Dostoevsky and the Epileptic Mode of Being

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1 This picture is borrowed from Joseph Frank, The Year of ordeal 1850-1859 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 56.
2 This map is originally from Gary Cox, Crime and Punishment: A Mind to Murder (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 39.
6 <http://www.abcgallery.com/H/holbein/holbein8.html>
8 <http://thesocietypages.org/thickculture/files/2010/02/6a00d8341c86cc53ef011571496b54970b-800wi.jpg>
Abstract

Dostoevsky and the Epileptic Mode of Being

This thesis explores the relationship between Dostoevsky and epilepsy, suggesting that his works can be characterized by a mode of existence which is epileptic by nature. An attack of epilepsy is depicted in two phases: immense anxiety of the outbreak of a seizure; and its sudden attack, during which consciousness completely collapses. I suggest that Dostoevsky’s writings can be understood in terms of these two phases: an infinite alternation between the desire to seize upon a critical moment and the impossibility of experiencing it. The thesis examines five of Dostoevsky’s post-Siberian novels to illuminate this particular existence, this epileptic mode of being.

Chapter 1 looks at *Humiliated and Insulted* to show that the seemingly selfless pursuit of moral ideals is a form of egoism. Vanya (Ivan Petrovich) sacrifices his personal interests and strictly binds himself to the moral law, incarnating Kantian moral imperatives. Discussing Freud on masochism and Jacques Lacan on Kantian ethics, this chapter shows that philanthropy is a form of idealism which privileges the ascetic ideal and despises the body. The chapter also shows how moral idealism is mocked and suspended under the power of epilepsy.

Chapter 2, on *Crime and Punishment*, demonstrates how Dostoevsky’s Petersburg is depicted as enigmatic, even ‘epileptic’, disconfirming subjectivity. The eclectic style of the city’s architecture – specifically St. Isaac’s Cathedral – makes the Petersburger disoriented and decentralised. Similarly, the chapter demonstrates that the meanings of ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ are pluralized in Raskolnikov’s dreams, revealing a splitting of identity. Due to this schizophrenic nature of the urban subject, there can be no single knowledge of why Raskolnikov commits the murder.

Chapter 3 explores the split subject in *The Idiot*. Prince Myshkin wants to reflect on the final moment just before consciousness collapses. He likes to freeze that moment and contemplate the possibility of an afterlife. But this wish is eclipsed by the seizure or, in the case of a guillotine execution, the immediate arrival of death, which continues to create a contradictory existence.

Chapter 4 examines Kirilov and his suicide plan in *Demons* to show that the epileptic has a will to master death: he has a will to the knowledge of death. But paradoxically, death is something ungraspable and cannot be appropriated into the realm of experience. Death as well as epilepsy eludes the self who wants to grasp it. This chapter also discusses Nietzsche on nihilism and Maurice Blanchot’s comments on Kirilov’s suicide.

Chapter 5 suggests a form of ‘feminine’ epilepsy in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I link with the hysterics who suffer from their reminiscences. I show that epilepsy is a moment of rupture of repressed violence. Epilepsy not only disrupts Vanya’s moral idealism, Petersburg’s pure architectural style, the Prince and Kirilov’s wishes for an eternal life, but it also evokes what is repressed beneath these thoughts. This chapter ends with Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, showing how the novel unveils a family history which is violent and silenced.

The thesis concludes with Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death*, suggesting that the epileptic mode of being demands the Dostoevsky’s heroes to live in infinite postponement, which necessitates a Dostoevskian subject which is infinitely deferred and unfinalized.

Kai-Yeung Fung, PhD candidate, The University of Manchester
20 January 2011
Declaration

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First of all, I would like to thank my first supervisor Professor Jeremy Tambling, whose comments on my research have been always helpful and inspiring. To borrow Nietzsche’s reading of epilepsy, my experience of discussing literature with Jeremy Tambling has been a series of ‘intellectual spasms’. Professor Galin Tihanov’s supportive and caring words, especially his comments on my conference papers on Dostoevsky, have been an invaluable source of motivation for my pursuit of Russian literature. I am also grateful to Galin for providing the opportunity for me to study Russian in the undergraduate program at The University of Manchester. Dr. Hal Gladfelder’s meticulous reading of my chapters has been helpful in polishing the thesis’s presentation and improving my writing skills. I also thank him for letting me teach as a graduate teaching assistant in the department, from which I have learnt a lot.

The theory reading group, led by Professor Tambling and initiated by James Smith, has given me the chance to engage with intensely exciting works of figures such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan and Walter Benjamin. The group discussions have inspired the theoretical aspect of this thesis.

My thanks to Carolyn Broomhead for listening to my chapter on The Idiot and JT Welsh for commenting my conference paper on cinema and the representation of death. The talks with Iain Bailey and James Smith about our theses and the future were very useful and uplifting. My study trip to St. Petersburg would not have taken place without my friend Federico’s encouragement. My neighbour Maksim Samuilov helped me to overcome some of the lowest periods in the past three years. The conversations with my friend Vincenz Serrano have been energizing. With him, I am able to express my fragmented and exiled thoughts. Lucia Nigri has been a caring and sensible friend and colleague, whose presence in the past two years was indescribably important to my life in Manchester. My thanks also to those who have read the draft of the thesis; their support in the last stage of my research was invaluable: Irene Huhulea, Rebecca Pohl, James Smith and JT Welsh.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to Wong Wing, whose unconditional support has made the completion of this thesis possible. My stay in Manchester for the past four years would have been impossible without the unspoken support of my parents, to whom I express my greatest thanks.
Preface

Kai-Yeung Fung (Paul) was born in Hong Kong in 1984. He has been interested in thinking how Dostoevsky’s writings can illuminate or be illuminated by other texts. His research interest is divided into four areas: Russian literature, nineteenth-century literature, critical theory and the novel. Besides, he has been interested in film theories, for which he has tried to rethink Dostoevsky as pre-cinematic. He obtained a MA in English and American Studies at The University of Manchester. As an exchange student, he studied comparative literature at The University of Western Ontario. And he obtained a BA with first honours in the department of Comparative Literature at The University of Hong Kong. He has been learning Russian since the beginning of his PhD in September 2007.
Note on Texts

Throughout the thesis, I have quoted Dostoevsky in English. In some circumstances, I have supplemented with the Russian original text in order to emphasize a phrase or sentence. To be consistent, most of the quotes are from the translations by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Their editions have illuminative notes and they have preserved much of the style of the original texts.¹ For the texts they have not translated, I have used other translations published by Penguin, Oxford and Northwestern University Press (see below). Please refer to the Bibliography for a list of other editions which I have studied. References to Dostoevsky’s novels have generally included part, chapter and page number. For example, ‘1.2.3’ refers to page 3 of chapter 2 of part 1. 1:2 refers to page 2 of volume 1 of the complete works of Dostoevsky in Russian.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, Humiliated and Insulted, trans. by Ignat Avsey (Surrey: Oneworld Classic, 2008)
_______, Winter Notes on Summer Impressions, trans. by David Patterson (Evanston; IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997)
_______, A Writer’s Diary, trans. by Kenneth Lantz, 2 vols (Evanston; IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994)
_______, Uncle’s Dream and Other Stories, trans. by David McDuff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)
_______, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1992)

Introduction

For in fact Dostoevsky always represents a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable – and unpredeterminable – turning point for his soul. (Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 61)

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. (Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History, XVII)

‘Behold this gateway, dwarf!’ I continued. ‘It has two faces. Two ways come together here: nobody has ever taken them to the end.

‘This long lane back here: it goes on for an eternity. And that long lane out there – that is another eternity.

‘They contradict themselves, these ways; they confront one another head on, and here, at this gateway, is where they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above it: “Moment”.’ (Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 3.2.2)

Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let’s go together.
(Hamlet 1.5.186–90)

Approaching the Epileptic Mode of Being

This thesis intends to reread Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels from the perspective of the ‘moment’. By the moment I refer to an indivisible instant, a caesura or a break, during which consciousness is abruptly cut off, and which is vividly expressed in Dostoevsky’s representations of epilepsy. I suggest that his novels can be understood in terms of an incessant anxiety to experience the moment. But at the same time, that infinitely short period of time is beyond the realm of human experience and therefore eludes the subject who desires to control it. The writing of epilepsy will therefore be understood as doubly structured: it refers to the radical and uncontrollable rupture of experience, a caesura in the course of narrative which suspends representations. But it also articulates the fearful attraction to that rupture. Put another way, an active force which aims to master experience is met with a sudden attack of epilepsy which throws the subject into passivity. In this way, epilepsy can be understood in terms of the caesura. For the concept of
'caesura’, I follow Hölderlin’s reading of the term in a passage in *Annotations to Oedipus*, which is quoted in Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the ‘expressionless power’ in art. He says that the passage serves not only the basis of the theory of tragedy but also that of art in general.¹ Hölderlin writes:

> For the tragic transport is actually empty, and the least restrained. – Thereby, in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein the transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture – namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the change of representation but the representation itself very soon appears (341).

The caesura in poetic meter refers to the unrepresentable moment. And since it cannot be represented it is incomprehensible as it is outside symbolization. In the caesura, Benjamin goes on to write, ‘every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media’ (341). This thesis will suggest that epilepsy can be understood in terms of the unrepresentable moment. On the one hand, Dostoevsky’s heroes try to comprehend and even master this moment. But on the other hand, they are powerless with respect to this moment where representations become impossible.

The desire to seize upon what is unseizable characterizes what I call the ‘epileptic mode of being’, a title borrowed from a chapter in Robert Lord’s book on Dostoevsky.² The way I understand the phrase will be different from Lord’s. In this chapter, he perceives epilepsy as something which keeps the subject in check. He suggests, for instance, that Prince Myshkin’s epilepsy in *The Idiot* is a delimiting force which prevents the realization of the destructive alter ego. Epilepsy resembles a buffer, which keeps the Prince in check, making sure that he does not transgress or exploit his ‘monstrous potentiality’:

> If epilepsy can be said to be a release of tension, it becomes thereby a form of human limitation. If these moments were to endure for more than a second of time, the epileptic would be transformed into a god, or into a superhuman monster (Kirillov), or simply annihilated. An epileptic, then, is pre-eminently one who founders and miscarries, one who is compelled to

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stop short of a goal, which will remain unattainable for the very reason that his personality is
(to use a currently fashionable term) ‘structured’ in a particular way. Epilepsy, subjectively
viewed, is that which limits and holds in check (94).

The epileptic seizure is preceded by moments of ecstasy, or as the narrator in The Idiot
describes, ‘sublime tranquillity’, ‘harmonious joy’, ‘ecstatic, prayerful merging with the
highest synthesis of life’ (2.5.227). These moments are ecstatic and unbearable. To endure
it one has to become a man-god, which is the theory of Kirilov in Demons. It is true that
the intensified consciousness is cut off by the seizure. But to say that the self is ‘compelled
to stop short of a goal’ or that his personality is ‘“structured” in a particular way’ runs the
risk of reducing the dynamics of the epileptic experience. The ecstatic moments are
instants where the subject desires to transgress, to think the impossible, and to confront his
‘alter ego’. The seizure, rather than playing the role of a guard or a safety valve, represents
much a more radical moment where all these desires are destroyed. I agree with Lord that
Dostoevsky’s epilepsy is the building up of an intense consciousness and the cancellation
of it. But the epileptic figure is not compelled to ‘stop short of a goal’. Their desires to
think the impossible are always already excessive before being stopped by the seizure. If
Lord’s reading is informed by a structuralist approach, my reading will be a post-
structuralist one. That is to say, Dostoevsky’s epilepsy expresses the desire to dissolve the
structure, to transgress the economy of pleasure. And yet, this incessant desire to go
beyond one’s own limit is punctuated by sudden seizures, which turn an active repetition
into a passive one. The desire to conquer an experience is at the same time a subjection to
the uncontrollable seizure. The epileptic wakes up from a seizure only to be anxious that
another one is pending. This particular state of anxiety characterizes the epileptic mode of
being, which is always already subject to the annihilation of existence.³

³ I find the following general studies of Dostoevsky’s novels most helpful to my research: Bakhtin is
particularly useful for understanding the tension among the ‘voices’ presented in the novels, Mikhail
Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis; London:
University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Jacques Cattau, Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation,
in structure, but often insightful; Robert Louis Jackson, Dostoevsky’s Quest for Form: A Study of His
Philosophy of Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), helpful in explaining the writer’s ‘fantastic
realism’. The appendix ‘Dostoevsky and the Fine Arts’ is helpful to my discussions of painting in relation to
the writer’s works; Richard Peace, Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels (London: Bristol
Classical Press, 1992); Edward Wasiolok, Dostoevsky: the Major Fiction (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press,
1964). For biographical studies of Dostoevsky, see Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, The
Mackler (London: Allen Lane, Penguin); Konstantin Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work, trans. by
My approach to epilepsy differs from that of Alex de Jonge’s *Dostoevsky and The Age of Intensity*. In chapter 11, ‘Intensity and Time’, he discusses Prince Myshkin’s meditation on the moment of epileptic fit, arguing that his meditation is the experience of ‘pseudo-mystic ecstasy and oneness, a kind of *paradis artificiel*’. For de Jonge, the Prince’s comment on epilepsy is intense nostalgia for having full meanings and a sense of eternity, which is symptomatic of nineteenth-century European literature (he compares Dostoevsky with Baudelaire throughout the book). Such reading of the Prince’s epilepsy overlooks two points: first, the onset of an epileptic seizure is painful, terrifying, and it annihilates consciousness; second, after one seizure, the next one is pending, suggesting repetition in the experience of epilepsy. In other words, epilepsy is not always an intensive experience; it comprises intensity and its effacement at the same time. The alternation of these two phases marks the experience of the epileptic; and it is the infinite alternation that makes epilepsy traumatic. This thesis focuses on this contradictory pattern of epilepsy. If de Jonge is interested in reading the nineteenth century as the age of intensity, my thesis explores how the relationship between intensity and its disappearance suggests a kind of postponement, a subjectivity which is infinitely deferred.

The Introduction will be in three parts. Firstly, I will look at how epilepsy was perceived in history and how these opinions might be helpful for us to understand Dostoevsky’s own reading of epilepsy in terms of the disruptive moment. I will bring in the discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony to demonstrate the ways in which different historical and literary references to epilepsy are amalgamated in Dostoevsky’s works. The co-existence of the ‘epileptic voices’ necessitates a reading which does not impose a single meaning to the illness. Instead of giving a definitive meaning to epilepsy and having it tested throughout Dostoevsky’s works, this thesis aims to explore the specific implications of epilepsy in each of the major post-Siberian novels. The second part of the Introduction will examine Dostoevsky’s medical reports and how the epileptic writer perceives his own epileptic condition. He describes his epilepsy in terms of the approaching of death and ‘mystic terror’. He also uses the latter phrase to describe the moment just before he was supposed to be executed by firing squad in 1849. The mystic terror refers to both Dostoevsky’s fear of what is unknown in epilepsy and death, and the anxiety to make sense of it. In this way, I will suggest that Dostoevsky is driven by the desire to comprehend the incomprehensible, that is, the desire to write the impossible. The

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The final part of this Introduction will give an outline of the arguments in the following chapters.

**The History of Epilepsy**

‘Epilepsy’ already has the implication of the moment. The word originates in Greek (*epilepsie*), meaning to ‘take hold on’ or ‘to seize upon’. One of the earliest records of the word was found in the Hippocratic medical writings collected in *On the Sacred Disease*.\(^5\) Epilepsy was called the ‘great disease’ or ‘sacred disease’ originating in the brain. It was sacred because a deity had sent a demon which had entered the patient, or he had sinned against the moon (hence ‘lunacy’).\(^6\) Plato also understood epilepsy as a sacred disease which disturbs the revolutions in the head.\(^7\) Epilepsy was also called the ‘falling sickness’, which visualizes the symptom of falling on the ground during a seizure.

The ‘falling sickness’ is used in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to describe Caesar’s epilepsy when he is offered the crown: ‘the rabblement hooted and clapped their chapped hands and threw up their sweaty night-caps and uttered such a deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the crown that it had almost choked Caesar; for he swounded and fell down at it...’ (1.2.337-341). Casca goes on to say: ‘He fell down in the market-place, and foamed at mouth, and was speechless’, to which Brutus responds: ‘Tis very like: he hath the falling sickness’ (345-347). Cassius disagrees with Brutus and says that it is not Caesar but ‘we’ who have the falling sickness, implying that the republic is actually falling apart: ‘No, Caesar hath it not; but you and I, and honest Casca, we have the falling sickness’ (348-9).

Shakespeare’s details about Caesar’s epilepsy come from Plutarch, who refers to three occasions of Caesar having the falling sickness in his *Lives*.\(^8\) The figure of Caesar is central for rereading Dostoevsky, who prefers the phrase falling sickness (падучая) to

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epilepsy (эпилепсия) when he refers to the epileptics in his novels.\(^9\) Raskolnikov, the impoverished law student who murders a pawnbroker and her sister in *Crime and Punishment*, justifies his crime by appealing to the ‘Napoleonic’ theory, which is based on Napoleon III’s 1865 book, *The Life of Julius Caesar*. Raskolnikov has written an article ‘Concerning Crime’, saying that mankind is divided into two classes – the ordinary majority and the extraordinary minority. While the ordinary ones must be subject to authority and the law, the extraordinary ones have the right to commit any crime and break any law just because they are extraordinary (3.5.259-261). Later in the novel, Raskolnikov says that he wants to make himself a Napoleon and that is why he killed the pawnbroker (5.4.415). The young man, among other justifications, sees himself as one of the extraordinary minority such as Napoleon or Caesar, who has the right to shed blood:

The lawgivers and founders of mankind, starting from the most ancient and going on to the Lycurguses, the Solons, the Muhammads, the Napoleons, and so forth, that all of them to a man were criminals, from the fact alone that in giving a new law they thereby violated the old one, held sacred by society and passed down from their fathers, and they certainly did not stop at shedding blood either, if it happened that blood (sometimes quite innocent and shed valiantly for the ancient law) could help them (3.5.260).

The law breakers suggest transgression, which brings us back to the novel’s title: The word ‘crime’ in Russian (преступление) literally means ‘stepping-over’. Although there is no mention of Raskolnikov being an epileptic, it is significant that he identifies himself with the ‘Napoleonic’ theory, which is based upon the great epileptic figure in history (Julius Caesar), supporting the point that Raskolnikov is an ‘epileptic’ character even if he is not literally an epileptic.

The ‘Napoleonic’ theory is later refracted in the voice of Shigalyov, one of the revolutionaries in *Demons*, who envisages a utopian society in which one tenth of the population must enjoy absolute freedom and have the right to control the remaining ninth tenths (2.7.403). Both Raskolnikov’s and Shigalyov’s theories aim to solve social problems in biological terms, which is a burgeoning discourse in nineteenth-century Europe.\(^{10}\) The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909) for instance, proposed that a born criminal is a special type of man whose biological structure is very similar to that of the epileptic. He also argued that the born criminal type often has cerebral

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\(^9\) See Richard Pevear’s note in *The Brother Karamazov*, p. 783.

\(^{10}\) See Temkin, *The Falling Sickness*, p. 366.
irritability which can create great original intellectual and psychic power as well as nervous disorder. This theory led him to the conclusion that the epileptic has the potential not only to be a criminal but also a genius. In his book *The Men of Genius* (1891), Lombroso shows that many men of genius experienced headaches, loss of memory and morbid irritability, which are suggestive of having epilepsy. These figures who expressed ‘the epileptoid nature of genius’ included Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Molière, Petrarch, Peter the Great, Mahomet, Handel, Swift, Richelieu, Charles V, Flaubert, St. Paul and Dostoevsky. In fact, the criminologist quotes the famous passages on epilepsy from *The Idiot* and *Demons* at length, saying that one might call the kind of fit they describe ‘psychic epilepsy’.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called the epileptic genius the ‘active man’. The philosopher wrote that Dostoevsky is the only psychologist ‘from whom [he] had anything to learn’. It is proved that Nietzsche had read Dostoevsky’s novels and it is not unlikely that his comment on the epileptic was inspired by his experience of reading Dostoevsky. In the preface of *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881) for instance, Nietzsche writes that his reader will discover a ‘subterranean man’ who ‘tunnels and mines and undermines’, an image which is readily comparable to the Underground Man in *Notes from Underground*, which Nietzsche had read in French. In the entry ‘Flight from Oneself’, Nietzsche says that men such as Byron and Alfred de Musset have strong impulses for actions. These men cannot endure to remain within themselves and long to dissolve into something ‘outside’. He refers to four famous epileptics at the end:

Those men given to intellectual spasm – Byron and Alfred de Musset are examples – who are impatient and gloomily inclined towards themselves and in all they do resemble rampaging horses, and who derive from their own works, indeed, only a short-lived fire and joy which almost bursts their veins and then a desolation and sourness made more wintry by the contrast it presents – how should such men endure to remain within themselves! They long to dissolve into something ‘outside’; if one is a Christian and is possessed by such a longing one’s goal is to be dissolved into God, to ‘become wholly at one with him’; if one is Shakespeare one is

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12 Temkin, p. 367.
satisfied only with being dissolved into images of the most passionate life; if one is Byron one longs for action, because action draws us away from ourself even more than do thoughts, feelings or works. And so could all impulse to action perhaps be at bottom flight from oneself? – Pascal would ask. And the proposition might indeed be demonstrated in the case of the supreme examples known to us of the impulse to action: for consider – in the light of the experience of psychiatry, as is only proper – that four of the most active men of all time were epileptics (namely Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed and Napoleon), just as Byron was also subject to this complaint.15

A ‘short-lived fire and joy’ almost bursts in the ‘active men’ who cannot ‘endure to remain within themselves’. The passage uses ‘dissolve’ to describe the ‘flight from oneself’, suggesting a process of dissolution of subjectivity. The passage compares this dissolution with the Christian ideal of longing to be dissolved into God. The same image also appears in the moment before the attack of epilepsy in The Idiot, during which the epileptic Prince Myshkin experiences ‘ecstatic, prayerful merging with the highest synthesis of life’ (2.5.226).

Nietzsche suggests that the four epileptics – Alexander, Caesar, Muhammad and Napoleon – are four great active men. This can be explained from the fact that they were all ingeniously active figures who founded entirely new orders which marked decisive moments in history. These moments can be understood as the threshold moment of action and transformation, where the world is ‘turned upside down’. A subjective and subversive decision changed the entire objective reality. Nietzsche asks: ‘Could all impulse to action perhaps be at bottom flight from oneself?’, which articulates the image of a man who desires for action and wants to go beyond his own limit, to overcome the self. The four great epileptics in history were able to do this; to what extent can Dostoevsky’s ‘epileptic’ heroes achieve that? In the opening page of Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov, who is rehearsing his crime, says to himself that what people are most afraid of is ‘a new step, their own new word’ (1.1.4). The ‘epileptic’ figure in the world of Dostoevsky is continually troubled by whether he can speak the ‘new word’, to do what is unprecedented, that is, to transgress one’s own limit, to flee from oneself.

For Nietzsche, one of the four great active epileptics is Muhammad, whom Raskolnikov sees as one of the transgressors who stepped-over and made a new law. There is no evidence showing that Muhammad was an epileptic. But it is said that a

remarkable incident in his early youth is suggestive of epilepsy. When he was living under
the care of his wet-nurse Halima, two angels approached Muhammad and split open his
abdomen and removed a black clot of blood. The son was cleansed with melted snow in a
golden basin. Then they weighed him, and his weight surpassed that of a thousand
people.16

Whether this story ever happened is beyond the scope of this thesis. But it is true
that Christian Byzantium, which was hostile and even at war with the Arabs, reduced
Muhammad’s story of visions to simply the signs of physical illness, that is, epilepsy.17
The perception of Muhammad having visions became more accepted in the West in the
nineteenth century, which possibly had to do with the emergence of the discipline of
psychiatry.18 Thomas Carlyle, for instance, in his lecture on heroes and hero worship,
takes Muhammad as an example to illustrate the hero as a prophet.19 Dostoevsky also has
a positive view on Muhammad’s vision and compares his own epileptic condition with
one of the visionary moments recorded in the Koran, when Allah brings Muhammad by
night from the ‘Inviolable Place of Worship (Mecca) to the Far Distant Place of Worship
(Jerusalem)’ (Sura 17, 1).20 A similar story says that Muhammad was awakened one night
by the archangel Gabriel, who, as he pushed against a jug of water with his wing, brought
him to Jerusalem, and from there rose into the seven heavens where he spoke with angels,
prophets, and Allah, visited the fiery Gehenna, and came back in time to keep the jug from
spilling. In The Idiot, Prince Myshkin compares this infinitely brief period of time to the
ecstatic moment just before the attack of epilepsy, saying that in those moments ‘time
shall be no more’ (2.5.227, Revelation 10:6). The Prince contemplates on these moments,
which, like Nietzsche’s flight from oneself, has to do with the loosening of boundaries (the
word ‘ecstatic’ derives from ‘ecstasis’ in Greek, meaning ‘standing outside’). But on the
other hand, he knows that those moments will be followed by the annihilative seizure.

Apart from the ‘falling sickness’, epilepsy is also called St. Vitus’ dance in The
Idiot. The saintly, childish and epileptic Prince Myshkin is described in the opening page
of the novel: ‘He had indeed been away from Russia for a long time, more than four years,

16 See Temkin, p. 152. See Ibn Ishaq, The Life of Muhammad, trans. by Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah (Pakistan:
17 The Byzantine historian Theophanes (died about 817) attributed Muhammad’s vision of seeing the angel
Gabriel and then falling down to the disease of epilepsy. See Temkin, p. 153.
18 Muhammad, according to a German biographer Sprenger (1869), suffered from hysteria. See Temkin, p.
372.
19 Quoted Temkin, p. 371.
that he had been sent abroad of illness, some strange nervous illness like the falling sickness or St. Vitus’s dance (вроде падучей или виттовой пляски), some sort of trembling and convulsions’ (1.1.6, 8:6). St. Vitus’ dance refers to a kind of dancing mania (choreomania) in the Middle Ages, which became a psychic epidemic seizing thousands of men and women and made them dance till they fell down in exhaustion. People who carried out the dance showed similar symptoms to those of an epileptic such as frothing, limb jerking and the loss of consciousness. St. Vitus was an epileptic who became a patron saint of actors, comedians, dancers and also epileptics. During the dance, there was music conducted with drums and pipes, which served ambiguous purposes: it provoked madness and sought to cure it.21 The dance was supposed to commemorate St. Vitus and celebrate the holiness of epilepsy. But the choreography itself could be madness-inducing. Epilepsy as St. Vitus’ dance can be seen as both ‘falling’ and ‘uplifting’ (maddening and celebratory), which makes the meaning of epilepsy in Dostoevsky’s texts hybridized.

In the European Renaissance, natural phenomena were often understood as the expressions of physical illnesses. For Paracelsus (1493-1541), the Swiss occultist and physician, epilepsy was associated with natural phenomena such as thunderstorms and earthquakes due to their similar association with splitting and distortion.22 The epileptic seizure resembles the thunderstorm which ‘splits’ the cloud. And the peculiar scream resembles an earthquake which cracks the shell. In Humiliated and Insulted (1861), a thunderstorm breaks out when the protagonist Nelly is explaining her traumatic family history, after which she has an epileptic seizure: ‘At that instant a fairly loud clap of thunder resounded, and torrential rain began to beat heavily against the window panes; it went dark in the room’ (4.8.318). In The Idiot, the thunderstorm also approaches during the Prince’s solipsistic reflection. He is about to enter the hotel where he will have the seizure: ‘It was at that moment very dark: the storm cloud came over, swallowing up the evening light, and just as the prince was near the house, the cloud suddenly opened and poured down rain’ (2.5.233). When he reaches the top of a spiral staircase, the Prince is attacked by his ‘spiritual brother’ Rogozhin, who is about to stab him with a garden knife. At this moment, the Prince has an epileptic fit:

His consciousness instantly went out, and there was total darkness. He had had a fit of epilepsy, which had left him very long ago. It is known that these fits, *falling fits* (падучая) properly speaking, come instantaneously. In these moments the face, especially the eyes, suddenly become extremely distorted. Convulsions and spasms seize the whole body and all the features of the face. A dreadful, unimaginable scream, unlike anything, bursts from the breast; everything human suddenly disappears, as it were, in this scream, and it is quite impossible, or at least very difficult, for the observer to imagine and allow that this is the man himself screaming. It may even seem as if someone else were screaming from inside the man. At least many people have explained their impression that way, and there are many whom the sight of a man in a falling fit fills with a decided and unbearable terror, which even has something mystical in it (235, 8:195).

The passage describes the seizure in detail: convulsion, spasm, frothing, screaming and most importantly, the impairment of consciousness. Like the thunderstorm which ‘splits’ and the earthquake which ‘cracks’, consciousness instantly collapses as the fit arrives. The seizure also causes ‘everything human suddenly [to] disappear’ and create a sense of mystical terror.

In his essay ‘The “Uncanny”’ (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919), Freud suggests that the sight of an epileptic seizure resembles the movement of an automaton and evokes the uncanny, a peculiar and mixed feeling of the familiar and unfamiliar (homely and unhomely). In his discussion of E.T.A. Hoffman’s tale ‘The Sand-man’, a text Dostoevsky had probably read, the psychoanalyst suggests that the falling of the eye balls from the automaton Ophelia is uncanny and evokes the castration fear. Freud does not directly discuss epilepsy in the essay, but the seizure – which causes extreme distortion, the ‘doubling’ of screaming and ‘decided and unbearable’ terror – is suggestive of a peculiar feeling of the familiar and unfamiliar. And Dostoevsky’s emphasis on the image of the falling of the Prince recalls the reference to Caesar’s falling sickness, which can be seen as the ‘castration’ of the ruler’s power.

