretive frame, I uncovered the manner in which characters are ‘in the world’ in Dostoevskii’s novels. The world, organised in various networks of referential totalities made up of equipment ultimately serviceable for human need and desire, is a necessary condition of human experience. In chapter 2, I demonstrated how Dostoevskii represents what Heidegger describes as the existential nature or the Being of the ‘world’.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned earlier, I have also shown how Dostoevskii, like Heidegger, is aware of the object’s potential for self-disclosure in modes of conspicuous absence.

Apart from always already being in the ‘world’, and immersed in their comportments towards these totalities of equipment in their everyday life, characters in the post-Siberian works are also always conditioned by their conscious or latent awareness of their own givenness to death; their existential guilt and anxiety and their internal other-relatedness or their ‘being-with’. By articulating how Dostoevskii represented these *existentialia* in moments or prolonged states of epiphany, I was able to give a more complete image of Dostoevskii’s existentialism, and structure some of his central insights into the necessary conditions governing human existence in the space between birth and death.

In chapter 3, I examined the operation of the *existentialia* of ‘being-towards-death’ in *Demons*. I emphasized how the prevalence of gossip, idle talk and frivolity give expression to an uprooted social environment that allows characters to flee in the face of their inner awareness of their mortality. I also recognised how several of the main characters engage in peculiar confrontations with their own death, leading to various ends, including Kirillov’s terrifying and empty epiphany, primordially communicating the nullity of death just before

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 91.

he commits suicide. There were also the prophetic relations to death undergone by Mar'ia Lebiadkina and Lizaveta Tushina. Finally, I presented how characters wrestle with their own givenness to death by expanding their imaginative capacities to encompass a sense of relation to infinity or immortality. The chapter revealed Dostoevskii's deep understanding of the human lived experience of death, as an impending event to be feared, an inevitability to be confronted, a boundary to be overcome.

In chapter 4, I found another form of 'living death' in the anxious and irresolute experience of Raskol'nikov in *Crime and Punishment*. My recognition of this, as well as Raskol'nikov's activated existential guilt, provides a new route to understanding the novel in a manner that does not subordinate the body of the work to the meaning of the epilogue, and also sheds new light on the importance of the metaphor of 'blood' in understanding the nature of existential guilt.

Finally, in chapter 5, I sought to describe the nature of desire in Dostoevskii's works, by focusing on *The Brothers Karamazov*. My concern in this chapter was to give expression to another *existential* — 'being-with' or Dasein's internal other-relatedness. I developed core lines of Dostoevskian criticism, building on Bakhtinian dialogism and what this concept entails about the interpenetrative relationship between self and other, manifest in all communication for Bakhtin, and as I discussed in the chapter, in the existentiality of human desire. I made use of Girardian desire in this regard, exploring how the myriad contradictory wants, wishes or cravings of Dostoevskii's characters can often be understood as refractions of a core desire for alterity — a desire to become other than oneself.

My second research question asked: In what sense is Dostoevskii an existentialist? This thesis recognised the shortcomings of some previous existentialist readings of Dostoevskii's fiction. Many of them take Dostoevskii's rhetorical focus on the spiritual journeys of egoistic, nihilistic or atheistic and death-driven characters such as Svidrigailov

and Kirillov for an endorsement of their perspectives on the world. Such commentaries misread Dostoevskii, misperceiving his anti-heroes as genuine heroes. I have attempted to avoid these readings not only because they seem too untrue to Dostoevskii biographically, but also because they represent a misunderstanding of existentialism. As I have stated, my approach has been largely existential-ontological, though I also explored meeting places between ontology and ethics in the final chapter on *The Brothers Karamazov*. Throughout the process, I tried to make use of Heideggerian existentialism to shed light on Dostoevskii's insights into human existence and how these insights are embodied in the lived experience of characters in his novels. This ultimately led to the uncovering and structural outlining of Dostoevskii's particular form of literary Christian existentialism.

My final research question asked: How do Dostoevskii's fictional narratives reveal existential truths? I provided some initial clarifications concerning how literature is able to reveal truths about reality in the introduction. The entire thesis can be read as a demonstration of how Dostoevskii's narratives reveal specifically existential phenomenological truths through the use of literary epiphanies. Yet, as I have stated already, my account of *existentialia* operative in Dostoevskii's fiction is by no means an exhaustive list. Morson's work on the existentiality of time, and Thompson and Miller's work on the lived experience of memory already indicate that Dostoevskii's insights into the human condition are widespread, perhaps even inexhaustible.

By demonstrating how Dostoevskii can be read as an existential phenomenologist, I have made explicit an implicit idea in Dostoevskii criticism, namely that the author's fiction is capable of representing fundamental truths about human existence. Commentators could very well uncover other *existentialia* depicted in artistic images in Dostoevskii's fiction. Such work could contribute to further expanding readers' understanding of Dostoevskii's overflowing insight into the underlying existential structures governing human experience.

As such, this work has opened up different avenues to explore in further research. Apart from discovering new *existentialia* in the novels, there is also a need for a more complete examination of Dostoevskii's existentialism in the context of a more exhaustive variety of existentialist works. Although early Heidegger, and to a lesser extent, Levinas and Bakhtin, have provided a rich avenue for comparison in this thesis, the works of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, later Heidegger and Tillich may also help contextualize Dostoevskii more precisely within 'existentialism' rather than in the methodology of 'existential phenomenology' specifically. This would help better illuminate Dostoevskii's profound influence on existentialism's conception and development.

Such an exercise will also compare and contrast how philosophy and literature treat the topic of existentialism differently — how these various authors' insights into the human condition are coloured by the literary forms they make use of. Finally, a thorough study of Dostoevskii's engagement with existentialism could fully reclaim Dostoevskii from poor yet popular existentialist readings of the author, and comprehensively demonstrate where the commonalities and differences lie with regards to his literary and philosophical existentialist inheritors and interpreters.

A deeper engagement with Bakhtin's entire oeuvre may also provide more nuance to readers' understanding of how Dostoevskii's art — the nature of his poetics and the literary formal methods he employs — are particularly suited to his form of literary existential phenomenology. Alternatively, an application of Bakhtinian ideas regarding Dostoevskii's poetics, namely their polyphonic nature and dialogicity, to other literary works, such as the tragic plays of John Webster, for example, could also bear fruit and take readers in unexpected directions.

My task in this work has been to articulate, analyse and determine Dostoevskii's own form of literary existential phenomenology. This has led to new interpretations of four of the



major post-Siberian works. It has helped uncover a new avenue for understanding the materiality of the object in the author's fiction. It has presented Dostoevskii's own form of literary Christian existentialism. It has demonstrated that Dostoevskii's poetics is fundamentally concerned with understanding human existence and uncovering that which underlies and conditions human lived experience.

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