In her book *Unconscious Structure in The Idiot: A Study in Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Elizabeth Dalton provides a psychoanalytical reading of the Prince’s epilepsy in a section called ‘an epileptic mode of being’, which she borrows from Robert Lord. She understands epilepsy as a psychical battlefield among the id, ego and superego:

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The sexual and aggressive feelings usually experienced by Myshkin in the disguised masochistic form of suffering rush into the ego with an effect of ecstatic joyful release. But the ego cannot tolerate the force of these energies in their original unmodified form, nor can it allow their meaning to rise into conscious awareness. The moment of orgiastic release is followed by the total eclipse of the ego in the epileptic seizure. The fit is also the revenge of the superego, which can be deposed only temporarily; for the uninhibited release of sexual and aggressive energy it exacts the talion penalty of symbolic castration and death. The instinctual drives are once more experienced under the negative sign of superego, in the form of asceticism and suffering.24

Dalton suggests that the ecstatic moments represent the animalistic tendency which has been repressed in the id. Neither the ego nor the superego can tolerate these primitive desires. Therefore the seizure is evoked to ‘punish’ the id. Dalton’s reading makes a parallel between a psychic structure and epilepsy. It presumes that epilepsy has to do with moral judgment: the seizure represents the punishment of the release of animalistic instinct.

Dalton does to Prince Myshkin what Freud does to Dostoevsky. In his 1928 essay ‘Dostoevsky and Parricide’, published as the preface to a German edition of The Brothers Karamazov, Freud suggests that the writer is driven by a ‘very strong destructive instinct’, which is comparable to that of a sinner or criminal: ‘His personality retained sadistic traits in plenty, which show themselves in his irritability, his love of tormenting and his intolerance even towards people he loved, and which appear also in the way in which, as an author, he treats his readers’.25 This observation is also picked up in the essay ‘A Cruel Talent’ (1882) by the critic and sociologist N. K. Mikhailovsky, who argues that Dostoevsky not only enjoyed tormenting his literary characters, but he was also compelled to torment his readers with his ideas and long-winded narrating style.26

But on the other hand, Freud elaborates on Dostoevsky’s ‘cruel talent’, saying that the writer showed a ‘great need of love and enormous capacity for love’, which seems opposed to the idea that he was a sadist. Freud resolves the contradiction by saying that the destructive instinct is turned towards the writer himself, characterizing Dostoevsky as

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a moral masochist: ‘Thus in little things he was a sadist towards others, and in bigger things a sadist towards himself, in fact a masochist – that is to say the mildest, kindliest, most helpful person possible’ (236). The masochist, subservient to the superego, acts ‘against his own interest’ and ultimately ‘destroys his own real existence’.\(^{27}\) For Freud, the epileptic seizure is an expression of the destructive instinct turned inward. The destructive instinct in Dostoevsky anticipates one of the most controversial concepts in Freudian psychoanalysis, that is, the death drive, which Laplanche and Pontalis call the drive \textit{par excellence}.\(^{28}\)

The destructive tendency in Dostoevsky’s epilepsy can be further explained with another literary reference: the above passage from \textit{The Idiot} portrays epilepsy as Dionysian. In Euripides’ tragedy \textit{Bacchae}, Pentheus, the king of Thebes, forbids his people to worship Dionysus, who later punishes Pentheus by burning his palace and having him ripped to shreds by his possessed sister and mother. Dionysus wanders all over the world, accompanied by Silenus and a wild army of Satyrs and Maenads. He makes his followers celebrate him by dancing insanely, just as the psychic epidemic of the St. Vitus’ dance. Part of the chorus reads: ‘And with shouts [Dionysus] rouses the scattered bands, /Sets their feet dancing, /As he shakes his delicate locks to the wild wind. /And amidst the frenzy of song he shouts like thunder: ‘On, on! Run, dance, delirious, possessed!’\(^{29}\) Dionysus is seen as the god of thunderstorm and more than once is he called by the chorus ‘Bromius’ (‘noisy’, ‘boisterous’, \(\beta\rho\epsilon\mu\epsilon\iota\nu\) means to roar), which images the noise of a thunder.\(^{30}\) The moment when Dionysus rips Pentheus into pieces marks his ‘thunderous’, disintegrating power.

Nietzsche also makes the connection between epilepsy and Dionysus. In \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, he discusses Raphael’s last painting \textit{Transfiguration} (1520) in terms of the Dionysian and Apollonian. Apollo is the god of light, prophecy and medicine, and is associated with discipline, beauty of form and individual identity.\(^{31}\) On the other hand,

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\(^{28}\) ‘[The dead drive] is the essence of the instinctual…it binds every wish, whether aggressive or sexual, to the wish for death’. Quoted, Nicholas Royle, \textit{The Uncanny: An Introduction} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 92.


\(^{30}\) The phrase ‘Bromius’ is used to address Dionysus at least three times. Chorus: ‘Take me O Bromius, take me and inspire Laughter and worship!’ (205); Chorus: ‘Bromius is with us, he shouts from prison the shout of victory!’ (211); Dionysus: ‘and I and Bromius shall be Victors’ (227).

\(^{31}\) Nietzsche compares the Appollonian with Schopenhauer’s concept of \textit{principium individuationis} in \textit{The World as Will and Representation}: ‘As a sailor sits in a small boat in a boundless raging sea, surrounded on all sides by heaving mountainous waves, trusting to his frail vessel; so does the individual man sit calmly in
Dionysus refers to the god of wine and tragedy, and his worship, recalling Euripides’ *Bacchae*, had to do with intoxication, violence, madness and the loss of identity. Nietzsche sees the Apollonian and the Dionysian as two competing and complementary forces at work in Greek art.

Raphael’s *Transfiguration* combines two scenes in the Bible: the upper part shows Christ’s transfiguration on the high mountain and the lower part depicts an epileptic boy with his parents and other disciples in awe. After the transfiguration, Christ encounters a crowd of people. One of them approaches Christ and asks him to cure his epileptic son:

Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away […] when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him […] When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, *Thou* dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose (Mark 9: 17-27).  

In the parallel narrative of St. Matthew the father describes the son as ‘lunatic’. Lunacy and epilepsy were understood as synonymous by Church fathers who affirmed that both were due to unclean spirits. The ‘spirit’ causes the young boy to jump into fire and waters, fall on the ground and to froth – all these symptoms were identified as those of epilepsy by ancient physicians. The ‘dumb and deaf’ spirit (or ‘deaf and mute’) can be seen as a self-destructive ‘epileptic spirit’. In fact, the ‘deaf and dumb’ is referred to in *The Idiot* to describe the Prince’s second epileptic seizure: a ‘wild shout of the “spirit that convulsed and dashed down” the unfortunate man’ (4.7.554).  

And in *Crime and Punishment*, St. Petersburg’s cityscape is described as ‘deaf and dumb’, suggesting the city is ‘epileptic’ by nature: ‘An inexplicable chill always breathed on [Raskolnikov] from this splendid

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32 See Douglas Smith’s notes, pp. 133-134.
34 Temkin, p. 91.
35 I have quoted from the King James Bible. Parallel versions are Matthew 17:14-20, Mark 9:14-29 and Luke 9:37-43.
36 Cf. ‘And as he was yet a coming, the devil threw him down, and tare him. And Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the child, and delivered him again to his father’ (Luke 9:42).
panorama; for him the magnificent picture was filled with a mute and deaf spirit…” (2.2.114). The ‘deaf and dumb’ which destroys the epileptic boy represents violence, grotesques and the loss of identity, as Nietzsche writes: ‘the lower half with the possessed boy, his despairing bearers, and the helplessly fearful disciples, shows us the reflection of eternal original suffering, of the sole ground of the world: “appearance” here is the reflection of the eternal contradiction, of the father of things’. The lower part which shows pain and chaotic emotions among the disciple is in contradiction with the upper part which shows the sublime and lofty image of Christ, which allows ‘a brilliant hovering in purest bliss and painless contemplation through beaming wide-open eyes’ (31). Nietzsche continues, ‘Here we have before our eyes, rendered in the highest symbolism of art, that Apollonian world of beauty and its substratum, the horrific wisdom of Silenus, and we understand intuitively their reciprocal necessity’ (31). Although Dionysus is not mentioned, we know that Silenus was a companion and tutor of the wine god. And in Bacchae, he wanders all over the world along with Dionysus and a wild army of Satyrs and Maenads. In other words, the lower part of Transfiguration reflects the Dionysian ‘horrific wisdom’ – chaos, contradictions, violence and dissolution of identity – which is crystallized in the wild scream of the epileptic boy who is yet to be healed in the picture.

Epilepsy and the Moment

I have discussed the historical and literary references to epilepsy in Dostoevsky’s works, suggesting that these references in various ways point to the disruptive, fracturing and violent moment of the attack of epilepsy. I have called the previous section ‘The History of Epilepsy’, but I am not so much interested in tracing a linear and homogeneous history of Dostoevsky’s epilepsy as showing how multiple references to the illness are polyphonically presented in his works. My approach to the history of epilepsy follows that of Oswei Temkin, the author of the classic study, The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology (1945, 1971). In the preface, he writes:

There is no unanimity about the range of the concept of epilepsy, and the nature of the disease is as yet obscure. For, on the one hand, there are many organic diseases which may lead to the same syndrome as it exhibited in ‘genuine’ epilepsy; on the other hand, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to draw a distinct borderline between epilepsy and certain cases of severe

36 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 4.31.
hysteria. The broader the point of view from which epilepsy is studied, the more the condition tends to lose its identity and merge into the domain of convulsive states, encompassing many ‘epilepsies’ of different origin.³⁷

The history of epilepsy is different from, to use Temkin’s example, the history of tuberculosis. In the latter case, the historian can apply a critical standard to the past and be able to say whether a medical case is actually tuberculosis or not. But in the former case, there is hardly a progressive or linear development in the study of epilepsy before the rise of modern neurology: ‘we may easily decry as false what the future will prove to be true’ (ix). Thanks to the massive and divergent receptions of epilepsy in the past, Temkin’s encyclopaedic study is that of ‘the opinions of laymen, philosophers and theologians, as well as those of physicians’ (ix). The book is a collection of historical fragments about epilepsy rather than a teleological reading of the disease’s development. It should be also noted that Temkin begins The Falling Sickness from Hippocrates and finishes with the psychiatrist Charcot. The history of epilepsy came to a point of ‘epistemological shift’ by the end of the nineteenth century: it was then treated in accordance with scientific knowledge derived from methods such as statistics, hospital observation and pathological anatomy. Temkin writes: ‘Thus we can say that until the nineteenth century, the history of epilepsy was the history of the falling sickness’ (x). With the emphasis on ‘the falling sickness’, Temkin’s book archives the social and ideological opinions of epilepsy until the end of the nineteenth century, enabling a diversified range of ‘voices’ to be represented in the illness’ long history.

As one Dostoevsky critic puts it, the meaning of epilepsy is always mediated by one’s health, diet, psychological stress, etc. And the epileptic seizure is ‘dependent on history, intelligence, imagination and the responses of the others’.³⁸ Instead of seeing how the present-day understanding of epilepsy illuminates Dostoevsky’s novels, this thesis is more interested in the writer’s subjective reading of the disease, and the way in which he makes use of relevant medical opinions from different periods to represent the illness. As the previous section has shown, Dostoevsky’s references to epilepsy are not restricted to a

³⁸ See Louis Breger’s review of James Rice’s Dostoevsky and the Healing Art, ‘Dostoevskii and Medicine’, Slavic Review, 45:4 (1986), 735-737. Also see Louis Breger, Dostoevsky: The Author as Psychoanalyst (New York: New York University Press, 1989). For Breger, Dostoevsky was trying to deal with his own neuroses through writing novels. Hence the writer is understood as a psychoanalyst. This thesis diverges from this autobiographical approach, which I think delimits the potential meanings of Dostoevsky’s works.
particular discipline or period. The world of epilepsy in Dostoevsky is a constructed mixture of opinions from the Greeks, the Bible, the Medieval, the Renaissance, modern criminology, etc. Such creative referentiality in the writing of epilepsy would be another way for thinking Mikhail Bakhtin’s proposition that Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel.\textsuperscript{39} That is to say, the author’s view of his own epileptic condition does not dominate the other historical opinions of epilepsy. The non-hierarchical interaction between the two sides of views creates an unfinalized reading of epilepsy in Dostoevsky’s works, which the following chapters intend to explore.\textsuperscript{40}

It is true that references to epilepsy from multiple historical periods permeate Dostoevsky’s works. But it is also true that Dostoevsky makes them depict one particular moment, that is, the moment of an epileptic seizure, during which consciousness collapses. As I have discussed in the opening, this thesis takes that moment of seizure as the caesura which suspends the flow of representation. Epilepsy in this thesis therefore will be understood as outside the realm of historical action. That is to say, epilepsy cannot be historicized in the world of Dostoevsky due to its repetitive and disruptive quality.

If consciousness ceases when the seizure arrives, how could the writer possibly describe it? Put another way, if the caesura is the unpresentable, to what extent can the writer possibly speak of it? We could find illuminations from Mikhail Bakhtin’s comment on Dostoevsky’s representations of death, which I understand as similar to that of epilepsy. In his notebooks for the second edition of his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin writes:


Dostoevsky never depicts death from within. Final agony and death are observed by others. Death cannot be a fact of consciousness itself. […] Death from within, that is, one’s own death consciously perceived, does not exist for anyone: not for the dying person, not for others; it does not exist at all. Precisely this consciousness for its own sake, which neither knows nor has the ultimate word, is the object of depiction in Dostoevsky’s world.\footnote{Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 290. Bakhtin also discusses the representation of death in the section called ‘The Temporal Whole of the Hero’ in his essay ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’. See Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 99-113.}

Bakhtin contrasts Dostoevsky with Tolstoy, who is interested in ‘what it feels like to die inside the person who is dying’.\footnote{Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 247.} This is absent in Dostoevsky, because consciousness collapses when a person dies. And the writer is primarily interested in depicting the activities of consciousness. As I have shown earlier in the passage from *The Idiot*, just when the epileptic seizure breaks out, the narrative’s point of view switches from within the Prince’s consciousness to outside it. Just as death is never depicted from within, an epileptic seizure is never depicted from within the epileptic’s consciousness.

And yet, before the attack of the seizure, the Prince keeps coming back to reflect on the seizure, fantasizing it as evoking eternity (he says he understands the extraordinary phrase ‘time shall be no more’ from the Book of Revelation when he has his last seizure (2.5.227)). Bakhtin goes on to say: ‘In Dostoevsky’s world death finalizes nothing, because death does not affect the most important thing in this world – consciousness for its own sake’ (290). On the one hand, epilepsy and death point to the annihilative moment which cannot be consciously perceived. But on the other hand, as this thesis will show, Dostoevsky’s heroes anxiously and continually imagine that particular moment. Epilepsy, like death, finalizes nothing; it creates infinite possibility for consciousness. Dostoevsky’s writings can be therefore understood as the incessant depictions of consciousness which is always punctuated by a rupture, that is, the moment which cannot be consciously perceived but which the subject is anxious to capture, master and beautify. And if Dostoevsky’s writings are characteristically driven by this desire to depict what is outside the realm of experience, we can say that his project is transgressive insofar as it aims to write the impossible.
Dostoevsky’s anxiety to grasp the ungraspable is integral to his ‘mystic terror’, a phrase he uses to describe his epileptic condition. I now move towards this particular terror through looking at the writer’s seizure records.

**Epilepsy and Mystic Terror**

The sources of the following seizure records are James Rice’s *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art* (1985), Jacques Catteau’s *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation* (1989) and Joseph Frank’s five-volume biography. Rice sees epilepsy as an isolated disease, which is central to understanding the greatness of Dostoevsky’s creations. His book is mainly a biographical study of the moments when major epileptic fits took place in the writer’s life. One-third of the book also suggests the nineteenth-century medical literature Dostoevsky might have read. Rice suggests that the writer’s greatness ‘lies not in the denial of illness but in its acceptance and mastery, and in the discovery (and invention, to be sure) of polymorphous and polyphonic values precisely within his pathological condition, which he consciously and ingeniously negotiated through art’. It is true that Dostoevsky keeps coming back to the subject of illness in his novels (most of the protagonists suffer from various illnesses), and it is also true that the writing of epilepsy, as I will argue, is a way to gain mastery over experience. But whether the attempt at mastery has triumphed or even become a therapeutic art is questionable. And Rice’s book offers few in-depth textual analyses of the novels in proving the point. Jacques Catteau’s book also provides invaluable information on Dostoevsky’s medical history, particularly his selection of two medical reports which record the writer’s ‘mystical terror’, a crucial phrase for understanding the writer’s response to his condition. Catteau’s chapter makes an interesting comparison between the epilepsy in the writer’s life and the epilepsy in his works. But, as Edward Wasiolek’s review puts it, it does not develop a substantial argument out of the comparison. Catteau does not give detailed analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, but his views are insightful. For instance, connecting epilepsy with the process of

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44 Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*, p. 234.
46 Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation*, pp. 90-134.
creating the novels, he says that Dostoevsky’s writings are driven by a ‘violent and convulsive’ impetus and are inclined to a form of excess.48 This thesis further explores Catteau’s view by rethinking the writer’s works not only in terms of the obsessive impetus to think about a particular moment or an idea, but also by considering the sudden rupture of thinking at the moment of epileptic seizure.49 Joseph Frank’s biography has been very helpful in terms of Dostoevsky’s biographical details. Particularly useful are his discussions of the execution of the Petrashevsky Circle in 1849 and the Petersburg novel *Humiliated and Insulted*. The above studies take a biographical approach to Dostoevsky’s epilepsy. They treat the process of literary creation as a way for the writer to cope with or accept his own illnesses. This thesis works in an opposite direction: it explores new meanings of epilepsy in the created works and suggests how they can help us to rethink Dostoevsky’s life. By the writer’s life I particularly refer to two aspects, to which I now move on: his life which is haunted by epilepsy and that which is haunted by death after his survival of a mock execution in 1849.

After the age of twenty-six, Dostoevsky had an epileptic seizure almost once every three weeks until he died of haemorrhage at the age of sixty. Thinking retrospectively, Dostoevsky said to Vsevolod Solovyev (brother of the philosopher Vladimir Solovyev):

> Two years before Siberia, at the time of my various literary difficulties and quarrels, I was the victim of some sort of strange and unbearably torturing nervous illness. I cannot tell you what these hideous sensations were; but I remember them vividly; it often seemed to me that I was dying, and the truth is – real death came and then went away again.50

The year when ‘real death came and then went away again’ was 1847. The writer was twenty-six and suffering from some kind of severe and progressive mental illness, which only when he was in the army in 1856 did he realize was epilepsy. He often had a fit while he was asleep which left him bloody and battered upon awakening. This kind of attack made him uncertain whether he would survive the night. And after each seizure, he was...

48 Catteau writes: ‘Certainly the feverish incandescence of the verb, the brutal discharge of the action in scenes of high tension is not merely a mimicry of the epileptic storm in writing, but their violent and convulsive tenor indicates that the writer had a secret inclination for the noble form of excess: aesthetic excess which is a metaphor for “what goes beyond bounds” and so weighs heavier and penetrates more deeply. It is the explosion which reveals the truth’ (131). ‘What goes beyond bounds’ echoes Nietzsche’s discussion of ‘flight from oneself’ in *Daybreak*, par. 549, p. 550.

49 Catteau is more concerned with the pre-seizure period as the writing is driven by a convulsive and violent impetus. This is crucial to the argument of my thesis, but it will also put more emphasis on the caesura, the break, the collapse of consciousness, which the seizure itself represents in Dostoevsky’s works.

haunted by ‘objectless fear’, ‘mystic depression’, and a ‘sense of guilt from a crime not
remembered’. 51 It is not unreasonable to suggest that the writer saw epilepsy as a form of
death.

During the early years (1846-1849), Dostoevsky read a wide range of medical
literature concerning the brain, the nervous system and the psyche by borrowing books
from his physician and close friend Dr. Stepan Dmitrievich Yanovsky (1817-1897). Apart
from that, he had daily meetings with the doctor two times per day to discuss medicine
and other subjects such as religion. Although Yanovsky did not mention epilepsy when
Dostoevsky suffered from apoplectic fits, the writer himself probably had thought about
the possibility of having epilepsy. 52

In 1846, when Dostoevsky gained his reputation for writing Poor Folk, he was
under enormous pressure, having become anxious to maintain his newly established
reputation. Possibly because of that he began to suffer from what he called ‘a severe shock
to the whole nervous system’. 53 Later, he met Yanovsky who became his lifelong
acquaintance and doctor. Regarding his nervous disorders, Dostoevsky records that
someone was snoring beside him at night. It turned out that it was actually a hallucination,
which anticipated the onset of apoplexy (kondrashka), which is a kind of stroke. 54 The
phrase kondrashka, as Rice points out, was a popular term for a sudden death. 55 That same
phrase was used in the short story Mr. Prokharchin (1846), in which the hero is stricken
by ‘a fainting spell, paralytic stupor, or kondrashka’. 56 Besides, Dostoevsky was very
anxious about being buried alive because the fits made him appear dead. His friends and
brother report that he was always disturbed and terrified by the idea of ‘lethargic sleep’, a
phrase which is found again to describe Stavrogin napping mysteriously in Demons
(2.1.229-30).

Previously, I have quoted the passage from The Idiot showing that the sight of the
Prince’s ‘falling fit’ arouses in the observer a ‘decided and unbearable’ horror (2.5.235).
Although Dostoevsky could not see himself having the fit, he experiences immense horror
every time before and after the seizure. Among the various states he had gone through, I

51 Quoted, Rice, Dostoevsky and the Healing Art, p. 158.
52 See James Rice, ‘Dostoevsky’s Medical History: Diagnosis and Dialectic’, Russian Review, 42:2 (1983),
131. On what Dostoevsky could have read for his epilepsy, see Rice, Dostoevsky and the Healing Art, pp.
109-193.
54 Ibid.
56 The last word is glossed in a marginal note: ‘a stroke’ [udar], James Rice, ‘Dostoevsky’s Medical History’,
p. 139.
would like to draw attention to the one he called ‘mystic terror’. In the medical report of 1870, he uses the phrase twice in two consecutive entries:

At three o’clock in the morning a fit of extreme violence, in the lobby, while awake. Fall and wound on the forehead. Without remembering anything and without being aware of it, I carried the lighted candle in a perfect state into the bedroom, closed the window and only guessed later that I had had a fit…I was beginning to calm down when I suddenly had another fit…When I regained consciousness I had a horrible headache and was unable to speak properly for a long time. Anya spent the night with me (Extreme mystic terror)…Impossible to think of work; profound hypochondria during the night… (10 February)

Fit during sleep, I had just gone to bed at ten past five in the morning…weak…although the consequences of the fit (that is, heaviness and even pain in the head, nervous disturbance, nervous laugh and mystic terror) last longer than before… (23 February)

In the first passage, the writer had two consecutive seizures, after which he experienced ‘extreme mystic terror’ and lost the ability to work. Mystic terror can be understood as the extreme fear of death or the fear of one’s own destruction. This is confirmed by the fact that Dostoevsky uses the same phrase to describe the moment before he thought he was going to be executed in 1849. On the morning of 23 April 1849, Dostoevsky was arrested for participating in the revolutionary group Petrashevsky Circle, which studied and disseminated writings by Fourier and Saint-Simon, the leading figures of French utopian socialism. The writer, among the accusations of bearing ‘the spirit of opposition to the government’ and ‘a desire to alter the existing state of things’, was charged specifically for reading an outraged letter written by Belinsky to Gogol (calling him a traitor to the cause of reform). He and other members were confined in the Peter and Paul fortress for eight months. They were found guilty of ‘plotting to subvert public order’ and sentenced to death by firing squad before a crowd of three thousands on Semenovsky Square. The names of the circle members were read aloud. Fifteen of them were condemned to death, and a priest invited them to confess to their crimes and repent. Tsar Nicholas had decided to remove the death sentence but he ordered the soldiers to act as if it was real up

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37 Quoted, Catteau, Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation, p.115.
39 Quoted from The Little Hero, written when Dostoevsky was confined in Peter and Paul Fortress in 1849. See Frank, pp. 49-65.
until the last minute. At the end, the death sentence was commuted to four years of hard labour in Siberia and four years of military service.

Among the victims who were supposed to be executed, Nikolai Grigoryev, who had already had a mental derangement in the Fortress, never recovered his senses after the reprieve and remained a mental invalid for the rest of his life. In another account, a colleague who stood next to Dostoevsky recalled the writer’s behaviour: ‘Dostoevsky was quite excited, he recalled *Le dernier jour d’un condamné* of Victor Hugo, and, going up to Speshnev, said: “Nous serons avec le Christ” (we shall be with Christ). “Un peu de poussière” (A bit of dust) – the latter answered with a twisted smile’.\(^6^1\) A word of faith was met with his friend’s nihilistic sarcasm.

The Mock Execution of the Petrashevtsy (the members of the Petrashevsky Circle)

In his short story *The Meek Girl* (1876), Dostoevsky calls *Le dernier jour d’un condamné* (*Last Day of a Condemned Man*) a masterpiece.\(^6^2\) He goes on to write: ‘[Victor Hugo] permitted [the fantasy] that a man who has been condemned to death would be able (and have the time) to make notes not only on his last day, but even in his last hour and, quite literally, at his very last moment’ (254). As it is described, Hugo’s short story is about a

\(^6^1\) Frank, *The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859*, p. 58.
condemned man writing from a first-person perspective his thoughts until he is sent to the guillotine. It is not surprising that Dostoevsky recalled the story at the critical moment of life and death. The critic Liza Knapp suggested that the writer could have in mind a particular passage from Hugo’s story. Hugo’s condemned man writes:

Condemned to death!
Well, why not Men – I remember reading in some book where that was the only good part –
men are all condemned to death with indefinite stays of execution. How is my situation now
any different?63

Hugo’s ingenious statement captures not only the straightforward fact that everyone is subject to their natural death, but it can also be read as a commentary on Dostoevsky’s life which had been traumatized by epilepsy. Epilepsy, appearing as death which advances and retreats unexpectedly, causes in Dostoevsky the state of ‘indefinite stays of execution’. Despite the fact that the writer said that he will be with Christ, the moment before his supposed death was by no means peaceful. Many years later, according to the writer’s friend Orest Miller, Dostoevsky described the memory of that last moment from a very different perspective: ‘He felt only a mystic terror, and was completely dominated by the thought that in perhaps five minutes he would be going to another unknown life…’64 The phrase ‘mystic terror’ returns. Twenty years after the mock execution, Prince Myshkin in The Idiot speculates what a condemned convict has in mind in the last moment of the beheading. The convict is also horrified by the unknowable when death takes place: ‘The ignorance of and loathing for this new thing that would be and would come presently were terrible’ (1.5.61). The passage illuminates the meaning of the mystic terror: death is fearful mainly because it is beyond human experience and cannot be known. Dostoevsky could be right that he will be with Christ, but there is no guarantee. In this way, mystical terror has to do with the fear of ignorance of the moment in the future. The subject – who is in the infinite state of execution and knows nothing about the moment – is petrified and placed into an inert position. Perhaps that is why Dostoevsky later writes in A Writer’s Diary (1873) that mystic terror is ‘the most colossal power over the human soul. […] A sense of

64 Quoted, Frank, The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859, pp. 55-56.
horror is something pitiless; it withers the heart and hardens it toward any lofty or tender feeling’ (‘Vlas’, 1.165).

Writing the Impossible
On one hand, the moment of an epileptic seizure evokes the fear of death. But on the other hand, it is described as ecstatic, resembling the state of ‘eternal harmony’. Dostoevsky’s friend Strakhov wrote in 1883:

Many times F. M. told me that before an attack he would have minutes of an enraptured state. ‘For several instants’, he would say, ‘I experience a happiness that is impossible in an ordinary state, and of which other people have no conception. I feel full harmony in myself and in the whole world, and the feeling is so strong and sweet that for a few seconds of such bliss one could give up ten years of life, perhaps all of life’.  

In the memoirs of Sophie Kovalevsky (whose older sister Dostoevsky had wished to marry), the professional mathematician reported a private conversation she had with the writer:

‘I felt’, said F.M., ‘that heaven descended to earth and swallowed me. I really attained God, and was imbued with him. ‘Yes, God exists!’ I cried. And I recall no more. ‘All of you healthy people,’ he continued, ‘don’t even suspect what happiness is, that happiness which we epileptics experience for a second before an attack. Muhammad avows in his Koran that he saw Paradise and was in it. All the wise fools are convinced that he is simply a liar and deceiver. But no! He does not lie! He actually was in Paradise during an attack of epilepsy, from which he suffered just as I do. I don’t know whether that blessedness lasts seconds or hours or months, but trust my word, all the joys which life can give I would not take in exchange for it!’

Initially, we would have thought the epileptic seizure meant only pain and meaninglessness to Dostoevsky. But here a new meaning is added to it. The moment is not only a form of simulated death, but according to the writer, it is also inseparable from a certain ecstasy. This epileptic moment which consists of the experience of death and the pleasure of eternal harmony suggests jouissance, which I understand as an interruption of

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65 Quoted, Rice, Dostoevsky and the Healing Art, p. 83-84.
66 Ibid., p. 84.
consciousness, an orgasmic, even violent form of pleasure that is removed from language and disconfirms identity.⁶⁷

There is hardly any empirical evidence which proved Dostoevsky did experience the ecstatic moment. Both James Rice and Jacques Catteau have quoted a specific study carried out by a distinguished French epileptologist Henri Gastaut, who argued that Dostoevsky ‘never experienced the ecstatic aura he gives to Prince Myshkin and which was attributed to him by two of his contemporaries’.⁶⁸ Jacques Catteau picks up on Gastaut’s point, arguing that Dostoevsky’s epileptic visions may be no more than a sensation of vertigo rationalized after the event, like an elevation or assumption. Possibly it was Dostoevsky’s secret inclination towards themes of universal harmony, eternity, God, which gave the aura [sic. the moment before the attack of epilepsy] its feeling of happiness and joy. In short, Dostoevsky may have mythologized the aura so as to experience a transcendence which he could not reach by other means.⁶⁹

Whether the epileptic really had a vision just before the onset of a seizure is immaterial. Rather, what I am interested in is the fact that Dostoevsky keeps returning to this ecstatic moment in his writings. It should be remembered that consciousness collapses immediately after the infinitely brief moment of ecstasy. Dostoevsky is fascinated by this rupture, this moment of incomprehensibility. Perhaps it is because the moment is incomprehensible and outside the realm of experience that the writer becomes anxious to speak, to write and even mythologize it. In this way, Dostoevsky’s works can be understood in terms of a drive to represent the unrepresentable.

In the opening I have suggested that Dostoevsky’s novels can be understood in terms of an incessant anxiety to experience the moment of epileptic ecstasy. But the attempt is always destroyed by the seizure which is inseparable from the ecstasy. I have also suggested that the ecstasy could be an imaginary construction as a way for the subject to master an unknown experience. It is this quixotic desire to experience the impossible and its continuous failure which are at the heart of the epileptic mode of being. The following chapters further examine this quixotic desire through five of Dostoevsky’s novels which were written after his survival of the mock execution. That Dostoevsky is placed in indefinite stays of execution is integral to his epileptic condition which was

⁶⁷ Here I have followed Roland Barthes’ discussion of jouissance. See Michael Moriarty, Roland Barthes (Cambridge; Polity Press, 1991), pp. 143-150.
⁶⁸ Quoted, Rice, Dostoevsky and the Healing Art, p. 233.
⁶⁹ Catteau, Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation, pp. 124-125.
described as death which constantly comes and goes. That is why I have chosen to focus on the post-Siberian novels to illuminate my argument.

The following chapters trace the references to epilepsy in each of the five novels and suggest how they illuminate a new perspective in rethinking Dostoevsky’s works. The chapters will take epilepsy as a trope for discussing the unrepresentable moment, during which all kinds of idealistic expressions are subject to destruction. Chapter 1 examines *Humiliated and Insulted*, looking at the romantic idealist figure Vanya (Ivan Petrovich). On the one hand, he is an impoverished writer who pursues philanthropy and moral ideals. He sacrifices his personal interest in exchange for other people’s benefits. Apparently, he is the selfless, naturally good figure of Dostoevsky. But on the other hand, in his meeting with Prince Valkovsky, whose principal interest is sensual pleasure, Vanya’s project of philanthropy is put into question.

By focusing on a dialogue between Vanya and the Prince, I will show that philanthropy – which the novel connects with the state of being humiliated and insulted – is no less pleasurable than the Prince’s libertinism. The difference between the Prince’s libertinism and Vanya’s philanthropy is only an apparent one. The Prince likes to mocks what he calls the ‘Schillerian types’, such as Vanya, giving them a shock by unveiling his obscene habits. The chapter suggests that Vanya is in recurring horror as his philanthropic project is constantly being challenged and problematized. Apart from the Prince, the protagonist is petrified by the ‘mystic terror’ every night when he writes his novel. I take the mystic terror as the ‘epileptic’ force, which, together with the terror caused by the Prince, challenges and suspends Vanya’s philanthropic ideal.

The chapter will further explore the problem of philanthropy by linking it with the categorical imperative, looking at the ways in which Vanya does good only for the sake of duty. The chapter will discuss Sigmund Freud’s ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ and Jacques Lacan’s essay *Kant with Sade*, suggesting that Vanya’s philanthropy involves moral masochism and repression under the institution of the moral law.

Chapter 2 continues with the critique of idealism by examining *Crime and Punishment*, in which the Petersburg’s cityscape is described as ‘deaf and dumb’ when Raskolnikov has a vision on the river Neva. The chapter focuses on the passage where he has that vision, suggesting possible reasons why the city receives such description. I will look at the city’s architecture, suggesting that it is eclectic by nature, which creates the effect of disorientation and alienation in the Petersburgers. In this way, the Petersburger’s subject is always decentred and is figuratively seized upon by the chaotic cityscape. I will
compare the eclecticism in architecture to Eisenstein’s conception of cinematic montage, suggesting Dostoevsky’s Petersburg is pre-cinematic. Images of the city are discrete and yet pieced together within a page of the Dostoevsky’s novel. In this way, I will also suggest that montage is another way for thinking how the epileptic city creates the split subject.

This chapter also looks at Raskolnikov’s dreams, showing how the schismatic state of being is marked there as well. And in fact, there is not much difference between Dostoevsky’s dreams and his Petersburg. I will focus on the mare-beating dream in part 1, suggesting that here ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ coincide and implicate each other. Raskolnikov says he wants to kill like a Napoleon and speak a ‘new word’. But every time he thinks of transgressing by killing the pawnbroker, he is also haunted by the desire for punishment. The ‘Napoleonic’ theory is nothing but an ideal which Raskolnikov uses to justifies his murder. But the schism of the protagonist shows the limit of that ideal. Both the city’s architecture and Raskolnikov’s interiority show that Dostoevsky’s Petersburg and its inhabitants are consistently depicted as schismatic and therefore ‘epileptic’.

Chapter 3 examines The Idiot and further spells out the problem of the idealism of the Dostoevsky hero. Prince Myshkin, as the Introduction has shown, contemplates the moments just before the seizure, fantasizing the possibility of having an eternal life. Similarly, the Prince is obsessed with what a convict has in mind in the final moment just before the guillotine blade decapitates him. This last moment is also what happened to Dostoevsky himself in 1849. For the Prince, the convict, though terrified, is compelled to contemplate an afterlife before the guillotine blade strikes. The Prince keeps reflecting on this last moment (just before the seizure and the decapitation), hoping to freeze it and turn it into eternity. But on the other hand, the wish is immediately cut off as the seizure breaks out or the blade falls.

The idealistic wish for an eternal life is always dwarfed by the material side of the seizure and the execution. This will be further illuminated by the nihilist Ippolit’s discussion of Hans Holbein’s The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521). The vivid deadliness of Christ in the painting leads Ippolit to think that the resurrection will not happen. The religious ideal is once again countered by materialism. In response, Ippolit decides to commit suicide, a topic which leads to the next chapter.

Chapter 4 looks at the political novel Demons, showing the ways in which the failure of revolution is integral to the failure of the will. Kirilov, one of the revolutionary group members, plans to commit suicide in order to prove his absolute freedom and his
insubordination to God. He says he will become a man-god if he manages to kill himself under his will. Similarly, he experiences the ecstatic moments which Prince Myshkin also has just before an epileptic seizure. Kirilov contemplates the possibility of overcoming those moments and extend the ecstasy to eternity. In both cases – the suicide and his fantasy of epilepsy – Kirilov is driven by the desire to freeze, to seize upon the moment. But continuing the argument in chapter 3, I will show that Kirilov’s will to possess death and epilepsy is insatiable. This is because both the moment of death and the epileptic seizure are by definition beyond the realm of experience. In this way, Kirilov’s will to death and epilepsy is continually unfulfilled and postponed. This chapter will also look at Stavrogin’s confession and Shatov’s discussion of nationalism in relation to the failure of the will. I will also bring in the French writer Maurice Blanchot’s discussion of Kirilov in The Space of Literature, Nietzsche on nihilism in On the Genealogy of Morals and his commentary on Demons.

Chapter 5 examines Dostoevsky’s final novel The Brothers Karamazov, suggesting how the epileptic seizure can be understood as the moment at which a violent and silenced family history is unveiled. When the father gives an account of how he sexually abused his deceased wife, the youngest brother Alyosha Karamazov has a hysterical seizure which is identical to his mother’s. The chapter will take Alyosha’s hysteria as a form of ‘feminine’ epilepsy. I will bring in the discussion of Breuer and Freud’s Studies in Hysteria, showing how the male hysteric suffers from his reminiscences. By reminiscences I mean the memory of Alyosha’s father’s sexual violence which has been repressed since childhood. Only through rereading the hysterical seizure are we able to rearticulate the repression of the family violence as well as the violence of repression. This chapter follows Walter Benjamin’s discussion of history in his essay Theses on the Philosophy of History, treating the hysterical seizure as ‘a moment of danger’ during which a repressed past flits by. To reread The Brothers Karamazov means to reread symptomatically a family history which is violent and silenced.

The thesis’ conclusion will show that the epileptic mode of being – which is characterized by the alternation between the continual desire to seize upon the moment and the annihilation of that desire – is marked by what I call infinite postponement. I will revisit Dostoevsky’s mock execution in 1849 and compare it with the young man who survives an execution in Maurice Blanchot’s short story The Instant of My Death. The young man turns out to be Blanchot himself, who also survived a German military shooting during his involvement with the French Resistance in 1944. Both writers
survived the executions, but the instant of their death stays with them, recalling Dostoevsky saying that his epilepsy is like death which comes and goes, or Hugo’s condemned man saying that men are thrown into indefinite stays of execution. The writers’ death sentences are infinitely postponed, causing their writings to be ‘posthumous’. Likewise, Dostoevsky’s heroes’ desire to comprehend, to possess, to master the moment is infinitely postponed, thus producing a Dostoevskian subject which is always deferred and unfinalized.
Chapter One

‘The Egoism of Suffering’: Schiller with Sade

I also read Mikhailovsky on Dostoevsky […] He might have recalled that something similar occurred in French literature, namely the infamous Marquis de Sade. He even wrote a book entitled Torments and Tortures, where with particular pleasure he dwells upon the depraved voluptuousness to be derived from the inflicting of pain and suffering. In one of his novels Dostoevsky also describes in detail the satisfactions of one such person […] And just to think that all the most important priests in the Russian Orthodox Church sang requiem masses for our de Sade and even read sermons on this universal man’s love of all humanity! We really do live in strange times! (letter from Ivan Turgenev to M. Y. Saltykov-Shchedrin, 6 October 1882)

The Humiliated and Insulted
In January 1861, Dostoevsky was thirty-nine. He had returned from penal servitude at Omsk fortress and army service in Semipalatinsk (1850-59). Resettled in Petersburg, he was anxious to engage with literary circles again. Dostoevsky had started to write Memoirs from the House of the Dead (1860-62), in which he gives a portrait of his prison life in Omsk. One section of the novel depicts a hundred men packed into a small bathroom, a scene which is compared by the narrator to Hell, and which was also compared by Turgenev to Dante’s Inferno (1.9.145). Van Gogh mentions the Memoirs in his letter, seeing the novel’s title as the motto for his portraits of madmen. In the same year, Dostoevsky had started a new journal, Time (Время, 1861-63), with his brother Mikhail and began to write Humiliated and Insulted (Униженные и Оскорблённые),


2 See Sander Gilman, Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 120-121. He quotes a letter Van Gogh wrote to his brother: ‘Some days ago I was reading in the Figaro the story of a Russian writer who suffered all his life from a nervous disease which he finally died of, and which brought on terrible attacks from time to time. And what’s to be done? There is no cure, or if there is one, it is working zealously’ (121). Van Gogh seems to identify himself with Dostoevsky insofar as they both suffered from some incurable illnesses, which can be dealt with through creating work (121).
which was published in serial form in the same journal. Dostoevsky also published in *Time* an essay in response to the critic Dobrolyubov’s article on Marko Vovchok’s short story *Masha*, discussing the critic’s utilitarian view of literature. Other publications in the journal include translations of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. The former addresses the social and economic conditions of 1840s Manchester workers. The publication of Gaskell’s ‘industrial novel’ reflects the journal’s concern with the future development of Russia. The editors of the journal, including Dostoevsky, are concerned with ‘the great peasant question’, suggesting that a transformation in Russia is needed and can be achieved through the reunion between the culture of the peasant and the educated class. The emancipation of the serfs also took place in the same year, which *Time* describes as a ‘sublime event’, comparable to other historical moments such as the defeat of the Tartars and the reforms of Peter the Great. *Humiliated and Insulted* was written during this critical period of time.

The novel is in four parts and an epilogue. It is the first Petersburg novel written since Dostoevsky’s return from Siberia. The novel can be seen as a parody of a group of lower class people who are anxious to fashion themselves as morally good even at the price of being humiliated and insulted. The parody is presented in two stories which merge at the end of the novel. I would like to approach the novel by giving an analysis of the plot.

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3 The novel’s title has been translated into different English versions: *Insult and Injury* (Frederick Whishaw, 1887); *The Insulted and Injured* (Constance Garnett, 1915); *The Insulted and Humiliated* (Olga Shartse, Soviet Union, 1957). *Humiliated and Insulted* (Ignat Avsey, 2008).

4 ‘Mr. -bov and the Question of Art’, *Dostoevsky’s Occasional Writings*, trans. by David Magarshack (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 86-137.

5 *Time* as a literary journal represented the voice of the 1860s social-cultural tendency called *pochvennichestvo* (roughly ‘return to the soil’), Joseph Frank points out that the word *pochva* has the accessory sense of ‘foundation’ or ‘support’), which advocated a new Russian cultural union between the people and the educated class. See Joseph Frank, *The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 34-47. This tendency is integral to the schismatic nature of Dostoevsky’s heroes such as Stavrogin in *Demons*. He writes in a letter: ‘Nothing binds me to Russia – everything in it is as foreign to me as everywhere else. True, I disliked living in it more than elsewhere; but even in it I was unable to come to hate anything!’ (3.8.666). Dostoevsky would describe the rootless and educated figure the ‘general man’ (*obshchechelovek*). See ‘And a Completely Superfluous One’, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, trans. by David Patterson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 21.

Part 1 begins with the introduction of the impoverished writer, Vanya (Ivan Petrovich), who is brought up as an orphan by Nikolai Ikhmenev, a small landowner, with Ikhmenev’s daughter Natasha (13). The story is a recollection of what happened one year before. At that time Vanya is writing a long novel, which is later praised by a key literary critic (Belinsky, indicated as B. in the novel). He often associates his work with his death: ‘I was also working on a long novel – but as it happens, I’ve ended up in hospital, and shall probably soon be dead’ (13). He says that his large stuffy and low-ceilinged flat in Petersburg is ruining his health (50). He fantasizes about being sent to the asylum: ‘At that time I was still given to daydreaming, hoping for a kind of rebirth. […] Get them somehow to reset my brain in my head and make a new man of me!’ (51). The unsuccessful writer is interested in some kind of transformed afterlife rather than the existing one, symptomatic of his romantic idealism.

Natasha has fallen in love with Alyosha, the son of Prince Valkovsky, and has recently eloped with him. Her elopement enrages her father Ikhmenev, who sees himself being humiliated and insulted. Vanya, who is also in love with Natasha, has no intention of competing with Alyosha. He sacrifices his love for Natasha: ‘There is no need to leave home. I will show you what to do, my darling Natasha. I’ll see to everything for you, everything, your meetings too […] I’ll be your go-between. Why not?’ (38). Vanya is anxious to maintain the family order of the Ikhmenevs even at the price of losing the person he loves. To maintain the moral order is much more important than his personal impulses. He has a tendency to become a martyr-like figure. His masochistic tendency is also found in Natasha. After the elopement, Alyosha continues to visit ‘a string of various demi-monde Josephines and Minnas’ (73). For this Natasha feels ‘immediately doubly affectionate’ to him. ‘This wonderful creature’, Vanya observes, ‘seemed to derived endless delight from forgiveness and toleration, as though in the very act of forgiving she experienced some peculiar and subtle kind of pleasure’ (73).

In part 1, Vanya also meets Jeremiah Smith, an old declined industrialist, to whom he is mysteriously attracted. He witnesses the old man’s death on the street, and then occupies his empty flat. There Vanya meets Smith’s granddaughter Elena, nicknamed Nelly, which Dostoevsky might have borrowed from Nellie Trent in Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It is also in part 1 that Vanya describes his experience of ‘mystical terror’.

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7 While Dickens’ Little Nell is predominantly portrayed as good and innocent, Dostoevsky’s epileptic Nelly is an illegitimate beggar who bears a traumatic past in relation to her mother. Little Nell dies before she has sexually matured, while Nelly is sexually abused and she manifests her affection for the protagonist Vanya.
which he finds familiar as it attacks him almost every night as part of his illness (1.10.51). We are not told what that illness is, but the fact that Dostoevsky uses ‘mystic terror’ to describe his epileptic condition suggests that Vanya also suffers from epilepsy. He defines the terror as the fear of something which he ‘cannot define, something unfathomable and non-existent in the normal course of events’ (51). The mystic terror, as this chapter suggests, points to the unrepresentable, the incomprehensible moment where Vanya’s pursuit of idealism is mocked and suspended.

In part 2, Vanya follows Nelly and witnesses the girl being physically abused by her landlady. The girl has an epileptic fit on the spot (2.4.118). Later, from his detective friend Masloboev Vanya gathers that Nelly is being tricked into working as a prostitute. Nelly is used to beg on the streets, which attracts the attention of Arkhipov. Mrs Bubnova, who sells orphans to make money, arranges to sell Nelly to Arkhipov (135). Masloboev discovers Bubnova’s plan. When he and Vanya arrive at the house, ‘there was a terrible, piercing shriek from somewhere behind several sets of doors […] This piteous cry was immediately followed by more screams, oaths, then a scuffle ending finally in a series of sharp, resounding, unmistakable slaps with the flat of a hand across a face’ (2.7.138). Nelly rushes out of the room, wearing ‘a white, completely torn and rumpled cotton shift’ (138). The description suggests that she is nearly raped and an epileptic fit has taken place off-stage. After the abuse, Vanya takes her to live with him and looks after her welfare.

Back in Smith’s flat, Nelly convulsively embraces Vanya, seeking a ‘catharsis’ of her ‘strange passion’ (164). It turns out that Nelly has a traumatic family history: Prince Valkovsky has seduced Nelly’s mother and asked her to rob her wealthy father Jeremiah Smith. The mother listens to the Prince. But the Prince abandons her after obtaining the money he wants. Smith is enraged and deserts Nelly’s mother, who becomes terribly ill and eventually dies. In other words, Nelly’s mother is a double of Natasha: they are both abandoned for going against the father’s will and eloping with another man. In view of Nelly’s sufferings and her mother being deserted by the Prince, Vanya summarizes the story of the novel:

It is a melancholy story, one of those dismal, heart-rending stories which are so often played out unnoticed, almost shrouded in mystery, under the heavy St. Petersburg sky, in the dark

The passage anticipates the long chapter in part 3 on the conversation between Vanya and the Prince, who relates his perverted habits. The passage qualifies Nelly’s traumatic history as melancholic, dismal and heart-rending. But as the novel moves on, it turns out that his summary is emotionally exaggerated.

**Schiller versus the Prince**

In part 3, Masloboev, a friend of Vanya, gives a further account of what happens to Nelly’s mother after she is deserted by the Prince. She has a German fiancé who is faithful to her and they spent their time reading Schiller and the like (3.6.219). Masloboev ironically describes him as ‘an upstanding chap, a knight in shining armour, a veritable Schiller, a poet and a merchant to boot, a young dream – in a word, a German through and through, Pfefferkuchen or something like that’ (217). Nelly’s mother possesses the Prince’s written promise of marriage and she can fight back Jeremiah Smith’s money from the Prince by legal means. And yet, as Masloboev says, ‘[She and her husband are] so honourable they’re asking to be duped, and secondly, rather than being brutally practical and, if possible, bringing the full force of the law to bear on the matter, they prefer to take refuge in virtuous and noble indignation’ (219). What Vanya describes as ‘dismal’ and ‘heart-rending’ is actually a story which is driven by a selfish insistence on maintaining one’s virtuous and noble image. And such egoism is associated with Schiller.

It is revealed that Masloboev is hired by the Prince to investigate his lost and illegitimate daughter Nelly. In order for the Prince to meet her, Masloboev arranges a meeting with Vanya so that he cannot stay with Nelly. During the meeting, the Prince meets Nelly alone, which takes place off-stage in the novel. Seeing the Prince, Nelly has an epileptic fit. The Prince reports: ‘Extraordinary girl! […] she spoke to me normally at first, but later, having looked me over, rushed towards me crying out something, shaking all over, dug her fingers into me…tried to say something, but couldn’t’ (223). Nelly has another fit when she is visited by the Prince again in part 3 (262). According to the Prince, Nelly seems to suffer from some kind of schizophrenic state: she shows her aggressiveness against him but retreats in the next moment. Nelly’s consciousness is split insofar as she knows the Prince is her father but she cannot accept to acknowledge that
fact. It seems that Nelly is also reminded of her mother’s and grandfather’s deaths, which are both indirectly caused by the Prince. It is at this moment of reminiscences that Nelly has the epileptic fit. The relationship of epilepsy and family history will be discussed at length in chapter 5 through *The Brothers Karamazov*. In that chapter, I will connect Nelly’s seizures to a ‘feminine’ form of epilepsy, which is associated with the hysteric who suffer from reminiscences.\(^8\)

Also in part 3, Masloboev’s parody of Nelly’s mother’s indulgence in ‘noble indignation’ is elaborated by the Prince, who invites Vanya to dine in an expensive restaurant. During the meal, the Prince says that he has a habit of engaging in the most eccentric debauchery with women (3.10.255). Turgenev possibly had the Prince in mind when he called Dostoevsky the Russian marquis de Sade (see epigraph). The Prince is a ‘veritable Pulcinella’ and a ‘snake or a huge spider’ which Vanya would like to crush (246-247).\(^9\) The Prince was once passionate about a philanthropic society. But what he calls the ‘romantic phase’ is gone. The only principle he knows is ‘love thy own self’ (254). For him the moralist Vanya and other wronged characters – whom he calls the Schillerian types – are no less selfish than himself. He teases Vanya for ‘playing second fiddle’, sacrificing his love for Natasha: ‘Alyosha has stolen your bride-to-be, that much I do know, and like some kind of a Schiller you now torment yourself on the lovers’ behalf, and offer them your assistance almost to the point of being their errand boy […] this really is a rather nauseating travesty of magnanimity…’ (245). The Prince then comes back to the issue of Nelly’s mother, addressing her Schillerian pretentiousness. He says that the mother enjoys an ‘ecstasy of hatred’ by not asking for the money back:

> If I give her the money, I might even make her unhappy. I’d have deprived her of the pleasure of being totally miserable *on my account* and of cursing me for it for the rest of her life. Believe you me, my friend, there is supreme pleasure to be derived from the kind of misery where one knows oneself to be quite blameless and generous and totally justified in calling the wrongdoer a scoundrel. One comes across this ecstasy of hatred precisely in your Schillerian types (257).

Although Nelly’s mother is wronged and debased, she nonetheless takes pleasure from claiming a higher moral position by labelling those who do wrong to her as evil. Hence the

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\(^9\) *Pulcinella* is a stock character, equivalent to Punch, in Italian *Comedia dell’arte* and puppetry.
Prince’s key reading of the Schillerian types: ‘the more pronounced and vociferous one’s magnanimity, the more riddled it is with the worse kind of selfishness...’ (257).

The Prince’s criticism of the Schillerian types is Nietzschean. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the philosopher suggests that the morality of the slave figure, as opposed to noble morality, is characterized by the affect of *ressentiment*. The slave lives in denial, negating all values of affirmation on the part of noble morality. To compensate for this negation, the slave imagines himself being assaulted and therefore has an excuse to take revenge on an imaginary wrongdoer. *Ressentiment* therefore is close to the English words ‘bitterness’, ‘rancor’ or ‘resentment’. And the prefix of the word (‘re-’) points to the reactive nature of the affect. Nietzsche writes:

> While all noble morality grows from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says no to an ‘outside’, to an ‘other’, to a ‘non-self’ […] In order to exist at all, slave morality from the outset always needs an opposing, outer world; in physiological terms, it needs external stimuli in order to act – its action is fundamentally reaction.\(^{10}\)

The relationship between the Schillerian figure and the Prince can be understood in terms of slave/noble morality. While the Prince triumphantly affirms his egoistic interest, the Schillerian figures negate their selfishness and blame the other for being the wrongdoer, creating the hateful ‘outside’ for the self to channel his own bitterness. Vanya himself describes aptly the slave morality in part 3: ‘How often had I paced up and down my room with the unconscious desire that someone should hurry up and offend me or say something that could be interpreted as an offence and thus precipitate a crisis, an emotional catharsis’ (266). The emotional catharsis would be similar to what the Prince calls the ‘ecstasy of hatred’: in both cases the subject takes pleasure from the state of resentment, from reacting to the blameable ‘outside’.

In part 4, the Ikhmenevs and Nelly meet. Ikhmenev proposes to adopt Nelly to be his daughter in order to replace his daughter who has eloped with Alyosha. Nelly despises Ikhmenev as he resembles Jeremiah Smith who has abandoned her mother. The daughter is reminded of her traumatic past. She then rushes to Voznesensky Bridge and begs on the street. Vanya observes her from afar:

She was not begging out of need […] It was as though she were trying to shock or frighten someone by her exploits; as though she were trying to impress someone […] She had been wronged, her wound could not have healed, and it was as if she were deliberately trying to aggravate it by this air of mystery, this mistrust of us all; as if she were savouring her own pain and revelling in this selfish orgy of suffering (эгоизмом страдания), if I may put it that way. This rubbing of salt in the wound and taking pleasure in the act were familiar to me; it is the last refuge of the many who’ve been offended and humiliated (обиженных и оскорбленных), who’ve been oppressed by fate and are conscious of its unfairness (4.4.281-82, 3:385-86).

Nelly’s wound ‘could not have healed’: the mischief cannot be undone; the offended ones cannot will backward to delete the memory of the offences. Since the pain cannot be undone, Nelly as the masochist aggravates it, publicizes it and takes pleasure from it, which is the ‘last refuge’ of the ‘offended and humiliated’ (recalling the novel’s title). The more humiliated Nelly feels, the more pleasure she can take from the begging. And perhaps the more pleasure she takes, the more humiliated she feels. Constance Garnett translates the ‘selfish orgy of suffering’ more literally as ‘the egoism of suffering’, a key phrase to this chapter and which summarizes the idea that to seek suffering can be a selfish and pleasurable act.  

To restore the family order, Vanya persuades Nelly to relate her family history to Ikhmenev, so that he will be moved and decide to reconcile with his daughter. Nelly’s story does change the father’s mind and his family order is restored. But Nelly’s account of her traumatic past causes her to have another epileptic seizure (329). On her death bed, Nelly passes a letter from her mother to Vanya, showing that she has asked Nelly to reconcile with the Prince. Having withheld the letter, Nelly never acknowledges her identity as the Prince’s daughter. She says to Vanya: ‘Go and tell [the Prince] that I’m dead and I haven’t forgiven him. Tell him also that I’ve been reading the Bible recently. It says there: forgive all thy enemies. Well, I read it, but I still haven’t forgiven him’ (355). Nelly dies soon after the letter is passed on to Vanya.

Vanya almost unconditionally does good to the other. He saves and takes charge of Nelly, volunteers to be the go-between in order to secure Natasha’s happiness, criticizes Alyosha and yet helps him with the elopement. He sees the Prince as evil (he even slaps his face for humiliating Natasha) and is inclined to disguise his intimate relationship with

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Nelly. Commenting on the novel, Konstantin Mochulsky says that Vanya’s philanthropy recalls Kant’s categorical imperative:

There remains the writer Ivan Petrovich, the author of a philanthropic tale, the representative of conscious good. Alyosha has not yet matured as to the moral law; Ivan Petrovich is its convinced bearer. He is humanist and moralist. In him lives the Kantian imperative; he does good for the sake of good, sacrificing his own interests, placing himself at the service of others.

According to Mochulsky, Vanya does good deeds only for the sake of duty. Whether it is Natasha, Smith or Nelly, he will serve their good by sacrificing his own interest. To be morally good becomes an imperative. In the Kantian sense, when the good deed is carried out, personal inclinations are excluded. For only by doing so can the moral maxim become universally valid.

But on the other hand, *Humiliated and Insulted* suggests that the humiliated and insulted people enjoy no less pleasure than those who launch the assault. In fact, the wronged turn suffering into masochistic pleasure and sees themselves standing in a morally higher position. This is aptly summarized by the phrase ‘egoism of suffering’ which appears in part 4 when Nelly begs on the streets in order to enjoy pleasure from suffering. In this way, Mochulsky’s proposition has to be re-examined. I will supplement his proposition by giving a rereading of the categorical imperative, suggesting that this philosophical concept is apparently founded upon the exclusion of inclination, but is actually motivated by self-interest. By self-interest I refer to the characters’ egoism of suffering, the pursuit of pleasure by inflicting hatred and pain on the self. This chapter will discuss two essays to illuminate this point: Sigmund Freud’s ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924) and Jacques Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’ (1964). I will suggest that Kant’s seemingly impartial explanation for committing good is necessitated by the subject sadistically placing himself under the authority of the moral law. By juxtaposing Kant with Sade, the chapter will show that the Kantian project has repressed the sadistic/masochistic relationship between the subject and the law.

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12 See Susanne Fusso, *Discovering Sexuality in Dostoevsky*, p. 22.
15 The critique of the sadism in Kant through Sade was first carried out by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 81-119.
After the discussion of the two essays, I will return to two particular ‘moments’ in the novel. First, in the dinner conversation, the Prince introduces to Vanya his female friend who is so debauched that ‘even the marquis de Sade himself could have learnt a thing or two from her’ (253). The libertine couple has a habit of mocking the Schillerian types and giving them a shock. This moment of mockery exposes the Schillerian repression: Vanya has sacrificed his own interest – particularly the interest of the body – in exchange for the creation of the humble, morally good man. I see the Prince’s mockery as the moment which points to what is disavowed in Vanya and, in a larger context, the Kantian categorical imperative. I will elaborate on this mocking moment with a discussion of the ‘mystic terror’, a petrifying experience which haunts Vanya at nights. The mystic terror – which is also used by Dostoievsky to describe his epileptic condition – is translated into new significance in *Humiliated and Insulted*: the terror of the unknowable becomes a destructive force which punctuates the idealistic pursuit of universal goodness, loosening the moral structure Kant would like to build in his philosophy.

Vanya’s compulsive philanthropy leads me to rethink the Schillerian character as Kantian. It is true that Schiller – a great admirer of Kant – disagrees with parts of his philosophy. But to what extent the two German writers are intellectually similar is beyond the scope of this chapter. I am more interested in how Dostoievsky perceives the Schillerian type as Kantian. On the other hand, I want to rethink the Prince – who actually refers to Sade – as Sadean. In this way, the chapter intends to juxtapose Kant with Sade, hoping to illuminate a critique of not only Vanya’s philanthropy but also Kantian moral philosophy.

Concerning the Prince’s mockery of the Schillerian type, it should be noted that Dostoievsky’s reception of Schiller is varied, and, according to Alexandra Lyngstad, is roughly divided into three phases: ‘fervent admiration, parody and satire, and creative assimilation’. The first stage refers to the pre-Siberia Dostoievsky, who was passionate about pursuing social and moral ideals and engaged with the Petrashevsky Circle. Alyosha in *Humiliated and Insulted* refracts the voice of the young Dostoievsky: he joins an intellectual circle frequented by ‘a young idealistic bunch, all ardent philanthropists’, who fervently discuss topics such as freedom of speech, forthcoming reform and love for

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humanity (182-183). The Prince, having heard of the group, replies with ‘the most sarcastic smile’ (184). As I have shown, the Schillerian type is mocked as being selfish, silly and pretentious, suggesting that the novel belongs to the second stage, that is, the parody and satire of Schiller. As for the third stage, Dmitri Karamazov in *The Brother Karamazov* quotes Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* (*An die Freude*, 1785) to define beauty as that which begins with the ideal of Madonna and ends with the ideal of Sodom. Dmitri’s rereading of beauty as always schismatic in light of Schiller’s poem can be seen as the stage of ‘creative assimilation’.

**Freud and the Merciless Superego**

I have demonstrated that the novel is a presentation of egoism of suffering. But how exactly does it work? Kant can be understood, as Nietzsche puts it, as a philosopher who is ‘building under the seduction of morality’, and ‘apparently aiming at certainty, at “truth”, but in reality at “majestic moral structure”’. For Kant, the categorical imperative is the objective principle of morality. It should be able to help us to decide what is morally good and what is not in all circumstances. Man is not only a means which he is driven by his inclination but an end in himself. The Kantian imperative is based on the strict distinction between one’s duty and inclination. Natural impulses and passions must be suppressed by the will in the name of imperatives as inferred by reason. To achieve that one must create an imperative for oneself to follow; a rational man is a law-maker of himself. To be able to act morally for the sake of duty one must conform to a certain self-imposed law.

In his papers on ‘Metapsychology’, Sigmund Freud compares the superego of the psyche to Kant’s categorical imperative. The superego functions in the role of self-criticism of the ego. It is the internalized voice of the parents, or more precisely, it is the introjection – the mental representation – of them. In his essay ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924), Freud writes that the superego is instituted as the relationship between the child and his parents is de-sexualized:

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19 Kant writes: ‘Act always so that you treat humanity whether in your person or in that of another always as an end, but never as a means only’. Quoted, Hans Siegbert Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 18.
20 Kant writes: ‘Act always in such a way as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a universal kingdom of ends’. Quoted, Reiss, p. 19.
[The super-ego] came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id’s libidinal impulses – namely, the two parents. In this process the relation to those objects was desexualized; it was diverted from its direct sexual aims. Only in this way was it possible for the Oedipus complex to be surmounted (422).

The libidinal impulses for the parents are de-sexualized and diverted to a strict obedience to the moral law. Here the moral law is mainly derived from the father’s law. In other words, the superego is characteristic of the father’s order, that is, his power, severity and the inclination to supervise and to punish (422). For in the Oedipus complex, the father is perceived as the obstacle to the realization of the Oedipal wishes (the unconscious desires for incest and parricide). When the infantile ego is about to overcome the complex and fortifies itself, the child erects within himself the obstacle imposed on him before: that is, the law of the father. As a result, the more severe the father’s education, the more rapidly the subject succumbs to repression, and the more dominant the superego will be over the ego later on. The overcoming of the Oedipus complex marks at the same time the moment of sexual repression and the establishment of the moral law.

Freud suggests that the ego is subservient to the superego in a ‘compulsive’ manner which is expressed in the form of a categorical imperative: ‘As the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the categorical imperative of its super-ego’ (389). He comes back to this idea once again in the ‘Masochism’ essay: ‘the super-ego – the conscience at work in the ego – may then become harsh, cruel, and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge. Kant’s Categorical Imperative is thus the direct heir of the Oedipus complex’ (422). Having surmounted the Oedipal wishes, the relationship between the superego and the ego is not like the sexual relationship between the parents and the child. The superego is the de-sexualized substitute for the Oedipus complex.

The Kantian imperative refers to obedience to the moral law as a duty and the negligence of inclination. But I have also shown that Vanya is strangely attracted to Jeremiah Smith and Nelly and feels compelled to show benevolence to them (‘There was something besides pity in my feelings towards her. Whether it was the mysteriousness of the circumstances, or the impression that Smith had left on me, or my own whimsical mood – I just don’t know, but something drew me irresistibly to her’ (2.3.112)). If the

Kantian imperative means absolute obedience without personal interest, why does Vanya’s philanthropy appears to be integral to some kind of unidentified affectation? And why would Freud, when comparing the superego to the categorical imperative, says that the superego works in a compulsive character and is ‘harsh, cruel, and inexorable against the ego’? When the Prince says that philanthropy is a form of selfishness, it implies that Vanya does good in order to seek pleasure. In other words, the motive behind him and the Prince is the same, that is, the primacy of pleasure. Psychoanalytically, I suggest that Vanya is no less ‘sexualized’ than the Prince.

Freud first shows that the superego is established through de-sexualization. But then he observes that the subject unconsciously desires to be beaten by the father and to have a passive (feminine) sexual relation with him (424). This observation confirms what he calls the unconscious sense of guilt, that is, the subject is unconsciously guilty of bearing the Oedipal wishes and wants to be punished. In this way, the subject returns to the Oedipal complex, only this time in an unconscious and more binding manner, as Freud writes:

> Conscience and morality have arisen through the overcoming, the desexualization, of the Oedipus complex; but through moral masochism morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus complex is revived and the way is open for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex (424).

The superego is sexualized again, which is expressed in the form of moral masochism and sadism. The more the subject intends to express aggression outward the more severely the superego will punish the ego: ‘A person’s conscience becomes more severe and more sensitive the more he refrains from aggression against others’ (425). The aggression which is instinctually renounced is then taken up by the superego which increases the aggressiveness against the self. And the tension between the severe superego and the subservient ego is expressed in the form of a sense of guilt. In this way, the sadism of the superego and the masochism of the ego form a circular system which creates pleasures in pain and, more importantly, ensures the subject will not transgress the father’s law (425).

Conversely, the masochist tends to commit crimes simply in order to be punished, which Freud associates with Russian types in literature: ‘Masochism creates a temptation

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to perform “sinful” actions, which must then be expiated by the reproaches of the sadistic conscience (as is exemplified in so many Russian character types) or by chastisement from the great parental power of Destiny’ (425). In A Writer’s Diary (1873), Dostoevsky thinks that the ‘the principal and most basic spiritual need of the Russian People is the need for suffering, incessant and unslakeable suffering, everywhere and in everything’ (‘Vlas’, 1.161). The claim that Russian people have the need for suffering leads the literary critic Rancour-Laferriere to write a book-length psychoanalytical study on moral masochism in Russian culture. The passage from A Writer’s Diary would be an apt description of the characters like Nelly and Vanya who unconsciously hope to be offended so that they can expect a rapture of masochistic pleasure.

Freud has shown that the subject cannot be ‘naturally’ subservient to the law, as Vanya appears to be; the subject becomes so only through the establishment of the super-ego which relegates the ego through the condition of sadism and masochism, which is entirely sexual and painfully pleasurable. In this way, the common understanding of the formation of the ethical sense is reversed. Normally, it is understood that the moral law is established after one acquires the ethical sense. But Freud suggests the opposite: it is the imposition of the moral law which leads to the creation of the ethical sense. Ethics does not create law; law creates ethics. The subject has not got the ability to distinguish ‘good’ and ‘bad’ before the imposition of the moral law.

**Lacan’s Kant with Sade**

Freud’s analysis prompts the question: if the act of philanthropy is motivated by the pleasure principle, can we still be selflessly philanthropic? Freud would say yes, only if the superego undergoes desexualization once again and carries out the Kantian categorical

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24 The moral masochism recalls Freud’s early paper ‘Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work’ (1916), in which he suggests a type which he calls the ‘criminals from a sense of guilt’. Freud suggests that in their case the act of crime is preceded by (not followed by) a sense of guilt which is unconscious. The Oedipal subject commits crimes to seek punishment only to expiate the greater crime he desires, i.e. parricide and incest. See Penguin Freud 14: Art and Literature (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 291-333.


26 At the end of ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’, Freud writes: ‘The situation is usually presented as though ethical requirements were the primary thing and the renunciation of instinct followed from them. This leaves the origin of the ethical sense unexplained. Actually, it seems to be the other way about. The first instinctual renunciation is enforced by external powers and it is only this which creates the ethical sense, which expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of instinct’ (425).
imperative. In other words, the establishment of the universal moral law has to be conditioned by sexual repression.

Freud’s point about repression is anticipated by Prince Valkovsky, who says to Vanya that morality is something based on the concealment of one’s ‘innermost secret’. This secret, as we can know from his overt confession of debauchery, would be referring to one’s sexual impulses:

If it could come about that each one of us were to describe his innermost secrets – secret which one would hesitate and fear to tell not only to people at large, but even to one’s closest friend, nay, fear to admit even to one’s own self – the world would be filled with such a stench that each one of us would choke to death. That’s why, all our social conventions and niceties are so beneficial. There is much profound wisdom in them, I won’t say moral, but simply cautionary, comforting, which of course is all for the better, because in essence morality is comfort – that is, it has been devised solely for comfort (то есть изобретена единственно для комфорта)

(3.10.250, 3:362).

The passage envisages a world where the regulation of the moral law is taken away and the instinct of destruction finds its fullest expression. This world anticipates the apocalyptic world pictured in Raskolnikov’s dream in the epilogue of Crime and Punishment. In that world, people, who were infected with some mysterious virus, ‘did not know whom or how to judge, could not agree on what to regard as evil, what as good. They did not know whom to accuse, whom to vindicate. People killed each other in some sort of meaningless spite’ (Epilogue, 547). Raskolnikov’s dream recalls the world envisaged by Sade, in which nature desires continuous destruction and the cessation of propagation. Robert Jackson suggests that Dostoevsky has taken the destructiveness from Sade’s work: ‘Dostoevsky found in Sade the archetypal ideologist of destruction and disintegration in society, and it is from this point of view that he approaches Sade and “sadism” in his work’.27 The world in Raskolnikov’s dream is driven by destructions and men are not bonded with morality anymore. And if the moral law confirms a rationalized

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27 Robert Jackson, Dialogues with Dostoevsky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 145. There are plenty of passages which evoke the image of destruction in Sade’s works. Here I shall quote the one which is quoted by Lacan, which I will move on to discuss. Sade writes: ‘Without destruction the earth would receive no nourishment and, as a result there would be no possibility for man to reproduce his species. It is no doubt a fateful truth […] Crime is necessary in the world. But the most useful crimes are no doubt those that disrupt the most, such as the refusal of propagation or destruction […] Murder only takes the first life of the individual whom we strike down; we should also seek to take his second life, if we are to be even more useful to nature. For nature wants annihilation; it is beyond our capacity to achieve the scale of destruction it desires’. See Jacques Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 210-211.
and humanistic subject, that world does not confirm any sort of subjectivity. The Prince, through his view on morality, also envisages such a Sadean world, in which everyone ‘would choke to death’ as they unveil their ‘innermost secrets’.

The Prince has pointed out that morality has been ‘devised’ (or invented, contrived), meaning that there is no such thing as natural good or evil. The moral law is the standard which judges, making good and evil seem natural. But the Prince goes beyond that; he openly affirms his sexual impulses which are always destructive to the moral order: ‘You accuse me of vice, debauchery, immorality, whereas my only fault now perhaps is that I’m more honest than others, and nothing else; that I don’t cover up what others conceal even from themselves’ (250). Conversely, the Schillerian figures are repressed insofar as they do not acknowledge their egoistic wish for pleasure, just as repression is always created when the first time the superego – the Kantian imperative – is established.

For the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Kant’s philosophy of the categorical imperative is based on repression. In his essay ‘Kant with Sade’, an essay which was intended to be published as a preface to de Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom (La Philosophie dans le boudoir, 1795), he reveals the underside of the history of Enlightenment, in which the rational subject has to repress his desire in exchange for the universal moral law. Lacan, retrospectively, comments on his pairing up of Kant and Sade at the end of The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis:

[Kant’s] theory of consciousness, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state, that very desire that culminates in the sacrifice, strictly speaking, of everything that

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is the object of love in one’s human tenderness – I would say, not only in the rejection of the pathological object, but also in its sacrifice and murder. That is why I wrote *Kant avec Sade*.30

The passage speaks of two kinds of desire: the desire ‘proper’ and the ‘pure’ desire. The desire ‘proper’ refers to the desire for enjoyment. It has to be sacrificed, repressed and substituted by the ‘pure’ desire, which is the desire for reason, to obey the moral law as an absolute duty. It should be noted that Lacan says that the ‘pure’ desire is created through the ‘sacrifice and murder’ of the desire ‘proper’, suggesting an image of violence. In ‘Kant with Sade’, he elaborates on this point, saying that the pursuit of good is transformed into the Good, which is the object of the moral law: ‘It is indicated to us by our experience of listening within ourselves to commandments, whose imperative presents itself as categorical, that is, unconditional’.31 Lacan continues:

This good is only supposed as the Good by proposing itself, as has just been said, over and against any object which would set a condition to it […] in an *a priori* equivalence, in order to impose itself as superior by virtue of its universal value. Thus its weight only appears by excluding anything – drive or sentiment – which the subject might suffer in his interest for an object, what Kant therefore qualifies as ‘pathological’ (56).

The establishment of the moral law must be based on the elimination of personal inclination. James Swenson annotates that here Lacan has Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* in mind. Kant writes:

Since the idea of the moral law deprives self-love of its influence and self-conceit of its delusion, it lessens the obstacle to pure practical reason and produces the idea of the superiority of its objective law to the impulses of sensibility; it increases the weight of the moral law by removing, in the judgement of reason, the counterweight to the moral law which bears on a will affected by sensibility. Thus respect for the law is not the incentive to morality; it is morality itself, regarded subjectively as an incentive […]32

For Kant, morality is itself the incentive for obeying it. That would be in stark contrast with the Prince’s reading, that is, morality is an invention essentially for comfort. It should

be noticed that Kant uses ‘weight’ as a metaphor to explain the effectiveness of the moral law, suggesting a sense of suppressive force of the law. And he writes that by removing the ‘counterweight’, that is, personal impulses, the ‘weight’ of the law will be stronger and more powerful. Since Kant uses the language of metaphor, it is not unreasonable then to ask with respect to the above quotation: who is ‘moving’ the weight of law?

For Lacan, the object of the Kantian moral law is the supreme good which is universally true and valid. Such object of the good does not exist in the phenomenal world: it can only exist in the noumenal world, which is beyond the conception of time, space and mortality. Lacan writes, ‘in order to assure [the object] to the will in the fulfilment of the Law, [Kant] is constrained to send [it] off into the unthinkability of the Thing-in-itself’. Kant constructs the object, the thing-in-itself, for the subject to rationalize the possibility of a universal moral law. But on the other hand, as for the question ‘who is “moving” the weight of law?’, Lacan asks: who enunciates the object? Using the concept developed by the linguist Émile Benveniste, he points out that the way in which Kant formulates the categorical imperative has repressed the difference between the subject of statement (sujet de l’énonciation) and the subject of enunciation (sujet de l’énoncé) (59). For instance, in the statement ‘one should not kill’, the subject of enunciation is unmentioned. We are asked to obey the moral law but we are not told the origin of the law; the ‘voice’ of reason has been silenced. For Lacan, this silencing of the subject of enunciation necessitates a split subject: ‘The bipolarity by which the moral Law institutes itself is nothing other than this splitting of the subject which occurs in any intervention of the signifier: namely that of the subject of the enunciation from the subject of the statement’ (59).

The implication of the split subject is that the ‘I’ is the agent which both imposes the law and obeys the law. The splitting of the subject is comparable to the sado-masochistic structure of the ego. The ‘I’ is the ‘tormenting agent’ which creates the object of the supreme good, sending it to unthinkability (Thing-in-itself) and back to the self as the law: ‘This object, isn’t it there in Sadian experience, descended from its inaccessibility, and unveiled as Dasein of the agent of torment?’ (60). In fact, in another seminar, Lacan quotes a passage from Kant showing that he himself recognized the moral law as tormenting. Kant writes: ‘We can see a priori that the moral law as the determining

33 See David Martyn, Sublime Failures, p. 187.
34 ‘Kant with Sade’, 60
35 Here I find Fink’s translation more accessible: ‘The bipolarity upon which the moral law is founded is nothing but the split in the subject brought about by any and every intervention of the signifier: the split between the enunciating subject and the subject of the statement’ (650).
principle of will, by reason of the fact that it sets itself against our inclinations, must produce a feeling that one could call pain’. 36 But the pain, as demonstrated in an earlier quotation from Kant as the ‘counterweight’ to the moral law, must be suppressed or, in Lacan’s comparison with Stoicism, has to be despised (60).

For Sade, perpetual torture of the body is desirable and is the condition for entering enjoyment (jouissance). But in Kant, this desire for pain is immediately concealed with the affect of contempt. The moral law is founded upon the universally supreme good which transcends time. This can only be achieved by repressing the experience of pain before the injunction of the law. In this way, Žižek and Alenka Zupančič write that what Kant postulates in his philosophy is not immortality of the soul but the immortality of the body: ‘Is not the phantasmic “truth” of the immortality of the soul its exact opposite, the immortality of the body, its ability to sustain endless pain and humiliation?’ 37 The Kantian subject has repressed the body, recalling Freud’s discussion of the superego, that the subject is de-sexualized and diverted from their Oedipal wishes in exchange for the dutiful obedience to the moral law. Only when the subject is sexualized will sadism/masochism be at work once again. But that is beyond Kant’s thoughts.

**Mystic Terror and the Prince**

Now I move on to show how Vanya’s philanthropy is mocked and suspended by Prince Valkovsky’s libertinism. For Lacan, Sade is more honest than Kant. He writes: ‘The Sadian maxim, by pronouncing itself from the mouth of the Other [i.e. the authoritative ‘voice’ of the moral law], is more honest than appealing to the voice within, since it unmasksthe splitting, usually conjured away, of the subject’ (59). 38 Similarly, disclosing his obscene habits, the Prince says that his only fault is that he is more honest with his sensual impulses (250). Kant needs Sade’s idea of perpetual torture to spell out the sadism in the institution of the moral law, just as Vanya needs the Prince’s honest confession of his debauchery in order to illuminate the repression in Vanya’s philanthropy.

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38 The Sadean maxim is summarized by Lacan with a quote from Sade’s *Juilette*. Lacan rephrases the quote: ‘I have the right of enjoyment over your body, anyone can say to me, and I will exercise this right, without any limit stopping me in the capriciousness of the exactions that I might have the taste to satiate’ (‘Kant with Sade’, 58).
The Prince says that apart from fame, money and gambling, his ultimate pleasure is derived from women: ‘the main, the most important thing is women…women in all their shapes and forms. I even go for debauchery that’s covert, secretive, and the more eccentric and depraved the better, even with a whiff of sordidness for extra delectation…’ (255). The Prince is not a simply a ‘womanizer’ but a Sadean libertine who enjoys all kinds of perverted sexual acts. His debachedness marks an absolute break with morality and sexuality. Such heterogeneity in the Prince terrifies Vanya.

It should be remembered that the Prince is a ‘snake or a huge spider’ which Vanya would like to crush. The image of the spider is often associated with mystery in Dostoevsky. Svidrigaylov in *Crime and Punishment* pictures eternity as a bath house with spiders forever lurking at the blackened corners (4.1.289). Ippolit in *The Idiot* describes a mysterious power which attracts himself to death as the impossible shape of a tarantula (3.6.409). Stavrogin in *Demons* observes a red little spider crawling while waiting for the girl he seduces to hangs herself (At Tikhon’s, 699). That Prince Valkovsky is thought of as a spider suggests a mysterious power inside him which ambivalently attracts and repels the Schillerian figure.39

The mysterious and perhaps destructive force in the Prince is well captured in the characterization of the ‘mystic terror’ that haunts Vanya every night when he is working on his novel. Vanya describes this terrifying moment in a long paragraph:

> Whether it was because of my nervous disorder, or the impressions my new dwelling made on me, or my recent dejection, at the first approach of dusk I would gradually, almost imperceptibly, enter that spiritual state (so familiar to me now at night-time in my illness), which I call *mystical terror* (я называю *мистическим ужасом*). It is a most dreadful, agonizing fear of something I cannot define, something unfathomable and non-existent in the normal course of events, but which may at any given moment materialize and confront me as an unquestionable, terrible, ghastly and implacable reality, making a mockery of all evidence of reason (1.10.52, 3:208).

This mystic terror has at least two traits and the first one leads to the latter. It is an extreme fear of something unknown, something ‘non-existent’, imperceptible, or beyond language. But the ‘unknown’ suddenly materializes and confronts the subject as an ‘implacable

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39 In psychoanalysis, the shape of a spider in a dream suggests the images of castration and erection at the same time. The ambivalence of the spider image can be seen as constitutive of the mystical terror. See Karl Abraham, ‘The Spider as a Dream Symbol’ (1922), *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, trans. by Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey (London: Maresfield Library, 1988), pp. 326-332.
reality’. The mystic terror therefore can be seen as the fear of something which is both unknown and known, just as the fearful anticipation of epilepsy is always cut off by the sudden attack of a seizure. The sudden materialization of the unknown ‘something’, as the passage continues, ‘[makes] a mockery of all evidence of reason’. The terror of it, ‘totally confounding all rationalization, normally increases inexorably, so that in the end the mind – which oddly enough on such occasions can function with particular lucidity – nevertheless loses all capacity to counteract the sense’ (51). The passage conveys the image of the terrified subject who becomes ‘deaf and dumb’ – losing the faculty of reason – and at the same time is highly conscious of his own being. The subject is placed in a fearfully passive position where the mind becomes ‘unresponsive and impotent’. All the subject can do is to witness the powerlessness of reason or, to put it in Sadean terms, to witness how reason is ‘tortured’ with fear.

Reason is being mocked in the moment of mystic terror. If we contextualize the terror with respect to the humiliated and insulted figures, we can say that the mystic terror is a revelation of the impotence of the Kantian reason. The mystic terror is significantly compared to the experience of necrophobia, the horror of death (‘It seems to me that something similar must be experienced by those who suffer from necrophobia’ (52)). The corpse is familiar insofar as it is a human body. But at the same time the motionless body looks unfamiliar to the living. The fear of the corpse is part of the inability to envisage the resurrection of the dead; the corpse will remain as a corpse. And the meaninglessness of it constitutes the phobia.\(^40\)

Besides, as the Introduction has shown, Dostoevsky is anxious that he will be buried after having a seizure, as his body will look like a corpse. It is not coincidental that the above passage refers to necrophobia: the fear of the corpse means the fear of the self, who is always subject to the epileptic seizure which turns the self into a ‘corpse’. Although Vanya does not literally suffer from an epileptic seizure in the novel, the fact that he is haunted by the mystic terror every night suggests that he is subject to the seizure. In contrast with the categorical imperative which has repressed the body, the mystic terror refers to this epileptic moment during which the subject loses the ability to reason and the body is about to have a fit. During the mystic terror, the repressed Kantian subject has to cope with its own convulsive body, which can be seen as a radical revolt against the

\(^{40}\) I will extend the discussion of how the corpse shatters idealism in chapter 3 on *The Idiot*. 

bodily repression which is instituted throughout the subject’s dutiful obedience to the moral law.

The mystic terror is also found in the dialogue between Vanya and the Prince, who likes to torment the Schillerian type by mocking his philanthropic reason. Vanya writes:

[The Prince] derived some kind of enjoyment, even some kind of wanton pleasure, in his self-abasement and in the insolence, the cynicism with which he tore off his mask in front of me. He wanted to relish my surprise and my horror. He genuinely detested me and was mocking me to my face (3.10.246).

How does the Prince tear off his mask and relish horror in the Schillerian type? The Prince says to Vanya that he is bored by the Schillerian ideal: ‘I am so fed up with all this naivety, this mock sentimentality that Alyosha affects, all this Schillerian romanticism’ (247). The Prince relates his habit of dealing with his ‘hatred of all this banal, utterly pointless show of innocence and sentimentality’. First he performs the Schillerian type and then destroys it:

One of my most sporting amusements being to pretend I am that way inclined myself and, as I enter into the spirit of it, to befriend and string along some everlastingly juvenile Schiller, only suddenly and unexpectedly to give him the shock of his life – lift up my mask, pull a face, poke my tongue out at him just at the moment when he’s least expecting it (247).

This ‘sporting amusement’ of the Prince is sadistic in nature as it takes pleasure from mocking the juvenile Schiller and giving him a shock. The Prince elaborates: ‘There’s a peculiar gratification to be derived from the sudden tearing-down of a mask, from the cynicism of not even deigning to betray any sense of shame in suddenly exposing oneself to another indecently’ (251). The moment of sudden disclosure of obscenity can be seen as the moment where the moral order is mocked and suspended. Similarly, the Prince tells a story of a clerk in Paris who, during his ‘bouts of madness’, wraps his naked body with a large cloak and strolls on the street. Stopping in front of a person, the clerk ‘fling[s] his cloak open and expose[s] himself in all his…glory’ (251). The exhibitionist enjoys the moment of ‘suddenly knocking some kind of jumped-up Schiller into the middle of next week by poking one’s tongue out at him when he’s least expecting it’ (251).

The Prince has a female friend whose debauchery ‘skill’ is even more ‘professional’. She is the Prince’s ‘secret and mysterious paramour’, who is ‘so lascivious
that even the Marquis de Sade himself could have learnt a thing or two from her’ (253). On the surface, the lady is ‘stern’, ‘severe’, ‘daunting’ as ‘frigid as an iceberg’ and engages in ‘contemplative mysticism’. On the other hand, ‘there was no harlot who was more debauched than she’ (253). Joseph Frank points out that this female libertine is an allusion to Marquise de Merteuil in Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), who also has multiple sexual relationships with men without moral restraints.  

In the case of the Sadean lady, she not only commits debauchery shamelessly but also performs the role of Schiller, only in order to tear it off with indecency. ‘The strongest, the most exciting and thrilling aspect of this sport’, the Prince says, ‘was its air of mystery and the sheer effrontery of the deception’ (253). The Sadean lady unmasks her indecency at the most unexpected moment in order to expose the deception of morality. The Prince continues:

> This mockery of everything (Эта насмешка над всем) that the Countess preached in society as being elevated, sublime and inviolate, no less than her inner satanic laughter and premeditated flouting of everything that ought not to be flouted – all this without restraint, taken to its utmost limit, beyond the reaches of even the wildest imagination – was that which constituted the principal and most vivid feature of the gratification (253, 3:364).

What Sade could ‘learn’ from this anonymous lady would be the source of her pleasure, which is mockery. Not the mockery of Sade, but the mockery of the Schillerian figure. The Prince’s female friend takes pleasure from mocking sublime virtues. Her sudden shift from frigid iceberg to excessive debauchery reveals the delusion of moral ideals.

The lady’s ‘inner satanic laughter’ recalls Goethe’s Mephistopheles who is also a figure of mockery. The laughter also anticipates the scene where Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* dreams of the pawnbroker. He tries to murder her again with an axe, but the pawnbroker ‘heaved all over with laughter’ and she does not stir or bleed ‘as though she were made of wood’ (3.6.277). Like the Sadean laughter, the pawnbroker’s laughter is ‘inaudible’, hinting at its undecided nature (277). Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* wishes to commit murder like Napoleon so that he can feel no repentance. The pawnbroker’s inaudible laughter can be seen as the mockery of any justification which seeks a higher cause for the murder. Similarly, the Sadean lady’s ‘inner satanic laughter’, her excessive debauchery, and the subversion of moral order – all these are the mockery of the elevated and sublime virtues which she pretends to preach.

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The idea of mockery is central to the idea of mystic terror and the mocking habits of the libertine couple. The mockery is carried out in the sudden revelation of the Sadean indecency which gives a terrifying shock to the Schillerian figure, dismantling Kant’s wish to postulate the immortality of the body. It is this sudden moment of switch that punctuates the idea of an inviolable moral law. And it should be remembered that the mystic terror is the phrase derived from Dostoevsky’s description of epilepsy. The phrase in *Humiliated and Insulted* has been translated into the shocking fear of the moment when the fantasy of ‘natural goodness’ shatters and Kant’s ‘majestic moral structure’ collapses. And because epilepsy implies the convulsive body, the mystic terror has also been understood as the reaction against the subject who has repressed the body in exchange for the attainment of the Good, an ideal which does not exist in the phenomenal world.

One of the few things Sade could learn from Dostoevsky’s libertine couple would be their destructive interest in mockery. Mockery refers to the moment of sudden change in which the Schillerian figure is horrified by the unmasking of the most indecent behaviour. This mockery is destructive in tendency insofar as it puts the Schillerian figure in terror and confounds their reason. And this mockery begins with the performance of the Schillerian and the sudden contempt for it. In the mockery, the position of the Prince his female friend turns upside down or, in Bakhtinian words, is ‘carnivalized’. It is through this carnivalization of the character that the perversity of the Schillerian figure is exposed. The mockery – which terrifies, turning the Schillerian hero ‘deaf and dumb’ – is the power of the moment.

**The Russian de Sade**

When Turgenev disapprovingly says that Dostoevsky is the Russian de Sade, he seems to have missed the point (see epigraph). He is critical of Dostoevsky portraying characters like Prince Valkovsky who triumphantly admit their obscene debauchery. But unlike the writings of Marquis de Sade, to portray obscenity is not an end itself. When Pushkin’s unfinished story ‘Egyptian Nights’ – specifically the section involving Cleopatra and her lovers – was compared to the work of Sade, Dostoevsky rebuked this view by saying that the story, instead of being scabrous, provides ‘a point of view (and just this point of view is the main thing)’ for the reader to witness the ‘corruption of human nature that has

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42 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 3.
attained frightful proportions’. Similarly, *Humiliated and Insulted* has made the stark observation that the impoverished and wronged are no less egoistic and perverted than the Sadean characters. In the letter quoted in the epigraph, Turgenev is confused by the fact that Dostoevsky – ‘our de Sade’ – was even commemorated by the Russian Church, exclaiming that the Russian people were living in ‘strange times’. That the Russian de Sade was revered by the Church is indeed strange. But perhaps that peculiarity of Russia is part of Dostoevsky’s reading of his country. In fact, he is still remembered today because his novels have shown the strangeness of the Russian people, the strangeness of his time.

The characterization of the humiliated and insulted in this novel (such as Vanya, Nelly, Natasha and Ikhmenev) is in distinct contrast with the Prince and his female friend, which has enabled this chapter to present a critique of the Schillerian type through the Sadean type. In the next four novels however, the Dostoevsky’s heroes are increasingly schismatic: the pursuit of moral ideals, for instance, will be discovered in a character who manifests his desire for sensual pleasure. This tendency in creating the split subject will bring us closer to the epileptic mode of being. With this in mind, I now move on to the next chapter on *Crime and Punishment*.

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43 Quoted, Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky*, p. 145.
44 ‘[…] And just to think that all the most important priests in the Russian Orthodox Church sang requiem masses for our de Sade and even read sermons on this universal man’s love of all humanity! We really do live in strange times!’.
Chapter Two

Petersburg and the Deaf and Dumb Spirit

Some strange thought suddenly stirred inside me, I shuddered, and at that moment my heart seemed to fill with hot spurt of blood, suddenly boiling up from a surge of a powerful, but previously unknown sensation. I seemed to understand something at that moment, which up until that point had only stirred within me, but had not been consciously realized. It seemed that my eyes had been opened to something new, to a completely new world that was unfamiliar to me and known only by some murky rumours or secret signs. I suppose that my existence began at that precise moment (Dostoevsky, ‘Petersburg Vision in Verse and Prose’, 1861).¹

Reading Raskolnikov: Reading the City

Crime and Punishment (Преступление и Наказание), in six parts and an epilogue, was published in instalments in the literary journal Russian Messenger in 1866. In the summer of 1865, Dostoevsky was writing a short novel about the subterranean life in Petersburg called The Drunkards. The novel was rejected and later turned into a subplot of Crime and Punishment in relation to the jobless alcoholic Marmeladov. To alleviate his financial situation, the writer signed an agreement with the publisher Stellovsky, agreeing to finish a new novel by November 1866. The novel turned out to be The Gambler, published while Dostoevsky was writing Crime and Punishment.

Dostoevsky started writing Crime and Punishment in September 1865 from a first-person point of view. He changed the idea and rewrote the novel in third-person narration.² Parts 1 and 2 were published in January and February in 1866. Part 3 was delayed because a Petersburg student Dmitri Karakozov attempted to shoot the Tsar in March (Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov is based on the assassin, which I will come back to in chapter 5). Katkov, the editor of the journal, delayed the publication, fearing that the novel would be seen as an incitement of the assassination after which two left-

wing journals were closed down. Chapter 4 of part 4, which contains the young prostitute Sonia reading the Gospel, was considered inappropriate and rejected. The chapter was amended and was published in June and July. Nothing came out in September and October as Dostoevsky needed to write *The Gambler* for the contract he had signed. The remaining parts came out in the November and December issues.

The plot of *Crime and Punishment* is complicated. To summarize, we can say that all actions in the novel are driven or influenced by the murder of a female pawnbroker and her sister Lizaveta. In the early stage of writing the novel, Dostoevsky describes this central action:

> The action is contemporary, in the present year. A young man, expelled from the university, petty-bourgeois in origin and living in extreme poverty, as a result of levity and unsound ideas, gives himself to certain strange half-baked notions, which are in the air, and decides at once to break out of his wretched situation. He has decided to kill an old woman, the wife of a titular councillor, who lends money at interest.⁴

The novel tells the story of Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, formerly a law student, who is driven by some immature ideas to commit a crime, which literally means ‘stepping over’ in Russian (преступление). In the opening page, the twenty-three-year-old young man articulates the raw idea of the murder: ‘Hm…yes…man has it all in his hands, and it all slips through his fingers from sheer cowardice…This is an axiom…I wonder, what are people most afraid of? A new step, their own new word (Нового шага, нового собственного слова), that’s what they’re most afraid of...’ (1.1.4, 6:6). The idea to speak the ‘new word’ or make a new step forms the basis of the ‘Napoleonic theory’ which is elaborated in part 3. At the end of part 1, Raskolnikov murders the pawnbroker and her sister Lizaveta. At the end of part 6, he goes to the police office and confesses his crime.

It should be noticed that ‘Raskolnikov’ is derived from the word ‘schismatic’ (‘raskolnik’), which refers to the Old Believer, who split off from the Russian Orthodox Church in disagreement with the patriarch Nikon’s religious reform in the mid-seventeenth century. In this way, the young man who wants to speak the ‘new word’ is also radically ‘old’ insofar as his name refers to the Old Believers, who insisted on maintaining their religious traditions. ‘Raskolnikov’ also comes from the word ‘split’ (раскол). His friend Razumikhin describes him: ‘There really were two opposite

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characters in him, changing places with each other. At times he’s terribly taciturn! He’s always in a hurry, always too busy, yet he lies there doing nothing. Not given to mockery, and not because he lacks sharpness but as if he had not time for such trifle. […He] sets a terribly high value on himself and, it seems, not without a certain justification’ (2.2.215). Raskolnikov’s name suggests all kinds of splits of the character, which this chapter will further explore.

Six months ago before the story begins, Raskolnikov writes a published article on the subject of crime. Speaking to the examining magistrate Porfiry in part 3, he gives an interpretation of his article, which mainly draws on the ideas in The Life of Julius Caesar (1865) by Napoleon III. The idea put forth in the book, as Joseph Frank points out, recalls Hegel’s characterization of ‘the-world-historical-individual’; the book aims at ‘defending the right of great historical figures to accomplish their world-transforming role unhampered by the narrow standards of conventional social morality’.4 Similarly, Raskolnikov identifies himself with the ‘the-world-historical-individual’ in order to justify his right to commit the murder. In his Napoleonic theory, humankind is divided into two categories: a majority of ordinary people and a minority of extraordinary ones. The extraordinary men, including Napoleon I, have the self-given right to allow their conscience to ‘step over certain obstacles’ (259). These exceptional men break an old law and found a new one, even at the price of sacrificing other people’s lives. These men, who are able to speak the ‘new word’, must inevitably be criminals. On the other hand, the ordinary men are by nature ‘conservative, staid, live in obedience, and like being obedient’ (260).5

In part 4, Raskolnikov asks Sonia to read out the passage about the resurrection of Lazarus from the Gospel of St. John. In part 5, Raskolnikov confesses to having committed the murder. Sonia asks Raskolnikov to bow down in the middle of the square in the Haymarket to confess his crime before entering the police station in part 6. He is then sent to Siberia for hard labour, during which Sonia takes care of his welfare. Going

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back to the confession to Sonia, Raskolnikov invents multiple reasons to justify his crime. But at the same time he negates all the reasons he provides. He justifies the murder with reasons such as philanthropy, the need for money, his ‘evil’, his ‘madness’ and at the end he backs himself up with the Napoleonic theory by saying that he wants to kill like a Napoleon (415). But on the other hand, Raskolnikov doubts whether he has actualized the Napoleonic theory. At the end of part 3, he says: ‘I was in a hurry to step over …it wasn’t a human being I killed, it was a principle! So I killed the principle, but I didn’t step over, I stayed on this side…All I managed to do was kill’ (3.6.274).

Raskolnikov meets Porfiry for three times. In the meetings Porfiry keeps winking at Raskolnikov, recalling the ending of Pushkin’s *The Queen of Spades*, in which the deceased old countess winks at the Napoleonic hero Hermann through a poker card, which turns him into a mentally deranged man. Porfiry’s winks can be seen as feminine and maddening. His androgynous character is reiterated by the absence of a family name and his resemblance to a peasant woman: ‘It would even have been good-natured were it not for the expression of his eyes, which had a sort of liquid, watery gleam and were covered by nearly white eyelashes that blinked as though winking at someone. The look […] had something womanish about it’ (250). Porfiry’s gender ambivalence also parallels the way he investigates Raskolnikov. He did not arrest Raskolnikov in the first place even though he knows he is the murderer. This is to confuse the young man, so that he would carelessly provide clues or evidence of his crime. Porfiry explains: ‘If I were to lock [a criminal] at the wrong time – even though I’m sure it was him […] I would be giving him, so to speak, a definite position; I would be, so to speak, defining him and reassuring him psychologically, so that he would be able to hide from me in his shell’ (4.5.338). Instead of fixing the identity of the criminal, Porfiry keeps Raskolnikov ‘consciously under eternal suspicion and fear’ (338). The power of the police – who can both fix and unfix the criminal’s identity – leads Porfiry to define psychology as cursed and double-ended (452). At the end of the last meeting he says that Raskolnikov will not run away from the police: ‘You need a life and definite position […]. You’d run away, and come back on your own. *It’s impossible for you to do without us*’ (6.2.460). For Porfiry, the young man needs the police for his obsession with the Napoleonic theory. The police represent the judicial law, on which Raskolnikov depends to justify and measure his crime as transgressive, as successful in terms of stepping over.
Porfiry qualifies the murder case as a ‘fantastic, gloomy and modern case (Тут дело фантастическое, мрачное, дело современное)’ (6.2.456, 6:348). Then he analyzes Raskolnikov:

There are bookish dreams here, sir, there is a heart chafed by theories; we see here a resolve to take the first step, but a resolve of a certain kind – he resolved on it, but as if he were falling off a mountain or plunging down from a bell-tower, and then arrived at the crime as if he weren’t using his own legs. He forgot to lock the door behind him, but killed, killed two people, according to a theory (456).

As we know, Raskolnikov’s crime is not based on any manifest conflicts between the two women and the young man. What drives him to kill, as Porfiry says, is a theory. And this theory is derived from the book written by Napoleon III, who wanted to justify himself as the rightful and powerful heir to the throne. And even the Emperor himself is interpreting the triumph of Julius Caesar to justify his claim. In this way, Raskolnikov’s theory idealizes the victors in history. As the murder is motivated by the idealized theory, there is no material cause in explaining the case.

Not surprisingly, the murder is committed in a mechanical manner. Raskolnikov axes the pawnbroker like a machine (1.6.76).⁶ When he hears by chance that Lizaveta would not be home and the old woman ‘would be left at home alone’, he walks like a ‘man condemned to death’ (1.5.62). The Napoleonic theory begins to operate in full speed just as a machine; instead of natural impulse, something else drives Raskolnikov to kill:

This last day, which had come so much by chance and resolved everything at once, affected him almost wholly mechanically: as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him along irresistibly, blindly, with unnatural force, without objections. As if a piece of his clothing had been caught in the cogs of a machine and he were being dragged into it (1.6.70).

Raskolnikov never uses the pawned items he has stolen from the pawnbroker. The key point is to kill, which he thinks would prove his subversiveness. His desire to fashion himself as a Napoleon continues after the murder. In part 2, he meets the police clerk Zamyotov in a tavern called the Crystal Palace and virtually confesses to him of having committed the murder (2.6). Later, in a detour, he compulsively returns to the crime scene:

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⁶ ‘He took the axe all the way out, swung it with both hands, scarcely aware of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the butt-end down on her head. His own strength seemed to have no part in it. But the moment he brought the axe down, strength was born in him’ (1.6.76).
‘An irresistible and inexplicable desire drew him on’ (2.6.170). He walks up to the pawnbroker’s flat and rings the bell in order to experience the moment of transgression once again: ‘The former painfully horrible, hideous sensation began to come back to him more clearly, more vividly; he shuddered with each ring, and enjoyed the feeling more and more’ (2.6.172). Raskolnikov takes pleasures from seeing the self ‘stepping-over’ again.

Raskolnikov’s anxiety to kill the old woman to prove his ability to transgress marks what I will call the ‘intentional’ or ‘premeditated’ side of the novel. In gender term, Raskolnikov’s wish to become a Napoleon is symptomatic of his desire for the fantasy of a masculine self. The thirst to step over or to speak the ‘new word’, I suggest, is integral to the Tsar’s intention to rebuild the city in a grandiose style. In chapter 6 of part 1, just before the murder, Raskolnikov, walking in the Haymarket, fancies building up tall fountains in the market area in order to freshen the air: ‘He arrived at the conviction that if the Summer Garden were expanded across the entire Field of Mars and even joined with the Garden of the Mikhailovsky Palace, it would be a wonderful and most useful thing for the city’ (1.6.73). Adele Lindenmeyr points out that Raskolnikov’s fantasy to rebuild Petersburg is constitutive to his desire to prove his Napoleonic theory. She supports the case by discussing how Napoleon III, in order to establish legitimacy by his link with his illustrious predecessor, hired the city planner Georges Haussmann in 1852 to rebuild Paris from a medieval city into a modern city, in which areas like the Haymarket were all removed.

But on the other hand, Raskolnikov is absorbed into a contradictory thought: ‘he suddenly became interested in precisely why the people of all big cities are somehow especially inclined, not really out of necessity alone, to live and settle in precisely those parts of the city where there are neither gardens nor fountains, where there is filth and stench and all sorts of squalor’ (1.6.73). The place referred here is best illustrated by the Haymarket, which was one of the oldest, largest and busiest retail trade centres of Petersburg. The problem of overcrowding intensified after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which caused peasants to migrate to the city to seek jobs. Each house in the market neighbourhood can accommodate up to two hundred and fifty people. And about eighteen

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taverns were located just outside where Raskolnikov lives. These conditions of the Haymarket, as described in the opening pages of the novel, cause ‘a feeling of the deepest revulsion [that] flashed for a moment in [Raskolnikov’s] fine features’ (4).

During his walk in Petersburg, Raskolnikov bears multiple thoughts in his mind at the same time. He compares such a mode of being with that of the condemned man: ‘It must be the same for men being held out to execution – their thoughts must cling to every object they meet on the way’ (73). Just like the condemned man who indulges in virtually every object he sees just before his death, Raskolnikov has the same inclination to reflect on every object he sees during his walk in the city. At one moment he fancies rebuilding the city according to the grandiose city plan. At the next moment he is distracted by the stench and crowd in the Haymarket district. Raskolnikov’s vision therefore undergoes a continuous process of ‘splitting’. That is to say, his vision always diverges to other images in his mind. Seeing one thing means seeing the others. The group of political buildings in the Admiralty district can be seen as an allegory of the Haymarket area, and vice versa.

In Dostoevsky’s novel Notes from Underground (1864), the Underground Man says that ‘St. Petersburg [is] the most abstract and intentional city in the whole world’. He qualifies his statement: ‘(Cities can be either intentional or unintentional)’ (1.2). Field of Mars, as Raskolnikov mentions, is located in the Admiralty district of Petersburg, in which all the political and military buildings or monuments were built. As in modern Paris, roads are straight and wide and the buildings are all built with tidy, symmetrical, classical façades. Buildings in this district – such as the Admiralty, Alexander Column, Bronze Horsemen statue (monument of Peter the Great) – can be seen as the intentional display of Tsarist power. And the Underground Man would say that it represents the intentional city of Petersburg.

But where is the unintentional city? Less than one kilometre away from the centre of this district is the Haymarket square, the busiest and disease-brewing slum of the city. This is the place where all the major characters live and the murder takes place. This is also the most mysterious part of the city, infected by chances, accidents, randomness and all kinds of carnivalesque activities.

9 I have cited the statistics of the Haymarket from Adele Lindenmeyr’s essay.
10 Commenting on the experience of travelling in Europe in February 1862, Dostoevsky writes: ‘Everything ordered and made to order from Europe at that time fit in very comfortably with us, beginning with Petersburg – the most fantastic city with the most fantastic history of all the cities on the face of the earth’. See ‘And a Completely Superfluous One’, Winter Notes on Summer Impressions, trans. by David Patterson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 19.
Raskolnikov had planned the murder six weeks before the action of the novel begins. The distance, as he calculates, between his room and the pawnbroker’s flat is exactly seven hundred and thirty steps (1.1.5). And yet, the murder is committed largely by chance. For instance, Raskolnikov decides to execute his plan only after hearing from afar a conversation that the pawnbroker will be alone in her flat on the night (1.5). In a tavern he hears another conversation between two young men mentioning the idea that killing the pawnbroker will be beneficial to the common good (1.6). Another accident is that the pawnbroker’s sister Lizaveta enters the flat during the murder, which causes Raskolnikov to kill her as well. Lizaveta is described as quiet, gentle, mild and ‘will consent to anything’ (1.6). She is continuously abused by her sister and arguably by many men who are attracted to her. In fact, she is pregnant when she is killed. Raskolnikov meant to kill one woman but accidentally he kills two. And actually he has destroyed three lives altogether. The actual murder outwits Raskolnikov’s meticulous plan, exposing the futility of trying to make himself a Napoleon by following a theory. And the effect of chance points to the unintentional city of Petersburg.

This chapter will suggest a rereading of *Crime and Punishment* in terms of the intentional and unintentional sides of Petersburg. For instance, the Tsars intend to build rigid and uniform architecture. But it turns out to be eclectic and disorienting in the eyes of the Petersburgers. There is always a limit in the intentionality of the city plan. In other words, the meaning of the city is always excessive and therefore cannot be fully comprehended. The dark streets and corners, the underground activities, the hidden aggressiveness of Raskolnikov, the effect of chances of the murder – all these point to the unintentional sides of the city. The unintentional city destabilizes the intentional one, creating a decentred and disorienting space, which characterizes a subject which is decentred.

This chapter will show how the novel is decentered at two levels: the urban space of Petersburg and Raskolnikov’s interiority. These two aspects of the text, I argue, are allegorical of each other. That is to say, the writing of Petersburg will be understood as a commentary on writing the schismatic Raskolnikov. Conversely, the schism in Raskolnikov helps us understand the Underground Man’s riddling statement on the most ‘abstract and intentional’ city. I will examine two ‘moments’ in the novel. First, I will explore the way in which Petersburg, particular St. Isaac’s Cathedral, is represented in the novel. Significantly, the Petersburg’s panorama, which includes the Cathedral, is described as filled with a ‘mute and deaf spirit’, which implies the city itself is ‘epileptic’
by nature (2.2.114). I will look at the Cathedral’s eclectic architectural style to show how the Petersburger’s experience of seeing is disoriented with respect to the eclectic cityscape.

The second part will move on to discuss Raskolnikov’s dreams, particularly the mare-beating dream, showing how they overthrow the logic of the Napoleonic theory. The dream depicts the image of ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ at the same time, suggesting the impossibility of transgression. This section intends to show that the eclectic quality of the dreams is integral to the eclectic setting of Petersburg’s geography. That is, the experience of seeing in the dreams is split, just as the visual experience of walking in the city is always schismatic. And the dominance of eclecticism will demonstrate that the relationship between ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ is not consequential; they occupy Dostoevsky’s hero at the same time and necessitate a split and unfinalized subject, which marks the epileptic mode of being.

The Vision on the Neva
As I have discussed, Raskolnikov’s Napoleonic theory is based on Napoleon III’s reading of Julius Caesar. The concept of Tsar, as we know, derives from Caesar, implying the status of a Roman emperor. In fact, when Raskolnikov justifies his crime before his sister Dunya, he has Caesar in mind as he names the place where he was crowned: ‘men spill [blood just] like champagne, and for which they’re crowned on the Capitoline and afterwards called benefactors of mankind’ (6.7.518). In a metonymical shift, Raskolnikov’s wish to kill like a Napoleon is equivalent to that of wanting to be a Caesar as well as a Tsar.

I would like to trace Raskolnikov’s relationship with the power of the Tsar through chapter 2 of part 2.11 Part 1 finishes with the murder and part 2 begins with Raskolnikov being summoned by the police. It turns out that he is summoned because of his failure to pay a debt to his landlady. Afterwards, he returns to his coffin-like flat and decides where to dispose of the property he has taken from the pawnbroker. Walking on Voznesensky Prospect towards the Neva, he says to himself: ‘Why the Neva? Why in the water? Wouldn’t it be better to go somewhere very far away […] in some solitary place […] to bury it all, and maybe also make note of the tree?’ (2.2.108) (see map). Raskolnikov could dispose of the property in a much more desolate area. And yet, he suddenly decides to hide

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11 A study on the topography of Crime and Punishment was carried out by Nikolai Antsiferov’s 1923 Dostoevsky’s Petersburg (Leningrad: Leningrad, 1991), which is not available in English. See Buckler’s discussion of the book, Mapping St. Petersburg, pp. 110-112.
it under a stone in a deserted courtyard along Voznesensky Prospect. There appears an inexplicable drive for him to do so, anticipating Porfiry’s comment that he will not flee Petersburg and would rather return to the police and confess.

After hiding the property, Raskolnikov turns down to Konnogvardeisky Boulevard and crosses Nikolaevsky Bridge to reach Vasilevsky Island, where his friend Razumikhin lives: ‘Well, well, I seem to have brought myself to Razumikhin! The same story all over
again…It’s very curious, however: did I mean to come, or did I simply walk and end up here?’ (2.2.110). Razumikhin then offers Raskolnikov a translation job, which he first accepts and then rejects. Leaving the flat, he crosses the bridge again to return to the Haymarket area.

Walking in the middle of Nikolaevsky Bridge, Raskolnikov is whipped by a driver for falling under the horses’ hooves. An elderly woman, taking the young man for a beggar, thrusts a twenty-kopeck coin into his hand. Continuing to walk, he stands at the centre of the bridge (no. 4 in the map), turns his head towards the Admiralty district and fixes his gaze on the golden dome of the highest building in Petersburg: St. Isaac’s Cathedral. Raskolnikov’s gaze is suspended at this moment, as he is both fascinated and terrified by the Petersburg panorama before him:

He clutched the twenty kopecks in his hand, walked about ten steps, and turned his face to the Neva, in the direction of the palace [Tsar’s Winter Palace]. There was not the least cloud in the sky, and the water was almost blue, which rarely happens with the Neva. The dome of the cathedral, which is not outlined so well from any other spot as when looked at from here, on the bridge, about twenty paces from the chapel, was simply shining, and through the clear air one could even make out each of its ornaments distinctly. The pain from the whip subsided, and Raskolnikov forgot about the blow; one troublesome and not entirely clear thought now occupied him exclusively. He stood and looked long and intently into the distance; this place was especially familiar to him. While he was attending the university, he often used to stop, mostly on his way home, at precisely this spot (he had done it perhaps a hundred times), and gaze intently at the indeed splendid panorama, and to be surprised almost every time by a certain unclear and unresolved impression. An inexplicable chill always breathed on him from this splendid panorama; for him the magnificent picture was filled with a mute and deaf spirit… (Необъяснимым холодом веяло на него всегда от этой великолепной panoramy; духом немым и глухим полна была для него эта пышная картина…) (2.2.114, emphasis mine, 6:90) 

The mute and deaf spirit, as the Introduction has discussed, is a reference to the Bible, where Christ speaks to an epileptic child who is possessed by an unclean spirit: ‘Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him’ (Mark

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9:18). The deaf and dumb spirit recalls Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian force in Raphael’s *Transfiguration*, which has to do with chaos, contradictions, violence and dissolution of identity.\(^{13}\) Regarding to the ‘inexplicable chill’ which breathes on Raskolnikov, the deaf and dumb suggests a state of shock and terror, recalling the mystic terror which attacks Vanya in *Humiliated and Insulted*. The spirit here also anticipates the epigraph of *Demons*, which includes a quote from the Bible about a man being possessed by demons and later cured by Christ (Luke 8:27).\(^{14}\)

The notebook for the novel – written in first-person narration – shows what Raskolnikov would have in mind when he has the vision on the Neva:

> The view has a [complete] coldness and [deadness] about it. This is a quality that destroys everything [kills everything], turns everything into nothing. An inexplicable cold blows from it. The spirit of muteness [every time] [and a certain negation] and silence, the spirit – ‘mute and dumb’ is poured over all this panorama [oppressing my heart]. I can’t express myself but I know that my impression was not at all what is known as abstract, intellectual, and reasoned out, but completely immediate.\(^{15}\)

This version of the vision is even more destructive in tendency. The subject is put into a state of trauma to which he can give no expressions and hence the state of ‘mute and dumb’. Another variation of the passage reads: ‘…it was impossible for me to have [any thoughts] about this or about other things; that everything was a matter of indifference to me, that everything for me was (…) that it was no long my thoughts, but someone else’s, alien’ (138). This passage suggests a reason why Raskolnikov is deaf and dumb: his gaze and thoughts are fixed onto something unfamiliar, something alienated to him. He is aware of certain thoughts, but they do not belong to the self. The sense of alienation in the vision recalls the view that Raskolnikov commits the murder by mechanically following a theory.

The architectural historian Grigory Kaganov approaches Raskolnikov’s alienated existence from the historical development of Petersburg’s landscape painting from the eighteenth to twentieth century. He argues that the panoramic depiction of Petersburg

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\(^{14}\) It should be noticed that the demons in *Demons* are allegorical of the European ideas which ‘possess’ the Russian educated class. This is not far away from what is depicted in the vision on the Neva, where Raskolnikov is seized upon by the glamour of the Cathedral built in an eclectic mixture of European architecture styles.

became less popular after the 1840s. The depiction of the city changes from a macroscopic point of view to a quotidian one. The Haymarket, for instance, becomes a more popular subject in the post-40s paintings. It is at this point of discussion that Kaganov quotes the passage of the vision on the Neva. He shows how the panoramic view does not fit Raskolnikov’s inclination for the slum area of the city:

What we have here is no longer a simple touch of comedy or a slight irritation, but full and irreparable alienation. In the inner world of the raznochinenets of the 1860s [Russian intellectuals of non-aristocratic descent], there is no longer a place for any ‘splendid panoramas’, solemnly open and easily surveyable space. His imagination is entirely absorbed by the narrow corners and dark depth of the city. And Raskolnikov especially keeps pondering this curious fact.\(^{16}\)

Instead of the ‘lofty and beautiful’ picture of Petersburg, Raskolnikov is absorbed by the much unseen space scattered in the Haymarket area. Kaganov seems to suggest that Raskolnikov is a primary example to demonstrate the decline of panoramic painting, as the young man represents the slum, the underground, the illegal. But Raskolnikov is not as straightforward as Kaganov seems to suggest.

Raskolnikov stops at a specific point on Nikolaevsky Bridge every day to look at the city’s panorama. Why would he want to stand at the spot if the vision on the Neva creates such a traumatic experience in him? The young man who is driven to execute his Napoleonic theory wants to identify himself with tsarist power. And since the vision of the Neva is filled with the most important political buildings, such as the Winter Palace and St. Isaac’s Cathedral, it is not surprising that Raskolnikov is so eager to engage with the vision.

But on the other hand, as the notebook has suggested, Raskolnikov suffers from standing in a completely alienated position. In Dostoevsky’s ‘Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose’ (1861), an article published in *Time*, the narrator remembers a ‘fantastic, magic vision’ from his youth, when he stood on the bank of the Neva on a January evening (see epigraph). The narrator, like Raskolnikov, is confounded by ‘some strange thought’ which makes him shudder.\(^{17}\) The cityscape reveals to him ‘a completely new world that was unfamiliar to [him] and known only by some murky rumours or secret signs’. The


\(^{17}\) Quoted, Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg*, p. 22. This article was originally from D. D. Minaev. But Dostoevsky the editor rewrote almost the whole piece. See Joseph Frank, *The Stir of Liberation 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 64-75. This article is also quoted in the epigraph of this chapter.
strangeness creates a sense of alienation, which leads the narrator to say: ‘I suppose that my existence began at that precise moment’.\(^{18}\) For Dostoevsky, the Petersburger’s existence is deeply marked by the continuous influxes of strange and unfamiliar thoughts. In this way, the Petersburger is not far away from falling into madness, as Svidrigailov, who comes to Petersburg to propose to Raskolnikov’s sister, says: ‘I am convinced that many people in Petersburg talk to themselves as they walk. This is a city of half-crazy people. […] One seldom finds a place where there are so many gloomy, sharp, and strange influences on the soul of man as in Petersburg’ (6.3.466). Not crazy, but half-crazy. The Petersburgers are on the verge of nervous breakdown. This is exemplified by Raskolnikov, who is torn between the desire to become a Napoleon and the compulsion to return to his slum area. Svidrigailov goes on to say to Raskolnikov:

I’ve already observed you several times from the side. You walk out of the house with your head still high. After twenty steps you lower it and put your hands behind your back. You look but apparently no longer see anything either in front of you or to the sides. Finally you begin moving your lips and talking to yourself, sometimes freeing one hand and declaiming, and finally you stop in the middle of the street for a long time (466).

Svidrigailov is a non-Petersburger who stays in the city for a short period of time. As a visitor to the city, he is able to give a detailed portrait which is typical of the Petersburger. He shows that Raskolnikov, like many other Petersburgers, is troubled by some thoughts. These thoughts are contradictory: he wishes to become a Napoleon, fashion himself as the exceptional man and take charge of the intentional city. But at the same time, another part of him belongs to the dark corners and hidden streets, the carnivalesque Haymarket, the unintentional city. The half-crazy Petersburger is marked by this split between the two cities.

**Eclectic Architecture and Montage**

I now move on to further analyze the vision on the Neva in order to illuminate the split existence of the Petersburger. I suggest the split not only takes place at the level of Raskolnikov’s split desire (the conflict between his inclination for Napoleonic theory and the carnivalesque Haymarket), but the split also takes place in the visual experience of Petersburg’s architecture. As the passage of the Neva vision indicates, Raskolnikov is able

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.
to see at least two important buildings: the Winter Palace and St. Isaac’s Cathedral. The former was the Tsars’ accommodation and the Cathedral was originally founded by Peter the Great. If we draw a line between Raskolnikov and the two buildings mentioned, his field of vision can be schematized in the shape of a triangular cone, inside which most of the political and social buildings are located. They include: the Bronze Horseman statue, Admiralty, the Senate house, Alexander Column. The Palace and the Cathedral are set up as two anchor points of Raskolnikov’s field of vision, within which are other tsarist buildings. The Neva vision enables Raskolnikov to contemplate these grandiose buildings with classical style, which can be seen as the material expression of tsarist power. But as I will show, the eclectic style of these buildings contaminates the purity of classical style, causing the impossibility of identifying these buildings with the pure, monological expression of tsarist power. I would like to illuminate this point by examining the Cathedral.

St. Isaac’s Cathedral is the tallest building in Petersburg (101.5 metres), which explains why Raskolnikov can even see the ornamentation of the Cathedral’s dome from approximately 800 metres away. The Cathedral is square in shape, with four facades surrounded by grandiose Corinthian porticoes. It is distinguished by its gilded dome which punctuates the city skyline and it has been compared with St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican City and St Paul’s Cathedral in London. The dome is surrounded by a colonnade and topped with an octagonal lantern. Around the gilded dome, there are four smaller turrets which serve as bell-towers. Enormous reliefs are erected on each side of the facades. And there are angel statues standing on the corners and around the gilded dome.19 Peter the Great gave the name St. Isaac the Dalmatian because the legendary Byzantine monk is his patron saint (their birthday is 30 May). St. Isaac as the patron saint is the name of Peter’s patriarch. But the name Isaac also recalls the son of Abraham, who almost kills and sacrifices Isaac under God’s request (Genesis 22:1-19). That the panorama makes Raskolnikov deaf and dumb suggests that St. Isaac’s Cathedral bears a castrating force. But the Abraham reference also suggests that the Cathedral is subject to castration. St. Isaac’s can therefore be understood as representing the father and the son at the same time. Besides, ‘Isaac’ in Hebrew implies laughter (‘he will laugh’), recalling the pawnbroker’s laughter in Raskolnikov’s dream (3.6.227) and Porfiry’s winks. These references suggest

an eclectic reading of the Cathedral, which resists the intention in seeing the building as the pure expression of tsarist power.

Prior to the nineteenth-century version of St. Isaac’s, three earlier ones – much smaller and less sophisticated in style – were built on the same district. The first version was built by Peter the Great in 1703, the year that he founded St. Petersburg. That St. Isaac’s was demolished and built three times over a hundred years suggests the importance of the Cathedral as a symbolic display of tsarist power. In 1712, Peter and Catherine had their public wedding in the first version of the Cathedral – a small wooden church built in the Admiralty district. To suit the grand scale of the developing city, Peter commissioned the second St. Isaac’s on the bank of the Neva, where the Bronze Horseman statue now stands. The earth in that location was not strong enough and it was decided that the structure be destroyed in 1735. The third version was commissioned by Catherine II, the Empress who gained her autocracy through a palace coup d’état in 1762, during which her husband Peter III was assassinated. One of the strategies she used to consolidate her legitimacy as the rightful heir was the pulling down of baroque-style architecture left by Empress Elizabeth who came before her, and subsequently building a series of classical
constructions such as St. Isaac’s. The insistence on displaying power through classical buildings is suggestive of a desire for the fantasy of a pure and universal form.20

Catherine, whose governance is often described as enlightened absolutism, approved the reconstruction of St. Isaac’s in the name of Peter the Great. She entrusted the project to Antonio Rinaldi, the ‘master of marble facades’, to invigorate the classical style. Catherine also commissioned the French sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet, a friend of her favourite philosophe Diderot, to build the Bronze Horseman statue. On the stone of this monument of Peter the Great, the Empress inscribed with the phrase ‘Catherine the Second to Peter the First, 1782’ in both Russian and Latin. During the consecration of the fourth St. Isaac’s, it was proposed a circling of the Bronze Horseman should be followed by the traditional procession around the Cathedral.21 St. Isaac’s and the Bronze Horseman statue were inseparable in terms of symbolising the power of the Tsar. One of the paintings of Vasily Surikov actually places the statue and the Cathedral together.22 A mythical aura is suggested when the Tsarist power is thought together with divinity incarnated in the

Cathedral. Dostoevsky also comments on how the statue is perceived to possess an aura, without which Petersburg will ‘disappear’. In *The Adolescent* (1875), he writes: ‘And what if this fog dissipates and goes away? Won’t this whole rotting and slimy city disappear also, float up with the fog, and vanish into thin air like smoke, leaving behind the old Finnish bog and, in the middle, for decoration perhaps, the Bronze Horseman on his feverish, weary horse?’

![Vasily Surikov, *View of the Monument to Peter I on the Senate Square*, 1870](image)

The Cathedral commissioned by Catherine did not work out well. Her successor Paul I was unhappy with the slow rate of the building progress, and instructed the architect to finish the project at higher speed, resulting a one-domed church which was felt to be inharmonious with the capital’s ‘majestic image’. In 1816, Alexander I decided to rebuild the Cathedral and commissioned the project from the French architect Auguste Montferrand (1786-1858), who also built the monolithic Alexander Column. The Tsar asserted that the new design must preserve the Cathedral’s ‘rich marble facing’ and lend ‘grandeur and beauty to so famous a building’. The project took more than forty years to accomplish. During those years, hundreds of thousand craftsmen – who lived in barracks by the construction site – died of ill health, epidemic disease and accidents, such as mercury poisoning when fire-gilding the domes.

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23 Quoted, Schenker, *The Bronze Horseman*, p. 296.
25 It should be noted that the Column is erected in commemoration of the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812.
26 Butikov, p. 7
The reconstructions of the Cathedral express the autocrats’ anxiety to confirm their power since Peter the Great. Similarly, if we zoom out from the picture of St. Isaac’s, Petersburg was built because of the intention to display the autocrat’s power. In 1703, Peter the Great decided to build St. Petersburg out of a maze of islands which he had conquered from the Swedes. The site chosen was a marshy river delta in the Gulf of Finland and subject to frequent flooding. The extreme northern location causes the city to have prolonged darkness in the winter and extended daylight – the ‘white nights’ – in the summer. It was estimated that Peter ordered between ten to thirty thousand serfs, prisoners of war and common criminal to be sent to the delta to build the city. Thousands died under the poor working conditions.27

The intentional city, however, is inseparable from its unintentional quality. For instance, Petersburg has experienced about 270 major floods since its erection on the marshy ground. Alexander Pushkin’s narrative poem The Bronze Horseman (1833) is based on one of the most severe floods in 1824. The poem expresses ambivalence towards Peter’s creation of the city. On the one hand it glorifies the aesthetics of uniformity and grandioseness of the intentional city. But on the other hand, the forcefully built city induces the flood which causes the low-ranked civil servant Evgeny to become mad and eventually be drowned in the Neva. The first part of the poem expresses the narrator’s admiration for Peter’s creation, for instance:

Mysterious water, now there rise
Great palaces and towers; a maze
Of sails and mastheads crowd the harbour;
[...]
I love thee, Peter’s proud creation,
The princely stateliness of line,
The regal Neva coursing, patient,
‘Twixt sober walls of massive stone;
The iron lacework of thy fences,
Thy wistful, moonless, lustrous nights,

Dusk-clothed but limpid…

The second part opens with the images that the city is about to flood. As the flood destroys the city, Evgeny sits in Peter’s square, surrounded by the flood with the Bronze Horseman statue looking down on him (‘And high above him, all undaunted/ By foaming stream and flooded shores,/ Deaf to the storm’s rebellious roars,/ With hand outstretched, the Idol, mounted/ On steed of bronze, majestic, soars’). The flood destroys the life of Parasha, a woman whom Evgeny admires. He falls into delirium and roams the city like a mentally deranged man. A year later he curses the Bronze Horseman statue when passing by, which causes it to turn alive and start pursuing Evgeny:

For there,
Behind him, to the darkness wedded,
Lit by the moon’s pale ray and slight,
One hand in warning raised, the dreaded
Bronze Horseman galloped through the night.
Till morn, where’er Evgeny, frightened,
Did bend his steps and wander, mute,
The fell Bronze Horseman rode, benighted,
In mad, in thunderous pursuit (96).

The poem finishes with the city returning to the glamorous image portrayed in the opening. And we see Evgeny’s corpse floating on a river.

Pushkin’s reading of Petersburg through the Bronze Horseman is analogous to Dostoevsky’s reading of the city through St. Isaac’s Cathedral. The intentional side of the city is integral to its unintentional side. Peter’s will to speak the new word – to build a city out of a swamp – is inseparable from the advent of flood and the production of madness. St. Isaac’s can also be seen as the utmost expression of Tsarist power. But on the other hand, the Cathedral’s architectural style is eclectic, which contrasts with the Tsar’s intention to impose uniformity to the city.

Georhgy Butikov, who wrote on the Cathedral, points out that by the middle of the nineteenth-century Russia classicism in architecture had begun to decline. This was followed by a trend of eclectic architectural style, which is characterized by ‘a loss of

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stylistic purity, a departure from the principle of architectural and decorative unity, and a
tendency to indulge in ornamental elements which had no structural meaning’. Eclecticism tends to combine elements from two or more historical styles in architecture. And the construction of the last St. Isaac’s was very much influenced by this trend.

It should be noted that Nicholas I, the Tsar who staged the mock execution for Dostoevsky and other Petrashevsky Circle members in 1849, on countless occasions interfered in the progress of construction, making changes which were incongruous with Montferrand’s plan.

Although St. Isaac’s is one of the last major buildings in Russia designed in the late classical style, it by no means merely complies with one single style. The exterior of the Cathedral is decorated with excessive sculptures on the pediments. The Cathedral’s interior is equally over-decorated. Building materials such as coloured marble were transported from the Caucasus, Finland, France and Italy (Genoa and Siena). Count Francesco Aglarotti, who says Petersburg is ‘the great window to the west’, described the building in the city as ‘bastard architecture’. A century later, the nineteenth-century French aristocrat Marquis de Custine elaborates on the same point in his travel writing on Russia: ‘A taste for edifices without taste has presided over the buildings of St. Petersburg’ (32). The writer Théophile Gautier devotes a lengthy chapter to the Cathedral in his Voyage en Russie (1866), in which he says that the Cathedral is ‘unquestionably the most beautiful and modern church’ located in Petersburg, ‘the youngest and newest of the European capitals’. He likes the ‘absolute unity’ of the Cathedral. And he adds: ‘What a symphony of marble, of granite, bronze and gold!’ Gautier appraises the church’s adherence to classical form and also its infusion with other historical styles, especially Eastern styles. Julie Buckler, who argues that eclecticism was the dominant aesthetic of nineteenth-century Petersburg, elaborates: ‘St. Isaac’s is more than slightly eclectic in its fusion of neoclassical pediments, columns, and porticoes with Italian Renaissance-style paintings, Greek-Orthodox crosses, Church Slavonic lettering, and Byzantine architectural features, in a grand marriage of West and East’.

The word ‘eclecticism’, as Buckler points out, comes from the Greek eklektikos (‘selective’) and eklegein (‘to select’), meaning to choose out of a selection or to distinguish. But in the nineteenth century, eclecticism was associated with randomness.

29 Butikov, St. Isaac’s Cathedral Museum, p. 16.
30 Quoted, Buckler, Mapping St. Petersburg, p. 32.
31 Buckler, p. 47.
and unintentionality. Politically, it can be seen as a style which is non-hierarchical and, for the self-fashioning of the Tsar, democratic.

While classical style gives the impression of a form which transcends time, the rather random aggregation of various styles moves away from the traditional attempt to historicize a particular period or style. Eclecticism, as Buckler puts it, ‘asserted that a new reality could be constructed from fragments of the past, since invoking the past in fragmented form pays tribute to history, while denying its power to determine the future – a particularly potent notion for Russia’ (53). It should be noted that eclecticism does not break with the past. Rather, it comes from ‘fragments of the past’. And these fragments are arranged almost randomly on the surface of the building, opening up a sense of heterogeneity in the building design. In other words, seeing St. Isaac’s is seeing various fragments of the past at the same time, which creates a visual experience which is always schismatic.

In an article ‘Little Picture’ (1873) collected in A Writer’s Diary, Dostoevsky comments on the lack of ‘expression’ in Petersburg’s architecture: ‘All of Petersburg’s architecture is remarkably characteristic and distinct and always impress me specifically by the fact that it expresses all the lack of character and personality typical of the city over the entire period of its existence (1.255). As a student from Petersburg’s Main Engineering School in the Mikhailovsky Castle, Dostoevsky was well-read on the history of architecture. Although he does not use the phrase eclecticism, he suggests that the eclectic style leads to the loss of an authentic identity of the city. He continues:

There is no such city as Petersburg; from the point of view of architecture, it is a reflection of all architectural styles of the world and of all periods and fashions; everything has been, bit by bit, borrowed and distorted in its own way. In these buildings you can read as in a book all the currents of all great and trivial ideas that, appropriately or accidentally, have landed here from Europe and that gradually overcame and captured us (1.255).

Seeing the eclectic architecture in the city is like seeing an unfamiliar object agglomerated of different styles, which is constitutive to the indefinite and enigmatic nature of the Petersburg panorama. Dostoevsky’s comment is double-edged: it can be read as a critique of the unfiltered influx of European civilization which is materialized in the city’s

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32 The Italian artist Piranesi explores how the ‘pure’ style of classicism is always already contaminated, an idea which is picked up by Eisenstein in his discussion of the cinematic montage. See Stanley Allen, Piranesi’s ‘“Campo Marzio”: An Experimental Design’, Assemblage, 10 (1989), 70-109.
architecture. But on the other hand, such eclecticism created an unprecedented visual experience, which conditions the split subjectivity of the Petersburgers.

The new architectural trend allows the juxtaposition of multiple historical styles, which can be seen as an anticipation of Sergei Eisenstein’s formulation of the cinematic montage. In his discussion of the architect Piranesi, he calls the dissonance and disjunction between different styles in classical architecture an ‘ecstatic transfiguration’. Here he highlights the etymological meaning of ‘ecstasy’, which means ‘going out of oneself’. The relationship between different architectural styles in a building is not static. They are juxtaposed, ‘dissolved’ and re-configured from within. Commenting on the interior of classical architecture, he says: ‘these arches can undergo an “explosion” within their own form’. An internal ‘split’ happens in the classical architecture, in which the multiple historical styles enact a dialectical relationship within moments of ‘explosion’.

The way Eisenstein comments on architecture strikes a parallel with the way he discusses montage, as he continues to writes: ‘Montage is the stage of explosion of the movie frame. […] When the tension within a movie frame reaches a climax and cannot increase any further, then the frame itself explodes, fragmenting itself into two pieces of montage’. Indeed, St. Isaac’s – if not the entire Petersburg’s cityscape – can be understood as a form of montage: the image of the Cathedral is filled with a tension created by the oppositions of styles. When this tension reaches a climax, which would be the moment when the intention to impose uniformity is the strongest, the image explodes and forms multiple pieces of montage which come to an active and unstable relationship with each other. When the narrator says Raskolnikov is confounded by the Petersburg panorama, all the former impressions reappear before him: ‘It was as if he now saw all his former past, and former thoughts, and former tasks, and former themes, and former impressions, and this whole panorama, and himself, and everything, everything, somewhere far down below, barely visible under his feet…’ (2.2.114-5). The return of the impressions can be understood as pieces of montage in Raskolnikov’s imagination. And this imagination is evoked from looking at the eclectic cityscape.

The relationship of Dostoevsky’s Petersburg and montage can be further illuminated by Bakhtin’s discussion of carnivalization in Dostoevsky’s novels. He writes:

33 Quoted, Stanley Allen, p. 90. The phrase is originally from Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Piranesi, or the Fluidity of Forms’, *Oppositions*, 11 (1977), 85.
34 Ibid, p. 90.
Carnivalization is not an external and immobile scheme which is imposed upon read-made
content; it is, rather, an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of
heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things.\footnote{Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 166.}

That Bakhtin emphasizes a flexible form of visualizing things is suggestive: the images in
Dostoevsky’s novels are mobilized from within. What carnivalization does to the text is
that it ‘relativize[s] all that was externally stable, set and ready-made’ (166), just as
montage juxtaposes multiple images into a constellation. Writing which is carnivalized
can be therefore also described as cinematic: both of them lead to the discovery of the
unseen meaning of things through rereading a dynamic patchwork.

Dostoevsky’s Petersburg can be reread as a series of montages. In fact, the opening
page marks the dominance of this form in representing the city. In the Haymarket, ‘it was
terribly hot out, and moreover it was close, crowded; lime, scaffolding, bricks, dust
everywhere, and that special summer stench known so well to every Petersburger who
cannot afford to rent a summer house – all at once these things unpleasantly shook the
young man’s already overwrought nerve’ (1.1.4). Various images of the hot Petersburg are
pushed together in Raskolnikov’s consciousness, giving the young man a shock. Then
another set of images follow, which completes the cinematic montage: ‘The intolerable
stench from the taverns, especially numerous in that part of the city, and the drunkards he
kept running into even though it was a weekday, completed the loathsome and melancholy
colouring of the picture (колорит картины)’ (1.1.4, 6:6). The above passage is
synaesthetic: the market is visualized with stench. One image is juxtaposed with another,
forming a sensually repulsive picture. Petersburg here is presented through a piling up of a
series of images. They resemble the way in which cinema is created by piecing numbers of
shots together. And this incessant jumping from one ‘shot’ to another in Raskolnikov’s
imagination evokes a sense of shock: ‘A feeling of the deepest revulsion flashed for a
moment in the young man’s fine features’ (4).

The shock effect permeates the novel. Another example is in chapter 6 of part 2.
Standing on Voznesensky Bridge, Raskolnikov has a vision which is like the one on the
Neva:

Leaning over the water, he gazed mechanically at the last pink gleams of the sunset, at the row
of houses, dark in the thickening dusk, at one distant window, somewhere in a garret on the left
bank blazing as if aflame when the last ray of sunlight struck it for a moment, at the dark water of the canal – he stood as if peering intently into the water. Finally red circles began spinning in his eyes, the houses began to sway, the passers-by, the embankments, the carriages – all began spinning and dancing around him (169).

Raskolnikov’s gaze fixes on one spot and then moves on to another, jumping from one image to another like the cinematic montage (‘the last pink gleams of the sunset’, ‘the row of houses’, ‘one distant window’, ‘the dark water of the canal’). In the next moment, all the images he perceives are pieced together and spin before him, just like a film shown to him in twenty-four frames per second. Raskolnikov has just murdered two women; he wants to sit or lie down somewhere in the street (168). But Petersburg is full of maddening images that the young man has no time to take rest. Consciousness is bombarded with shock, as the novel continues:

Suddenly he gave a start, perhaps saved from fainting again by a wild and ugly sight. He sensed that someone was standing next to him, to his right, close by; he looked – and saw a woman, tall, wearing a kerchief, with a long yellow, wasted face and reddish, sunken eyes. She was looking straight at him, but obviously saw nothing and recognized no one. Suddenly she leaned her right forearm on the parapet, raised her right leg, swung it over the railing, then her left leg, and threw herself into the canal (2.6.169).

The passage, which reads like a film script, begins with a shock which ‘saves’ Raskolnikov from fainting and then moves on to study closely the woman who commits suicide. Dostoevsky’s segmented sentences which describe the suicide break the woman’s action into multiple parts. Each part focuses on one segment of the body, resembling a series of cinematic close-up shots.

The passage anticipates how a film camera works: it creates close-up images of Petersburg and pushes them together on a film strip. In this way, the Petersburger is therefore under constant attack of shock insofar as he, through his ‘camera-eye’, sees images from multiple locations in various distances within an infinitely brief period of time. Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the film camera, not accidentally, can be read as an anachronistic commentary on Dostoevsky’s Petersburg:
Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations
and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this
prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its
far flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.  

The film camera has the capacity to illuminate the minimal changes in the fractional second of actions which we only have general knowledge (Benjamin uses the example of the way people walk and a hand reaching a spoon). If we take Raskolnikov’s vision as that of a film camera, the concept of a stable viewing subject has to be challenged: what he sees are fragments of images pieced together in the form of montage. A series of ‘splittings’ take place in Raskolnikov’s vision, which make the formation of a stable viewing subject impossible. Benjamin writes: ‘With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. […] The enlargement of a snapshot […] reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject’ (230). What cinema does to the viewer is comparable to what Petersburg does to Dostoevsky’s urban hero: both engender an unstable and unfinalized subject.

Benjamin calls the image ‘the caesura in the movement of thought […]that] is to be found wherever the tension between dialectical opposition is the greatest’.  

He also refers the image as ‘dialectics at a standstill’. The movement of thought is suspended, during which all the thoughts in consciousness are juxtaposed with each other. The juxtaposition forms a patchwork of thoughts, which are all brought to a standstill and are in a dialectical relationship with each other. For Benjamin, the act of thinking is similar to the way in which the montage is created, as he writes in Theses on the Philosophy of History:

‘Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad’. In thinking, the flow of thoughts is

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40 This is also quoted as the epigraph of my Introduction for rethinking the ‘moment’ in terms of the caesura. Here, the ‘arrest’ of the flow of thoughts in thinking is comparable to the moment of caesura, during which the ‘rhythmic sequence’ of representation is suspended by the ‘counter-rhythmic rupture’. In the caesura, Benjamin writes, ‘every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an
arrested, engendering a tension between one thought and another. Similarly, in montage, images are creatively ‘quoted’ from life and pieced together, creating a dialectical opposition between one image and another. In both cases, the movement of representation is frozen, so that the tension between one expression and another can be fully exposed.

The Theses illuminates our understanding of Raskolnikov’s vision on the Neva: standing in front of the panoramic cityscape, he is thrown into the state of shock (‘mute and deaf’). But this is the beginning of what thinking involves: all images from different times are brought to a standstill in Raskolnikov. The images are ‘seized upon’ as in an epileptic seizure and, as Benjamin puts it, are ‘pregnant with tensions’. This moment when all Petersburg’s images are brought to a standstill is the epileptic moment. Recalling the vision on the Neva, Petersburg is filled with the deaf and dumb spirit, which means that the Petersburger is always thrown into a shock because of the eclecticism of the city. He is constantly torn apart when being absorbed in the contradictory images of the city. But just as Benjamin says that thinking involves exactly this engagement with contradictions, Dostoevsky says that the Petersburger’s existence begins precisely at this contradictory moment.

The Haymarket and Dreams of Beating

I would like to move towards a conclusion by examining Raskolnikov’s mare-beating dream. I want to show that the Petersburger’s vision is not only split during his detour in the city, but that this is also the case in his dream. There are at least six Raskolnikov’s dreams scattered in the seven parts of the novel and more than half of them involve beating.41 In part 2, he walks in the middle of the road, which enrages a carriage driver, who whips him heavily on his back. After that he dreams of his landlady beaten by Porfiry’s assistant ‘the Squib’ (2.2.115-116). In the same part of the novel, Raskolnikov wanders into a building where virtually everyone is drunk. From the singing and dancing crowd, he hears a song from a singer with a thin voice: ‘My soldier-boy so fine and free, expressionless power inside all artistic media’. The caesura which suspends expressions can be understood in this novel in terms of the moment of deaf and dumb, i.e., the moment of shock, which Benjamin understands as central to the experience of modernity (see his essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, Illuminations, pp. 156-162). For the quotation on caesura, see ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, Selected Writings 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 340-341. Cf. the discussion in the beginning of my Introduction.

What cause have you for beating me!' (2.6.157). At the end of part 3, he dreams of returning to the crime scene, at which he frantically axes the pawnbroker who appears to be made of wood (3.6.277). And in part 1, just before the murder happens, Raskolnikov has the mare-beating dream (1.5.54).

Raskolnikov dreams of his childhood when he and his family were living in a little town. He is about seven in the dream and strolling with his father towards the cemetery to commemorate his grandmother and young brother whom he has never seen. On the way to the cemetery, the little boy witnesses ‘some sort of festivity’ happening near a huge tavern, where a crowd of drunken people are singing. One of them, named Mikolka, asks everyone to get into his huge cart tied to a ‘small, skinny, grayish peasant nag’ (55). He whips the nag to make her gallop. The mare remains silent, to which Milkolka beats her with a long and stout shaft. With other peasants joining the torture, he beats her with an iron crowbar until she dies.

The entire beating scene is witnessed by the young Raskolnikov. In the beginning, the son is curious about what is happening: ‘Papa, what are they doing? Papa, they’re beating the poor horse!’ (56). The boy has often seen peasants whipping a horse on the muzzle and eyes, and he would feel ‘so sorry, so sorry as he watched it that he almost wept’ (55). In the past his mother has usually taken him away from the window. This time in the dream, the father replaces the authority voice. The curiosity to see and know what is going on is dwarfed by the father: ““Come along, come along!” says his father. “they’re drunk, they’re playing pranks, the fools – come along, don’t look!”’ What is forbidden to be looked at by the father is the most carnivalesque and violent scene taking place near the tavern. ‘Six men pile in [the cart], and there is still room for more’ (56). A ‘fat and ruddy’ woman who cracks nuts and giggles also gets in, contrasting with the skinniness of the mare. And the violence imposed on the mare increases regarding the instruments Mikolka uses to beat her. The father dismisses the beating as pranks and foolish, and seems to have neglected the violence involved. The father disavows the violence in his description and also forbids the son from looking into the scene.

The young Raskolnikov disobeys the father’s order, he ‘tears himself from his father’s hands and, beside himself, runs to the horse’ (56). Two fellows start whipping the mare from the side and then Mikolka shouts: ‘On the muzzle, on the eyes, lash her on the eyes!’ (57). Other participants continue to sing drunken songs. Running past the mare, the boy has a closer view of the beaten horse: ‘[He] sees how they are lashing her on the eyes, right on the eyes!’ This causes the boy to be beaten as well: ‘One of the whips grazes his
face, he does not feel it, he wrings his hands, he shouts, he rushes to the gray-bearded old man, who is shaking his head in disapproval of it all’ (56). The boy is taken away from a peasant woman, but he breaks free and rushes back to the mare and is beaten again. One of the peasants suggests killing the mare with an axe. At the end, the mare is surrounded by a group of drunken peasants who hasten to destroy her with all kinds of instruments.

‘It’s my goods!’ says Mikolka after the mare heaves a deep sigh and dies (58). The boy shouts and dashes again to the mare. He ‘throws his arms around her dead, bleeding muzzle, and kisses it, kisses her eyes and mouth’ (58). He throws himself at Mikolka with his little fists. But at the same time, the father returns to the scene and seizes the boy away from the crowd. The young Raskolnikov asks: ‘Papa! What did they…kill…the poor horse for!’ And the father replies with the same answer: ‘They’re drunk, they’re playing pranks, it’s none of our business, come along!’ (59).

Raskolnikov wakes up just after being pulled away by the father: ‘God […] but can it be, can it be that I will really take an axe and hit her on the head and smash her skull…slip in the sticky, warm blood, break the lock, steal, and tremble, and hide, all covered with blood…with the axe…Lord can it be?’ (59). Raskolnikov appears to think that the beating of the mare in the dream prefigures the murder of the pawnbroker in reality. Mikolka strikes the female mare on her back continuously and could have used an axe to do so – these details match with what happens during the actual murder. And it can be said that Raskolnikov is sympathetic to the pawnbroker as the young Raskolnikov sheds tears for the beaten mare.

And yet, the dream is more complicated than that. It has, for instance, a strange repetition of the image of the eye. First, the father forbids Raskolnikov from looking at the beating. Second, the beating of the mare involves the beating of the eye. And thirdly, when Raskolnikov embraces the mare, his face is being beaten, which suggests that his eyes are injured as well. And lastly, Raskolnikov the dreamer has been looking at himself experiencing the mare-beating scene.

In view of the father’s forbidding of looking, that the son breaks free and looks can be understood as stepping over the father’s order. That Mikolka beats Raskolnikov’s eyes is a form of punishment for transgressing the father’s order ‘Do Not Look’.
The mare’s eyes and the boy’s eyes have a metonymical resemblance in the dream. When the boy witnesses the mare’s wounded eyes, he cries and feels terribly sorry. If the theory about transgressing the father’s law is correct, when the boy sees the mare’s injured eyes, he is actually seeing his ‘own’ injury. In other words, the young Raskolnikov is witnessing what he is punished for (transgressing the ‘Do Not Look’) from the image of the beaten mare. In this way, uncannily speaking, Raskolnikov is stepping over the father’s law by looking at the beating and seeing himself being punished for transgressing that law at the same time. Crime and punishment are not to be understood either sequentially or casually; they take place at the same time.

What the dream demonstrates is perhaps the limit of Raskolnikov’s Napoleonic theory. The attempt to step over, to transgress the law, is always inseparable from the punishment imposed by the law itself. If that is the case, the idea of speaking the ‘new word’ becomes an impossible act, a stepping over which only reinstates the father’s law.

This chapter has shown how Dostoevsky’s Petersburg is eclectic in nature, which in the first place produces alienation in Raskolnikov. A further analysis has suggested this alienated position is confounding to the subject. Hence the deaf and dumb spirit which haunts Petersburg’s cityscape: the viewer at the particular moment is shocked and loses the ability to reason. And yet, this alienated position has created a different mode of existence which I have illuminated through the experience of montage. Eisenstein’s phrase ‘ecstatic transfiguration’ can be used to describe the ‘splendid panorama’ of Petersburg: a series of urban images are pieced together dialectically, which creates a polyphonic merging and diverging of meanings. A single viewing subject is impossible in Dostoevsky’s Petersburg as vision is always already schismatic by nature, which recalls the Underground Man’s commentary on Petersburg: cities can be intentional or unintentional.

Raskolnikov’s desire for the fantasy of becoming a Napoleon expresses the thirst for an ideal in many of Dostoevsky’s heroes. Sonia reads the passage of Lazarus’ resurrection to Raskolnikov. And at the end of the novel, he is just about to turn open the passage. But the question of whether the young man will experience a renewal of life, as the narrator puts it, is the subject of a new story (551). The ending of Crime and

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Punishment anticipates the question of whether there is an afterlife and if the answer is positive, how the Dostoevskian heroes can know about it and, more importantly, why they are anxious to seize the truth of it. For these questions I shall now move on to the next novel The Idiot.
Chapter Three

The Image without an Image: The Guillotine and Holbein’s Dead Christ

Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521

Dostoevsky’s Corpses

*The Idiot* (*Идиот*) was written when Dostoevsky and his wife were travelling in Europe from 1867 to 1871. It was also during this period the writer saw Hans Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in the Basel museum. This chapter intends to reread *The Idiot* by rethinking Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. The novel, written in four parts, was published serially in the journal *The Russian Messenger*. The first part was found in the January and February issues in 1868. After that, the second part was delayed until July due to various reasons: the birth (February) and death (May) of daughter Sonya; the difficulties in continuing part 1 with the goal of portraying ‘a perfectly beautiful man’; and frequent epileptic seizures. A letter reflects the writer’s situation at that time: ‘As for *The Idiot*, I am so afraid, so afraid, that you cannot imagine. Even a kind of unnatural fear. It’s never been like this before’.¹ The writing process went on more smoothly. Part 4, which contains the murder of Nastasya Filippovna and her vigil, was finished in January 1869. The writer comments on it: ‘This finale, I wrote with inspiration, and it cost me two fits in a row’.² Another letter reads: ‘this fourth part and its conclusion is the most important thing in my novel, i.e., the novel was almost written and conceived for the novel’s denouement’.³

This chapter will further illuminate the epileptic mode of being by looking at the epileptic Prince Myshkin. I will suggest that the characterization of the Prince is marked by a contradiction between a desire for idealization and its annihilation, which necessitates a split subject. I will examine a number of images in the novel, showing how the Prince is driven by a desire for idealized imagery and how that desire is postponed. These images

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² Ibid.
³ Written in November 1868 to Sofia Ivanova, cited in Richard Pevear’s introduction to the novel, see *The Idiot* (New York: Vintage, 2003), xii.
include the guillotine evoked in the Prince’s remembrance, the eyes and knives in his reflection on his epileptic condition, and finally, the eighteen-year-old consumptive Ippolit’s ekphrasis of Hans Holbein’s Dead Christ.

I would like to summarize the novel in order to move towards the above episodes. After four years of medical treatment in Switzerland for a mysterious nervous condition which has the symptoms of idiocy, the saintly, childlike, and epileptic Prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin, born from a declined noble line, returns to St. Petersburg in order to find his distant relative Princess Epanchin. On the train he meets the civil servant Lebedev and Parfyon Rogozhin, a merchant’s son who is obsessed with the beautiful and capricious woman Nastasya Filippovna Barashkov. Totsky, the master of the orphan Nastasya, intends to get rid of her by marrying her to Ganya Ivolgin, the secretary of General Epanchin. During the party where Nastasya is to show her preference concerning Totsky’s arrangement, Rogozhin suddenly turns up with a pile of rouble notes wrapped tightly in The Stock Market Gazette, intending to take Nastasya away. The first part of the novel finishes with her eloping with Rogozhin.

The first part also depicts the meeting between the Prince and the Epanchins: the father, who is a general; the mother, who is the Prince’s relative; and the three daughters: Alexandra, Adelaida and Aglaya, whom the Prince is attracted to. During the meeting the Prince tells stories about his life in Switzerland. He also talks about the experience of witnessing a public execution, first to a valet and then to the daughters. At the meeting, the Prince sees a photographic portrait of Nastasya, whose suffering face shocks him (1.3.36).

The Prince, who is also attracted to Nastasya, realizes that he is endowed with a large inheritance and needs to leave Petersburg. Nastasya, after the elopement, secretly meets the Prince. Rogozhin, who is jealous of him, abuses and threatens to kill her. In chapter 5 of part 2, the Prince returns to Petersburg to meet Rogozhin in his three-storied house, which includes a money-exchange shop which is located on the ground-floor and is owned by the Castrates who rent an apartment upstairs. Rogozhin’s grandfather who built the house rents it to them and has great respect for them.

The sect of the Castrates splintered off from the older non-Orthodox Russian religious sect of the Flagellants, who believed in the repeatable incarnation of Christ in human beings. To obtain spiritual purity, the Castrates preached physical mutilation of the sexual organs for both male and female. The sect attracted many rich merchants,

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moneylenders and goldsmiths because, as a Russian commentator explains, the Castrates redirected their sexual drive into a passion for amassing wealth. Although Rogozhin is not physically castrated, he is often associated with the image of knife, suggesting that he is castrating in character. On the other hand, he is associated with the accumulation of wealth (he uses *The Stock Market Gazette* to wrap his money and he wishes to preserve Nastasya’s corpse), suggesting that he is also a figure of the Castrate.

On his way to Rogozhin’s house, the Prince suspects that he is being followed. The stalker turns out to be Rogozhin, who plans to stab the Prince with a garden knife. Just before the moment of the stabbing, the Prince has an epileptic seizure. He falls into unconsciousness and the sight of the fit paralyzes Rogozhin (2.5.235).

In part 3, the eighteen-year-old Ippolit Terentyev reads out ‘My Necessary Explanation’ before shooting himself with a pistol. In the ‘Explanation’, he comments on Holbein’s *Dead Christ* which he sees in Rogozhin’s house, suggesting that the painting destroys his faith in the resurrection. He also asks whether there can be an image which has not got an image (3.6.409). Later, he claims that he decides to commit suicide because he sees the ghost of Rogozhin visiting him while he is asleep. Ippolit’s suicide eventually fails as he forgets to put a cap in his pistol. He dies of consumption a few weeks after his ‘Explanation’.

In part 4, Nastasya, Aglaya, the Prince and Rogozhin meet, and the Prince is asked to choose either one of the women. The Prince remains silent: the daughter flees and the orphan woman faints. Later, Nastasya marries the Prince, but only elopes again with Rogozhin during the wedding. The Prince has his second epileptic seizure at Aglaya’s birthday party, during which she hears the shout of the ‘spirit that convulsed and dashed down’ (4.7.554). At the end of part 4, Rogozhin follows the Prince again to tell him that he has murdered Nastasya. The spiritual brothers (they exchange crosses in part 2) stay in the merchant’s house of the Castrates in order to keep vigil over the dead body. When the police arrive, the Prince is stroking Rogozhin like a child by the corpse. Rogozhin is sentenced to fifteen years hard labour. And the Prince becomes an idiot again and is sent back to Switzerland for medical treatment.

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3 Quoted, Comer, p. 92. Originally from Andreev, V.V., *Raskol i ego znachenie v narodnoi russkoj istorii* (SPb, 1870), pp. 283-284.

4 The novel quotes from the Bible to describe the seizure, see Mark 9:17-27 and Luke 9:42.
*The Idiot* is permeated by images pertinent to death: Nastasya’s corpse, Rogozhin’s knives, the Prince’s guillotine and Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. I would like to examine this painting before moving towards the other images of death.

In August 1867, on their way from Baden-Baden to Geneva, Dostoevsky and his wife Anna Grigorievna decided to change trains and spend a day visiting the town museum in Basel, where the writer particularly wanted to see Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. This painting, which depicts Christ taken down from the cross, fascinated Nikolai Karamzin, who writes in *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (1801): ‘[In this painting] one doesn’t see anything of God. As a dead man he is portrayed quite naturally. According to legend, Holbein painted it from a drowned Jew’.

The painting had an enormous impact on Dostoevsky, as his wife wrote in her diary:

> A remarkable work but it simply horrified me. Yet it impressed Fedya so much that he proclaimed Holbein a wonderful artist and poet. Contrary to tradition, Christ is depicted in this painting, with an emaciated body, the bones and ribs showing, the hands and feet pierced by wounds, swollen and very blue, as in a corpse that is beginning to rot. The face is agonized and the eyes are half open but unseeing and expressionless. The nose, mouth and chin have turned blue. In general, this so closely resembles a real corpse that, truly, I don’t think I would dare to remain in the same room with the painting. Perhaps it is amazingly exact, but, truly, it is not in the least aesthetic and in me it aroused nothing but revulsion and a sort of horror. But Fedya is full of admiration for this painting.

The painting has different effects on the writer and his wife. While the wife finds the image of the dead Christ obscene, Dostoevsky is absorbed into the enormously detailed depiction of the dead Christ. The dead Christ in the painting suggests the power of the abject, which threatens to dissolve bodily boundaries. As Julia Kristeva writes: ‘Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. […] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. […] The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything, it is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled’. In front

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9 The corpse is the primary example of abjection for Kristeva. See her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3-4. The experience of the abject can also be seen as the return of the repressed, as Kristeva writes at the end of her book: ‘For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals.
of *Dead Christ*, the viewer’s subjectivity is subject to destruction as the bodily boundary is intruded upon and becomes unstable. It is at this moment Dostoevsky almost has an epileptic seizure on the spot. The wife describes the scene again in her memoirs:

> The painting overwhelmed Fyodor Mikhailovich, and he stopped in front of it as if stricken. For my part, I was unable to keep my eyes on it. It was too painful, especially in my delicate condition, and I went into another room. When I returned about fifteen or twenty minutes later I found Fyodor Mikhailovich still standing there as if rooted to the spot. On his agitated face was the sort of frightened expression I had often noticed during the first moments of an epileptic seizure. I quietly took my husband’s arm, led him to another room and made him sit down on a bench, expecting him to have a seizure any minute. Fortunately, it did not come. Little by little, Fyodor Mikhailovich calmed down, and when we were leaving he insisted on going to take another look at the painting that had made such an impression on him.\(^\text{10}\)

Karamzin claims that nothing is akin to God in Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. And Anna Grigorievna says that the dead Christ in the painting resembles closely a human corpse. Dostoevsky appeared to be deeply attracted by the enormously detailed depiction of the cadaver. But what made the writer stand in front of it for so long, even climbing on a chair to have a closer look at it, is not only the stark realism which does violence to a stable viewing subject, but also the horrifying idea that Christ is but a human corpse and is not going to rise again.

Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is a painting contained within a wooden frame bearing the inscription *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum* (‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’) The upper and thicker part of the frame resembles a tombstone suppressing the painting which is only thirty centimetres high and two metres long. The painting represents a life-sized human corpse lying on a slab covered with a cloth. The corpse fully occupies the space in the tomb; Christ’s chest almost touches the upper frame, intensifying the impression that Christ will not rise again. The only details which distinguish the dead Christ from a human corpse are the wounds on his side, his feet and right hand. That the painting depicts just

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and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjection’s purification and repression. But the return of their repressed makes up our “apocalypse”, and that is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises’ (209). That Dostoevsky is captured by the body of the dead Christ suggests a religious crisis, in which the corpse is so vividly depicted that the writer is about to lose his faith in the resurrection and ponders the border between life and death. To use Kristeva’s term, the apocalyptic (revealing) moments in Dostoevsky’s works would refer to those moments where the life/death border is doubted and interrogated. Apart from *Dead Christ*, the guillotine and the epileptic seizure point to these moments, which this chapter will examine.

the dead Christ also suggests a break between the image and the biblical narrative. As the narrative comes to a standstill, the picture crystallizes the death and provides little space for envisaging the resurrection.11

Dostoevsky’s response to Holbein’s Dead Christ is refracted in The Idiot, particularly through the commentary made by the eighteen-year-old consumptive Ippolit. His observations on the painting, as this chapter shall demonstrate, provide a new perspective in rethinking the novel in relation to the subject of death. On 12 January 1868, less than six months after he saw Dead Christ, Dostoevsky writes to his poet friend Apollon Maikov that he is tormented by a certain idea out of which he wants to create a novel. The idea is to portray a perfectly beautiful man. In another letter to his niece Sofya Ivanova written on the next day, the writer says that the perfectly beautiful is an ideal: ‘There is only one perfectly beautiful person – Christ – so that the appearance of this immeasurably, infinitely beautiful person is, of course, already an infinite miracle’.12 He then compares the beautiful man to Cervantes’ Don Quixote, Dickens’ Pickwick and Victor Hugo’s Jean Valjean. These figures however, are beautiful only because they are at the same time ridiculous (Don Quixote and Pickwick) or pitiable as being treated unjustly by society (Valjean). Through The Idiot, Dostoevsky wants to test this idea by creating the childish, saintly and epileptic Prince Myshkin.13 The idea is also hinted at in the poem composed by Aglaya, which is about a ‘poor knight’ who is ‘more serious’ than Don Quixote, and is ‘capable of having an ideal, and second, once he has the ideal, of believing in it, and believing in it, of blindly devoting his whole life to it’ (2.6.249).

But on the other hand, the Prince suffers two epileptic seizures which disgust the onlookers who witness them. And after keeping vigil over the corpse of Nastasya together with Rogozhin, he returns to the state of idiocy and is sent back to Switzerland for medical treatment. The pursuit of the perfectly beautiful which is Christ himself seems futile.


Ippolit’s ekphrasis on Holbein’s *Dead Christ* further proves the case. In traditional paintings of the crucifixion, ‘a shade of extraordinary beauty’ is still found in the image of Christ (3.6.407). But there is ‘not a word about beauty’ in *Dead Christ*. Ippolit continues:

This is in the fullest sense the corpse of a man who had endured infinite suffering before the cross, wounds, torture, beating by the guards, beating by the people as he carried the cross and fell down under it, and had finally suffered on the cross for six hours. […] In the picture [Christ’s] face is horribly hurt by blows, swollen, with horrible, swollen, and bloody bruises, the eyelids are open, the eyes crossed; the large, open whites have a sort of deathly, glassy shine. […] Here the notion involuntarily occurs to you that if death is so terrible and the laws of nature are so powerful, how can they be overcome? (407-408)

How could the idea of the perfectly beautiful man be realized with respect to this image of the dead Christ? And why would Dostoevsky bring in *Dead Christ* when he wants to portray Christ as positively beautiful? What are the relationships between the Prince’s ‘blind devotion’ (as Aglaya puts it) to the ideal and the senseless destruction of it as expressed in the painting? As Ippolit puts it, even Christ who exclaims ‘*Talitha cumi*’ and raises Lazarus alive from the dead is subject to the laws of nature and struck so deadly in the tomb (408). The image of death is so realistic that any kind of idealism which envisages a life after death is almost impossible. The Prince describes Rogozhin’s copy of *Dead Christ* which the merchant’s son loves looking at: ‘At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!’ (218). Ippolit is an empiricist who only believes in what he literally sees. In his ekphrasis of *Dead Christ*, he describes nature as some kind of mystical and destructive force to which every individual is submitted. And Christ is no exception:

Nature appears to the viewer of this painting in the shape of some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly, much more correctly, strange though it is – in the shape of some huge machine (громадной машины) of the most modern construction, which has senselessly seized, crushed, and swallowed up, blankly and unfeelingly, a great and priceless being – such a being as by himself was worth the whole of nature and all its laws, the whole earth, which was perhaps created solely for the appearance of this being alone! The painting seems precisely to express this notion of a dark, insolent, and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subjected, and it is conveyed to you involuntarily (3.6.408, 8:339).
Ippolit compares nature to a beast, then to a modern machine. At the end Ippolit sums up all these images, seeing nature as a form of infinitely mystical power. He does not refer to the cross or the injustice done to Christ as referred to in the Bible, but emphasizes how nature forbids the corpse from rising up again. As we recall, the phrase ‘enormous, implacable dumb beast’ suggests the deaf and dumb spirit in the Bible and it is referred to again to describe the Prince’s second seizure (the ‘spirit that convulsed and dashed down’ (554)). The spasm, convulsion, screaming and eventual loss of consciousness – all these represent the power of epilepsy, which Ippolit compares to nature’s destructive power of producing the dead Christ.

Here nature is also compared to an enormous machine with modern design which crushes the body of Christ. The modern machine (‘громадной машины’) could imply the railway system which started to operate in Russia in the early nineteenth century. Lebedev, who says that he has been interpreting the Apocalypse, has the reputation of calling the network of railways spread over Europe the star of Wormwood (243, 372). The passage in the Bible referred to reads: ‘And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter’ (Rev. 8:10-11). Lebedev is critical of the development of science and utilitarianism which he sees as a curse of the ‘wellspring of life’: ‘Hurrying, clanging, banging, and speeding, they say, for the happiness of mankind! “It’s getting much too noisy and industrial in mankind, there is too little spiritual peace”, complains a secluded thinker’ (375). Ippolit’s ekphrasis also suggests the image of the guillotine, which the Prince describes earlier as a ‘heavy, powerful and special machine’ (22). Both the image of epilepsy and the ‘modern machine’ aptly express the abruptness and violence of nature. As Ippolit says, nature has ‘seized’, ‘crushed’, and ‘swallowed up’ Christ. Each verb points to a specific power which destroys the body – the epileptic spirit that seizes, the guillotine that crushes, and possibly, the web of railways that ‘swallows’. The image of the dead Christ, the guillotine and epilepsy – all these represent a definite, quick and violent death which cause Ippolit to doubt the resurrection. And they are integral to the image of castration expressed through Rogozhin stabbing the Prince and Nastasya with the garden knife.

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It should be remembered that the idea of losing faith in the resurrection is based on the visual experience of Holbein’s Dead Christ. Also, Ippolit is not seeing the actual painting: his observations are based on the memory of Rogozhin’s replica. The question of whether death can be overcome is always already mediated by the experience of looking at an image, which leads Ippolit to raise a fundamental question concerning the subject of imagery at the end of his ekphrasis: ‘Can something that has no image come as an image?’ (Может ли мерещиться в образе то, что не имеет образа?)’ (409, 8:340). How is the question related to Dead Christ? The question can be examined from at least two levels: what is the ‘something’ which has got no image? And how does that ‘something’ appear to the viewer as an image?\(^\text{15}\) I argue that the guillotine and epilepsy, as implied in Ippolit’s tirade on nature, destroy all kinds of attempts to create images. That is, they forbid all kinds of idealizations, such as to envisage the resurrection from a picture. Besides, the guillotine and epilepsy produce the corpse, or a corpse-like body, where the very materiality resists the viewer’s contemplation of an afterlife. If there can be something which has no image, it would be the dead body of Christ, the guillotine and epilepsy. The dead body has no image insofar as it denies idealism and resembles nothing but itself.\(^\text{16}\)

On the other hand, this chapter will demonstrate the way in which the dead body contrasts with the Prince’s intensive engagement with images. One side of the epileptic mode of being refers to a continuous wish to produce images akin to beauty, ideal, eternity. But that wish is always annihilated at its most intense existence. For Dostoevsky, the Prince’s persistent wish to produce a beautiful image is the pursuit of an ideal, namely to overcome the laws of nature, that is, death itself. As Dostoevsky writes when keeping vigil over the dead body of his wife Maria Dmitrievna in April 1864:

The teaching of the materialists, the general inertia and mechanism of matter, means death.

The teaching of true philosophy is the annihilation of inertia, that is, thought, that is, the centre


and the Synthesis of the universe and its external form, matter, that is, God, that is, life without end.\textsuperscript{17}

The concept of inertia has a strong connection to the development of science in the nineteenth century, specifically to the idea of materialism which challenges the spiritual existence of God. The teaching of the materialist perceives death as the end point of life. For a materialist this is the inertia of men and nothing can change the rule. True philosophy however, annihilates that rule, opening up the possibility of overcoming death, a life without an end, an eternal life. Not accidentally, Prince Myshkin calls himself a teacher of philosophy: ‘Perhaps I really am a philosopher, and who knows, maybe I actually do have a thought of teaching…It may be so; truly it may’ (59).

I would like to elaborate on ‘something which has no image’ by exploring the significance of the dead body. In his essay ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary’, Maurice Blanchot writes that the ‘the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image’, suggesting that the study of the cadaver can illuminate our understanding of imagery.\textsuperscript{18} He discusses this from two perspectives: first, the image pacifies as it feeds the desire to look and confirms a stable viewing subject. The image veils a certain ‘nothingness’ and appropriates it into art. The cleaning up of that ‘nothingness’ keeps the viewer satisfied, powerful and active. But on the other hand, the image can also make the viewer powerless, strangely mute and passive (80). Blanchot uses examples of the image of a face or a corner of a room. But the ultimate example is the dead body, which unreservedly exposes its nothingness to the field of vision:

The cadaver is its own image. He no longer has any relation with this world, in which he still appears, except those of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow which is constantly present behind the living form and which now, far from separating itself from that form, completely transforms itself into a shadow (83).


There is a temptation to see the dead body as the person who lived. But an unbridgeable gap emerges between the living form and the dead body, which resembles nothing but itself. Normally, a shadow is an index of an object. Here, the dead body represents the shadow which completely cuts itself off from the object. That the dead body represents the shadow of nothing resembles the ‘something’ which has no image. What remains in the dead body is the ‘elemental strangeness’ and the ‘shapeless heaviness of the being that is present in absence’ (83). The dead body exists contradictorily in the field of vision: ‘it can be elsewhere than where it is, where we are without it, where there is nothing, an invading presence, an obscure and vain fullness’ (84). This is not to say that the dead body revisits the living like a spectre or anything akin to a metaphysical presence. Rather, the dead body points to the very density of absence itself. What haunts the living is the ‘inaccessible which one cannot rid oneself of, what one does not find and what, because of that, does not allow one to avoid it. The ungraspable is what one does not escape’ (84).

Blanchot uses oxymoronic phrases – ‘shapeless heaviness’, ‘obscure and vain fullness’, ‘that which is present in absence’ – to draw attention to the mass of nothingness of the dead body, recalling Ippolit asking whether something imageless can appear as an image. The dead Christ can be seen as that ‘something which has no image’ since the materiality of the corpse denies all kinds of idealization of death, e.g. the resurrection of Christ. That explains why the Prince says that one can lose faith by just looking at the painting. But on the other hand, the dead Christ is an image in the canvas. The image of the dead Christ is ‘nothing’ but comes as ‘something’ within the frame.

In the last scene of The Idiot, Rogozhin murders Nastasya and keeps vigil over her body together with Prince Myhskin. Rogozhin keeps the corpse in his bed in the house of the Castrates. A silk curtain stretches across the dark and stuffy study, separating the alcove where the bed is set up from the remaining area. The interior resembles the architecture of a church in which the iconostasis divides the chancel and the nave. A garden knife was plunged into Nastasya’s left breast causing little bleeding. The corpse is doubly covered with white oiled clothes and surrounded by four uncorked bottles of Zhdanov liquid for preserving the dead. Rogozhin leads the Prince towards the alcove to have a closer view of the corpse:

Someone was sleeping there, a completely motionless sleep; not the slightest rustle, not the slightest breath could be heard. The sleeper was covered from head to foot with a white sheet, but the limbs were somehow vaguely outlined; one could only see by the raised form that a
person lay stretched out there. Scattered in disorder on the bed, at its foot, on the chair next to the bed, even on the floor, were the taken-off clothes, a costly white silk dress, flowers, ribbons. On the little table by the head of the bed, the taken-off and scattered diamonds sparkled. At the foot of the bed some lace lay crumpled in a heap, and against this white lace, peeping from under the sheet, the tip of a bare foot was outlined; it seemed carved from marble and was terribly still. The prince looked and felt that the more he looked, the more dead and quiet the room became. Suddenly an awakened fly buzzed, flew over the bed, and alighted by its head. The prince gave a start (606).

The passage describes in great detail the material aspect of death. The heap of white lace contrasts with the buzzing fly which marks the deterioration. The room is in the dark despite the white night in a Petersburg summer. The flesh is completely covered and its identity is anonymous. Unlike her photographic portrait through which Nastasya appears for the first time, there is no identifiable image of her on the bed. What remains is a vague outline of a dead body. The corpse, particularly the tip of the foot, is as stiff as marble, suggesting the vision of a sculpture artwork rather than human flesh. Paradoxically, the creature is and is not Nastasya; her image which has not an image comes without an image. The more the Prince looks, the less can he identify the body as Nastasya. Figuratively, the cadaver has substituted the re-enactment of Christ’s sacrificial death conducted in the chancel. The idea of resurrection is denied and replaced by the deadliness of the corpse.19

The spiritual brothers insist on guarding the corpse. The prince says: ‘N-not for anything! No, no, no!’, to which Rogozhin replies, ‘That’s how I decided, too, so as not to give her up, man, not for anything, not to anybody!’ (608). And yet, the stiffened corpse lying on the bed is unidentified and deprived of any quality which belongs to Nastasya, resisting Rogozhin’s attempt to preserve her, his desire for amassing his ‘property’.

The emphasis on the materiality of death is found again seven years later in Dostoevsky’s short story *The Meek Girl: A Fantastic Story (A Gentle Creature)* which was published in *A Writer’s Diary* (1876). This piece, based on a real incident, narrates a husband’s reaction to his deceased wife who has jumped off from the window with an icon in her hands. The hypochondriac husband, sitting next to the corpse, speaks to himself in order to figure out why she killed herself. Towards the end of his monologue he says:

Inertia…Oh, nature! People are alone upon earth – that’s the terrible truth! ‘Is there anyone alive upon the plain?’ shouts the Russian epic hero. I too am shouting, but I am no epic hero, and no one replies. They say the sun gives life to the universe. The sun will rise and, when it does, look at it – what is it but a corpse? Everything’s dead, and everywhere there are corpses. Only people are alive, and around them is silence – that’s the earth! ‘People, love one another’ – who said that? Whose teaching is that? The pendulum’s tickling heartlessly, repulsively. It’s two o’clock in the morning. Her shoes are on the floor by her little bed, as if they were waiting for her…No, seriously though: when they come to take her away tomorrow, what will I do?²⁰

The passage points to an absolute separation between the living world and that of the dead, suggesting that the living husband will not see his wife again. Unlike the epic hero figure which is always connected to divine power, no one replies to the husband’s earthly shout. And the fantasy that the shoes are waiting for the wife is negated by the real fact that she will be carried away.²¹

**Imagining the Guillotine**

I now move on to the Prince’s visit to the Epanchins in order to move towards the discussion of the guillotine. The Prince is intensely interested in reading and rereading images. To demonstrate his calligraphy, he writes variations of the signature of the fourteenth-century monk Pafnuty. The Prince analyzes his own work: ‘Here is a simple, ordinary English script of the purest sort: elegance can go no further, everything here is lovely, a jewel, a pearl; this is perfection’ (1.3.34). Just after finishing writing, the Prince is fascinated by Nastasya’s photographic portrait: ‘Remarkably good-looking!’ (31). He comments on it later: ‘An astonishing face! […] And I’m convinced that her fate is no ordinary one. It’s a gay face, but she has suffered terribly eh? It speaks in her eyes, these two little bones, the two points under her eyes where the cheeks begin. It’s a proud face, terribly proud, and I don’t know whether she’s kind or not. Ah, if only she were kind! Everything would be saved!’ (36). The picture captures an instant, and yet the Prince imagines what happened before (‘she has suffered terribly, heh?’). Her eyes, as it were, tell the ‘story’ of her suffering. All these suggest that he is deeply interested in developing theories or a narrative out of an image.

The Prince’s interest in reading images is fully demonstrated in his first meeting with Mrs Epanchin and her daughters. He begins by telling his impressions about Switzerland. He says he had severe seizures, often lapsed into stupor and lost his memory. The feeling of being foreign was ‘killing’ him (56). He then remembers a day in Basel – the same place where Holbein’s *Dead Christ* is kept – where he saw the braying of an ass in the town market: ‘The ass struck me terribly and for some reason I took an extraordinary liking to it, and at the same time it was as if everything cleared up in my head’ (56). He says the natural scenery in Lucerne made him feel ‘terribly oppressed’ which is suggestive of agoraphobia (58). Later, he dreams of himself as a foreigner suffering ‘blankly and mutely’ in view of the ‘shining sky’ and ‘the bright and infinite horizon’ in Switzerland (3.7.423). That nature causes blank and mute torments in the Prince recalls Ippolit’s description of nature which crushes, seizes and swallows.

Adelaida asks the Prince to find her a subject for a picture, saying that she does not know how to look (58). He then begins to enter into a lengthy reflection on ‘how to live’ when he was in Switzerland. For him, to look does not only refer to physical vision but also a metaphysical one. ‘There would come a call to go somewhere, and it always seemed to me that if I walked […] the whole answer would be there, and at once I’d see a new life […] I dreamed about all kinds of thing! And then it seemed to me that in prison, too, you could find an immense life’ (59).

The Prince tells Adelaida to portray the face of a condemned man at the moment just before the guillotine strikes him (63). Recalling Nastasya’s photographic portrait, the Prince is as if asking Adelaida to photograph the condemned man’s face. Not surprisingly, the sister, who is used to painting landscapes, does not understand the Prince: ‘What? Just the face? […] How should the face be portrayed? As just a face? What sort of face?’ (63). In the museum of Basel where *Dead Christ* is kept, there is also the Swiss painter Hans Fries’ *The Beheading of John the Baptist* (1514), which depicts the face of St. John just before his head is cut off with the sword. The Prince, who saw the braying of the ass in Basel, may have Fries’ painting in mind when he recommends the sister to paint a

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beheading.\(^\text{24}\) Compared to Holbein’s Christ who has just died after being brought down from the cross, the Prince suggests painting the moment just before the execution. But that moment will be a compression of ‘everything’ that happens in the entire event: ‘I thought then that it would be a useful painting. You know, here you have to imagine everything that went before, everything, everything’ (64).

The whole process of imagining the guillotine begins when the Prince meets the valet in the anteroom of the house of the Epanchins and relates his experience of witnessing an execution in Lyons a month before. The visual experience is so powerful that it is as if ‘before his eyes’ and he dreams of it five times (1.2.22). The condemned man hardly screams when the iron blade falls, as the Prince elaborates: ‘Hardly! It’s instantaneous. The man is laid down, and a broad knife drops, it’s a special machine called the guillotine, heavy, powerful…The head bounces off before you can blink an eye’ (22).

We see a similar description of the machine in Ippolit’s tirade on nature. Nature which crushes Holbein’s Christ is anticipated by the power of the ‘special’, ‘heavy’ and ‘powerful’ guillotine machine. No screaming will be heard from the convict as he or she dies instantaneously as the guillotine blade strikes.\(^\text{25}\) This was made possible by the advancement of mechanics in eighteenth-century France when there was an increasing number of executions. Decapitation done by the sword wielded by the hand became more difficult and inhuman. Dr. Guillotin proposed in the Constituent Assembly in 1789 that the method of punishment should be the same for all people who were sentenced to death and it should be carried out effectively by simple mechanism.\(^\text{26}\) The idea behind the invention of the guillotine is to treat massive human lives systematically, which recalls Hegel’s comment on the meaninglessness of deaths created by guillotine during Robespierre’s Reign of Terror: ‘The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore death, a death which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more

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\(^\text{24}\) See Pevear’s note in *The Idiot*, p. 620

\(^\text{25}\) The phrase is used again in *Demons* to describe the murder of Shatov and Kirilov’s suicide, both carried out with a revolver: ‘Death occurred almost instantly’ (3.6.603); ‘Death must have occurred instantly’ (3.6.625).

significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water’.

Hegel’s description is not far away from that of Holbein’s *Dead Christ* in which death is depicted as without inner depth or fulfilment (i.e. the resurrection). Both the guillotine and *Dead Christ* point to the banality of death which is produced under injustice. In fact, the Prince is no less critical of the justification of capital punishment: ‘To kill for killing is an immeasurably greater punishment than the crime itself. To be killed by legal sentence is immeasurably more terrible than to be killed by robbers’ (23). The critique recalls Dostoevsky himself being sentenced to death in 1849. This is one of the few places where implicit criticism of the prosecutor, i.e. the Tsar, is found in his work.

One of the reasons why the Prince is fascinated by the guillotine is that the convict loses his faith and hope as it is definite that his life will end. He is particularly interested in that last moment: ‘There have been examples when a man’s throat has already been cut, and he still hopes, or flees, or pleads. But here all this last hope, which makes it ten times easier to die, is taken away for certain’ (23). The loss of hope in life is a more sufferable experience than physical pain, suggesting that the convict is already ‘dead’ before the guillotine strikes.

But on the other hand, the Prince ‘looks’ from a different level suggesting that the convict’s mind is infinitely active and undetermined. He sees, for instance, infinity in the convict’s last minutes of life. There are twenty minutes left before the execution and the convict thinks: ‘It’s still long, there are still three streets left to live; I’ll get to the end of this one, then there’s still that one […] It’s still a long way to the bakery!’ (64).

And then the Prince emphasizes the convict’s ability to know ‘everything’ before the guillotine strikes, just as he speculates ‘everything’ about the convict:

> It’s strange that people rarely faint in those last seconds! On the contrary, the head is terribly alive and must be working hard, hard, hard, like an engine running; I imagine various thoughts throbbing in it, all of them incomplete, maybe even ridiculous, quite irrelevant thoughts […] There is this one point that can never be forgotten, and you can’t faint, and around it, around that point, everything goes and turns (65).

28 A similar point is made by Allan Stoekl in ‘Hugo’s *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*: The End as Contamination’, *Diacritics*, 30:3 (2000), 40-52.
The metaphor of the guillotine returns, as we recall the Prince describing it as a heavy, powerful and special machine (22). This time the Prince says that the brain is working like an overloaded and senseless automaton. The intensification of consciousness reaches such a level that it resembles an engine. Seeing infinity in the last moments of life ends up as a mechanical activity. In this way, death which is symbolized by the guillotine is prefigured in life: previously, the Prince envisages a life after death (‘Imagine, to this day they still argue that, as the head is being cut off, it may know for a second that it has been cut off – quite a notion!’ (65)). Here, death is always already announcing its power in life. In other words, the convict himself is turned into a guillotine before he is guillotined; death has already taken place before the much anticipated event when the head actually is cut off. The execution becomes a ‘non-event’ because the event has always already taken place in life.

For the Prince, the convict desperately demands more time to live. This recalls the Prince’s civil servant friend Lebedev referring to the execution of the countess Du Barry during the French Revolution: ‘This former ruling lady was dragged guiltless to the guillotine by the executioner […] She saw that he was bending her neck down under the knife and kicking her from behind – with the rest all laughing – and she began to cry out: “Encore un moment, monsieur le bourreau, encore un moment!” which means “Wait one more little minute, mister boorow (бюро), just one!”’ (197, 8:165). The countess would like to live longer. But what are the implications if such a thought intensifies to the extent that the mind becomes numb and mechanical? Dostoevsky comments on the same event later in the entry ‘Vlas’ in A Writer’s Diary (1873). First of all, he evokes a story from real life about a peasant who accepts a dare from another to do the most shocking thing ever. The first time he steals the Eucharist; the second time he is asked to shoot the stolen Eucharist. Pulling the trigger, he hallucinates and sees Christ on the cross and then falls into unconsciousness.

The writer moves on to explore the psychological state of the peasant. He suggests that the last moments express the peasant’s ability to detach himself from the horror of the shooting itself:

The young lad carefully loaded the gun, and he remembered doing it; he remembered taking aim, and remembered everything, right to the very last moment. It is also possible that the process of loading the gun was a relief, a release for his suffering soul, and he was happy to concentrate but for a brief moment on some external objects that provided this release. This is
what happens at the guillotine to those about to be decapitated. Mme, Dubarry cried to the executioner: ‘Encore un moment, monsieur le bourreau, encore un moment!’ (1.167)

When the convict’s head is working hard like an engine, it is not only a way to contemplate an eternal life, but it can also be seen as a self-detachment which postpones the arrival of death. A similar analysis is found in Crime and Punishment, in which the murder of the pawnbroker, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, is carried out ‘mechanically’ by Raskolnikov, suggesting that he is in a state of blankness when committing the crime (1.7.76). Being killed by the guillotine and killing the pawnbroker with an axe are not so different insofar as they represent a mystical horror which the subject cannot bear and wants to postpone.

The Prince tells the story of the execution first to the valet and the Epanchins. In between the two narrations he relates another story about ‘a certain man’ and his comrades being reprieved at the last moment of an execution by firing squad (60). The Prince virtually speaks of execution three times in succession, suggesting a compulsion to repeat the experience of witnessing death. Like the guillotine execution he sees in Lyons, the Prince emphasizes the clarity of the mind of that ‘certain man’ and his desperation to think and know about ‘everything’. This time the Prince is more specific in terms of what ‘everything’ is. After bidding farewell to his comrades and processing all the external objects in his mind, he spends the last two minutes in ‘thinking about himself’ (60). He is anxious to have a clear ‘picture’ of what will happen after death: ‘now he exists and lives, and in three minutes there would be something, some person or thing – but who? And where?’ (61). Aglaya says the Prince must know how to look as he knew how to live happily when he is in Switzerland (58). From his reading of the execution, we can see the Prince tends to look for things which are invisible and even non-existent. To look suggests a vision of something beyond what appears in the field of vision. The convict fixes his gaze on the rays reflected from the dome of a cathedral on his way to the execution site, imagining that in the next minute he will merge with them (61). And he is petrified by the unknowable: ‘The ignorance of and loathing for this new thing that would be and would come presently were terrible’ (61). Like the young man who faints in front of the Eucharist, the convict is detached from confronting the terrifying ‘new thing’ by contemplating infinity: ‘What if life were given back to me – what infinity! And it would all be mine! Then I’d turn each minute into a whole age, I’d lose nothing, I’d reckon up every minute separately, I’d let nothing be wasted!’ (61).
But what happens to the convict at these last moments can by no means be confined to escapism. It might be true that the convict wants more time to live. But the convict contradictorily rebukes his thirst for life: ‘In the end this thought turned into such anger at him that he wished they would hurry up and shoot him!’ (61). Perhaps the convict is angry with himself because he realizes that he will not be able to seize hold of each minute if he is reprieved. In fact, the convict did not keep the promise he made to himself. The Prince says: ‘I asked him about it – he didn’t live that way at all and lost many, many minutes’ (61). Similarly, Mrs Epanchins and her daughters are sceptical of what happens to the convict in the last minutes because he is released at the end (they seem to be more enthusiastic for the guillotine execution as the convict actually died). Aglaya is ambivalent about the Prince’s passion to philosophize the executions: ‘With your quietism one could fill a hundred years of life with happiness. Show you an execution or show you a little finger, you’ll draw an equally praise-worthy idea from both and be left feeling pleased besides. It’s a way to live’ (62). Aglaya’s comment recalls her poem about the ‘poor knight’ who is capable of an ideal and is devoted to it for his whole life (248-249). ‘Quietism’, as Aglaya refers to it, is a religious mysticism that consists of passive contemplation and a withdrawal from experiences of the senses, which expresses the way in which the Prince idealizes the external reality and therefore the way he looks. He says that he understands everything when he looks at the face of the condemned man (64). The picturing of the face of the condemned man contrasts with the face in Holbein’s Dead Christ, just as the idealistic way in which the Prince’s look is different from Ippolit’s empiricism in looking.

The anecdote of the reprieved man is a story from Dostoevsky’s real life. In 1849, he was sentenced to death for involving himself in the Petrashevsky Circle. The sentence was commuted to hard labour and conscription to the army at the last minute under the order of Nicholas I who became nervous of the intellectual activities in his own country regarding the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1848. The Prince’s eagerness to know what the convict has in mind recalls Dostoevsky’s criticism of Turgenev for turning away from the convict when the guillotine blade falls. His critique of the writer is refracted through the voice of Stepan Trofimovich and the caricature Karmazinov in Demons. In the article ‘The Execution of Tropmann’ (1870), Turgenev follows the entire process of the execution – the convict’s conversations with

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29 See Pevear’s note, pp. 619-620.
notables, setting up of the guillotine, the rehearsal of the event on the square. But when Tropmann is about to be decapitated, he turns his head away. Dostoevsky is very critical of Turgenev’s turning away. He writes in a letter to the critic Nikolai Strakhov:

This pompous and finicky article exasperated me […] Man on the surface of the earth does not have the right to turn away and ignore what is taking place on earth, and there are lofty moral reasons for this: *homo sum et nihil humanum*, etc. The most comic thing of all is that in the end he turns away and doesn’t see how [Tropmann] is finally executed […]. Moreover, he gives himself away: the chief impression one gets from the article is a frightful concern – fussy to the nth degree – about himself, his integrity, his composure – and all this over a decapitated head!\(^{30}\)

Dostoevsky quotes from the Roman dramatist Terence’s *Self-Tormentor*: ‘*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*’ (I am a man: nothing human is alien to me). The same quote is spoken by Svidrigaylov in *Crime and Punishment* and the devil-figure in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and is also discussed by Cicero.\(^{31}\) That Dostoevsky is concerned with all activities akin to men is not much different from the convict, projected by the Prince, wanting to know everything about the world and the self at the last moments of the execution. That is reflected in Dostoevsky’s insistence on witnessing the entire process including the head being cut off, just as the Prince says he would definitely hear the screech if he was on the plank of the guillotine. But here, to look not only means to envisage a metaphysical presence but also to witness the actual dismemberment of the convict’s body. The two aspects of looking are integral to each other. Activities akin to human beings are not confined to those of the soul but also the body including its mutilation. In fact, the body and soul are inseparable entities because the question of afterlife only arises when Ippolit sees the body of the dead Christ. Similarly, Turgenev is deeply interested in the psychology of the convict. He depicts in detail the events prior to and after the guillotine. He claims he has no right to watch the last moment, saying that he

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\(^{31}\) See H.D. Jocelyn, ‘*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*’, *Antichthon*, 7 (1973), 14-46.
would be an accomplice in the killing of the convict. The writer is anxious to maintain his stable bourgeois subject. He keeps himself away from the most bodily moment of death and closes his eyes and complicitly contemplates the convict’s death. Regarding Aglaya’s comment on the Prince’s quietism, he would disagree that he can say ‘equally praise-worthy idea’ from both an execution and a little finger, because his intense reflection – his epileptic mode of being – is not merely metaphysical but is always dependent on physical conditions, such as the dismemberment of the body at the guillotine, and the senseless convulsion and spasm during the epileptic seizure, to which I now move on.

**Epilepsy and Death**

Like the Prince’s anecdote of the execution, the representation of epilepsy in *The Idiot* is a combination of the wish for idealization and the material or bodily revolt against that wish. The Prince has two epileptic seizures altogether in the novel. The first one takes place on the spiral staircase of a hotel just before Rogozhin stabs him with his knife; the second one happens in the party at the Epanchins’ house, after he has compulsively broken a valuable Chinese vase and given a speech about the importance of his identity as a prince (4.7.553). I would like to focus on the first seizure, on which the Prince reflects extensively.

After Nastasya elopes with Rogozhin, she secretly meets the Prince. At the beginning of part 2, the Prince returns to Petersburg in order to discuss this matter with the merchant’s son. From the moment he arrives at the train station, the Prince senses that he is stalked by a ‘burning gaze’, which later turns out to be Rogozhin. The Prince instinctively identifies Rogozhin’s house which accommodates his family and the merchants who belong to the Castrates. Rogozhin relates how he is humiliated by Nastasya who turns away from him. He physically abuses her and hints that he will murder her: ‘But that’s why she’s marrying me, because she probably expects to get the knife from me! But can it be, Prince, that you still haven’t grasped what the whole thing is about?’ (2.3.215). It is in the same meeting that Rogozhin shows the Prince his replica of Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. Leaving the house, the epileptic roams the streets and enters into a state of intense self-reflection. He sees himself responsible for Rogozhin’s jealousy, wanting ‘to be alone and give himself over to all this suffering tension completely

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passively’ (224). Meanwhile he is well aware that he is being stalked by Rogozhin, whose pair of eyes is frequently mentioned in the long reflection. Also often mentioned is Rogozhin’s garden knife. Earlier in Rogozhin’s house, the Prince spots a brand new six-inch garden knife and picks it up ‘absentmindedly’ twice (217). Later in his long reflection, he remembers looking for a similar knife in a shop and wants to make ‘absolutely sure’ that the knife still exists in the window case (227). Both images of the knives and Rogozhin’s eyes are integral to the Prince’s reflection on his own death: ‘He insistently wanted to see “today’s eyes,” […] Yes, they were those same eyes (and there was no longer any doubt that they were the same) that had flashed at him that morning […] The prince had wanted terribly to go up to Rogozhin and tell him “whose eyes they were!”’ (231).

In the staircase of the hotel, Rogozhin’s eyes finally meet the Prince’s. For a second the two faces almost touch each other. The Prince seizes him closer to the light in order to confirm that he is Rogozhin. The Prince shouts ‘Parfyon, I don’t believe it!…’, after which an epileptic seizure breaks out, which paralyzes Rogozhin and saves the Prince from actual death (234). He has a ‘convulsive desire’ to see Rogozhin’s eyes, suggesting that the desire is epilepsy-inducing. And if he proves the eyes are Rogozhin’s – which he does – he will be ‘crushed and astounded’ (231). The Prince is not so much concerned with his own life as with whether the stalker is Rogozhin or not. The Prince’s desire to look at the eyes, the knife and finally Rogozhin’s face expresses his ‘blind devotion’ to the ideal that Rogozhin is innocent. But that vision of the ideal is refuted by the face-to-face encounter with the merchant’s son whose ‘castrating’ power destroys the Prince’s idealization.

The Prince’s convulsive desire to meet Rogozhin’s eyes which will crush him parallels the compulsion to repeat the experience of witnessing the execution and, as I will show later, the anticipation of an epileptic fit. This contemplative state is ambivalent: like the countess Du Barry’s ‘encore un moment’, it can be seen as a compulsion to repetitively contemplate destruction just in order to postpone the actual destruction. But on the other hand, just as with the convict’s mind turning into a thinking machine, we can say that destruction has already taken place. In the context of Rogozhin the castrate-figure, the Prince’s repetitive looking for the knife and eyes can be seen as the wish for castration. Arriving at the hotel, he stands on the other side of the street, crosses his arms and waits: ‘This time he was in full view and it seemed that he deliberately wanted to be in view’
At the end, the epileptic fit saves the Prince from being stabbed, allowing the compulsive contemplation of death to be postponed.

During the intense thinking about the question of death, the Prince also reflects on his epileptic condition, perceiving it as contradictory because of the co-existence of an ‘eternal harmony’ and banal idiocy. In the condition of ‘sadness’, ‘the darkness of soul’, ‘the pressure’, his brain would ‘momentarily catch fire’ (225). The ‘sense of life’ suddenly increases in exponential scale. Along with this elation is the sense of ‘harmonious joy and hope, ‘filled with reason and ultimate cause’ (226). These moments are infinitely minimal. But during these moments he would say to himself: “Yes, for this moment one could give one’s whole life!” (226). The ecstatic moments are so immeasurably pleasurable that the Prince thinks that he will sacrifice his life for it. The way in which he sees infinity in these minimal seconds before the seizure is virtually the same as the way he describes the convict’s thirst for infinite time. He then remembers saying to Rogozhin in Moscow that during those ecstatic moments he was somehow able to understand the phrase ‘time shall be no more’ (‘времени больше не будет’ (8:189)) from the Book of Revelation (227).

In ‘The Angel with the Little Scroll’, the seventh angel speaks to St. John: ‘And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer’ (Rev 10:6). The Prince does not elaborate on how he understands the phrase. But then he compares it with another moment of timelessness. He evokes the legend of Muhammad, who manages to travel across heaven within the time when a jug spills. The earthly time (the spilling) bursts open into the heavenly time (travelling across heaven). The phrase ‘time shall be no more’ suggests not only the cancellation of the concept of time, but also a replacement of the earthly time with the heavenly one. The Prince, retrospectively, treats those few seconds of ecstatic moment as apocalyptic and eternal.

On the other hand, the Prince sees the eternal harmony attained in those epileptic moments as the sign of physical illness, ‘a violation of the normal state’, which turns the ‘harmonious’ moments from the expression of ‘highest being’ to the very lowest (226). And yet he tends to believe in these ecstatic moments even if they are merely symptoms of his epilepsy:

33 For an interpretation of the use of this phrase, see Steven Cassedy, Dostoevsky’s Religion, pp. 124-128.
He finally arrived at an extremely paradoxical conclusion: ‘So what if it is an illness?’ he finally decided. ‘Who cares that it’s an abnormal strain, if the result itself, if the moment of the sensation, remembered and examined in a healthy state, turns out to be the highest degree of harmony, beauty, gives a hitherto unheard-of and unknown feeling of fullness, measure, reconciliation, and an ecstatic, prayerful merging with the highest synthesis of life? (и восторженного молитвенного слития с самым высшим синтезом жизни?)’ (226, 8:188)

The paradox lies in the way in which the Prince looks retrospectively – do the last moments in epilepsy represent the image of eternal harmony or just illness? The state of sadness, the darkness of soul and pressure – all these ‘abnormal strains’ are worth having if they are conditions of eternal harmony. The Prince wants to seek a resolution between the two incompatible images, constructing a synthesis between the ecstatic moments and the physical symptoms of the illness itself. His reading of his condition echoes Hegelian dialectics which, to over-summarize, generate a synthesis out of the alternations between a thesis and antithesis in the course of historical time.34 The Prince puts his paradoxical conclusion in question form, dialogically opening up the plurality in his argument. In the next moment, he seems to refute the dialectics he himself formulates:

However, he did not insist on the dialectical part (диалектическую часть) of his reasoning: dullness, darkness of soul, idiocy stood before him as the clear consequence of these ‘highest moments’. Naturally, he was not about to argue in earnest. His reasoning, that is, his evaluation of this moment, undoubtedly contained an error, but all the same he was somewhat perplexed by the actuality of the sensation. What, in fact, was he to do with this actuality? (226, 8:188)

A dialectical framework fails to capture the irreducible plurality of the Prince’s epileptic condition. To represent epilepsy dialectically, as the Prince admits, is an error. Unlike Hegel’s idea of the Absolute Spirit which eventually abolishes all contradictions, epilepsy ends each time with an abrupt annihilation of consciousness. The ‘dullness’, ‘darkness of soul’ and ‘idiocy’ are not in any synthetic relationship with those ‘highest moments’; they are mutually exclusive. Alexander Herzen, from whom Dostoevsky learned about Hegel, comments on the philosopher in relation to the discussion of dead sentence:

Hegel, with perfect logic, makes the discovery that the absolute is the confirmation of the unity of being and thought. But when it comes to the point, this same Hegel, like Leibniz before him, sacrifices everything temporal and existent to thought and spirit; idealism, in which he was reared, which he drank at the breast with his milk, draws him into that one-sidedness upon which he himself has read the death sentence – and he tries to suppress nature by the spirit of logic; he is ready to regard every individual product of nature as a phantom, he observes every appearance from aloft.35

Things which are transient and contagious are sacrificed to the dialectical logic which seeks the unity of being and thought. The actual beheading and the epileptic seizure are overlooked and appropriated into the logic of the spirit. Herzen’s critique of Hegel’s reading of the death sentence resembles Dostoevsky’s critique of Turgenev turning away from the beheading.36 In both cases, the latter tends to dismiss – even suppress, as Herzen puts it – the dismemberment of the body, the material base of the death sentence, the laws of nature.

Thinking about epilepsy retrospectively, the Prince is aware of the ‘trap’ of dialectical thinking, but all the same: ‘Because [the seizure] had happened, he had succeeded in saying to himself in that very second, that this second, in its boundless happiness, which he fully experienced, might perhaps be worth his whole life’ (226, italics mine). The Prince has a will to those ecstatic moments, just as he wants to see the convicts desiring infinity in the last moments of execution.37

**Ippolit’s Explanation**

This chapter has shown that there is an irreducible conflict between the Prince’s wish for the ideal and the force which refutes that wish. This conflict is mainly expressed in the Prince’s reflection on the execution and his epilepsy. I have examined these conflicts through his enthusiasm for reflecting on images such as the photographic portrait, the guillotine, the knife, Rogozhin’s eyes, the spilling jug, the Chinese vase and the corpse.

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36 Hegel discusses the death penalty in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), par. 100. On this, see Allen W. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thoughts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 121-122.
37 The Prince’s ambivalent attitude towards his epileptic condition – perceiving it as a banal illness and the opening up of a blissful state at the same time – is picked up by Kristeva, who suggests that Bakhtin’s dialogism is another way to articulate this ambivalence: ‘One might wonder, on the other hand, whether or not the well-known ambivalence of Dostoyevsky’s heroes, which led Bakhtin to postulate a “dialogism” at the foundation of his poetics, was an attempt to represent, through the ordering of discourses and the conflicts between characters, the opposition, without a synthetic solution, of the two forces (positive and negative) specific to drive and desire’. See ‘Dostoyevsky, the Writing of Suffering, and Forgiveness’, *Black Sun*, pp. 185-187.
His vision is pluralistic: on the one hand, under the guillotine death takes place instantaneously. But on the other hand, the powerful machine evokes the wish for infinite time. Similarly, the epileptic seizure cuts off consciousness abruptly. But it is preceded by the ecstatic moments for which the Prince says he would sacrifice his life. In both cases, there is the tendency to seek an infinite existence in vision, which is later annihilated.

I have also shown that this conflicting state of existence can be understood in terms of eventuality. The commonsensical reading of the execution or epileptic seizure as an experienced event does not stand in the world of Dostoevsky. The final moment of death as figured in the execution, the seizure, the stabbing does not belong to the realm of experience as consciousness will be cut off. The moment of death does not take place at a particular time but announces its traumatic power throughout the intensive and repetitive reflection of it. Put another way, the moment is the ‘non-event’. And it is the lack of eventuality which makes the Prince’s reflection traumatic. That is why Hegelian dialectics does not work for the Prince. There is no eventual synthesis in contemplation for it is always destroyed by the seizure. In the realm of experience, there is only the will to epilepsy but not epilepsy as such. Its singularity is only anticipated but not experienced.

While the Prince apparently fails to overcome the laws of nature and to attain the ideal from his reflection on the guillotine and epilepsy, the eighteen-year-old consumptive Ippolit decides to overcome nature by killing himself in order to prove his self will. I would like to conclude by going back to Ippolit’s speech discussed at the beginning of this chapter. He reads out a manuscript he has written entitled ‘My Necessary Explanation’, which explains why he has decided to commit suicide (406). It is in this speech that he reflects on the question of death through Holbein’s Dead Christ. Due to his consumption which will take his life in no more than a month, Ippolit more than once emphasizes that he is condemned to death (387, 389, 394, 412). He speaks of being scared by a seven-inch-long reptile whose secretion can kill. His dog Norma, confronting the reptile, seems to feel ‘mystical fear’ and is eventually killed by it. Ippolit then says he wants to accomplish a ‘good deed’ before he dies. At the end he says he reaches the ‘ultimate conviction’, which is to commit suicide before consumption takes his life: ‘Nature has so greatly limited my activity by her three weeks sentence that suicide may be the only thing I still have time to begin and end of my own will. So, maybe I want to use my last opportunity of doing something?’ (415). Ippolit sees nature as giving a three weeks death sentence to him. This understanding of nature recalls his ekphrasis of Holbein’s Dead Christ, comparing nature to some senseless dumb beast which crushes and reduces Christ into nothing but a corpse.
Previously, the eighteen-year-old raises the question of whether death can be overcome in view of the dead Christ. Here he decides to ‘overcome’ his consumption and prove his mastery over nature by committing suicide.

Apparently, Ippolit’s resolution is a logical conviction derived from his intention to overcome the laws of nature, that is, his natural death. And yet, he emphasizes that his decision to commit suicide is not according to logic but revulsion: Ippolit does not consciously choose to commit suicide. Rather, he is subject to a certain force which leads him to reach such a decision, as he says: ‘It is impossible to remain in a life that assumes such strange, offensive forms. This apparition humiliated me. I am unable to submit to a dark power that assumes the shape of a tarantula’ (411). He also describes this ‘dark power’ as ‘infinite’, ‘blank dark’, ‘dumb’, appearing in some ‘strange and impossible form’, ‘as if someone hold[ing] a candle led me by the hand and showed me some huge and repulsive tarantula and started assuring me that this was that dark blank, and all-powerful being, and laugh[ed] at my indignation’ (409). This description sounds familiar because Ippolit uses the same phrase to describe Dead Christ: ‘The painting seems precisely to express this notion of a dark, insolent, and senseless eternal power, to which everything is subjected, and it is conveyed to you involuntarily’ (408).

As I have suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the dead Christ in the painting is that ‘something without an image’, that is the dead body which resembles nothing but itself. It is nowhere but everywhere. And everyone is subject to it as everyone has to confront their own death. The notion of the senseless eternal power appears to be that of death. And if that is the case, death takes the position of the subject and casts its power over the living. Just as Ippolit is passively led to gaze at the repulsive dark blank being which appears in an impossible form. Ippolit says he commits suicide just because he cannot remain in a life which is subject to this power, that is, the power of death. In other words, he commits suicide only because he is seized hold by that mystical power. As it

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38 The French writer Georges Bataille also sees the image of spider as formless, as a threat to the attempt to construct a system of thought. I will quote the whole passage here: ‘A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit’. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31. The image of the spider permeates Dostoevsky’s novels. Prince Valkovsky, for example, resembles a huge spider which Vanya wants to crush (3.10.246). See my discussion of the image of the spider in relation to mystic terror in chapter 1 on *Humiliated and Insulted.*
were, he wants to prevent himself from dying under the power of death, i.e. to die of his consumption, and therefore he wants to kill himself first in order to have absolute control over his own death. The apparent materialist who observes empirically Holbein’s Dead Christ turns out to be not very different from an idealist who sees himself subordinated to some unknowable power.

Ippolit attempts to resolve the question he raises: In view of the very power of the laws of nature, how can we believe in the resurrection? How can death be overcome? He responds to this question by committing suicide in order to express his will power. But paradoxically, the eighteen-year-old decides to ends his life only because he is nauseated by the power of death. To put it figuratively, he is passively subject to the power of death when he thinks he is going to actively meet death. Similarly, the Prince is always already subject to the power of the guillotine and epilepsy which crushes and seizes. Ippolit’s suicide opens up other questions which will be addressed in the next chapter: How is it possible for Dostoevsky’s heroes to overcome death by committing suicide? To what extent can one’s will overcome the laws of nature? To answer these questions I shall move on to the next chapter on Demons.
Chapter Four

The Will to Epilepsy: Suicide, Writing and Modernity

‘A great will and a great thought’

Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave (*Thomas the Obscure*).¹

Thus Maurice Blanchot describes a man who commits suicide by hanging himself. The man who kills himself would like to ‘leave existence’ and ‘make a leap into the void’, which turns out to be impossible. Instead of the ‘void’, the man experiences but the physical tightening around his neck. The rope ‘holds him, held to the end, held more than ever’ until the man loses consciousness and therefore can no longer experience anything. The man negates the present life and wills to enter a metaphysical void, but all he can experience is the physical pain. The lofty will to leave one’s own existence is obstructed by the mundane tightening of the rope. The rope represents an unbridgeable gap which experience cannot surpass.²

This chapter further formulates what I call the epileptic mode of being by examining *Demons* (Бесы, 1871-72), particularly the building engineer Alexei Nilych Kirilov’s project of suicide.³ The suicide case demonstrates that the subject wishes to attain an infinite existence by ending his life. Kirilov’s case reflects what I will call the will to death, namely, a desire for finishing the existing life in exchange for a meaningful and utopic afterlife. Similarly, regarding the will to death, I will suggest that Kirilov also has a will to epilepsy. That is, a desire for the ecstatic moments just before the attack of an epileptic seizure. And yet, these ecstatic moments, as I have shown in the previous chapter,

last for a minimal time and will be annihilated by the seizure itself. The will to death and
the will to epilepsy share a similar pattern: the subject wishes to experience metaphysical
existence but that wish cannot be materialized in the moment of death and seizure. To
illuminate this point, apart from Kirilov’s suicide, I will look at the novel’s larger political
context, particularly the idea of Shigalyovism. I will also discuss Nietzsche’s *On the
Genealogy of Morals* (1887), his notebook commentary on *Demons*, and Maurice

The second half of the chapter explores how the will can be related to the notion of
time by focusing on Nicholai Stavrogin’s confession and his suicide. In his confession and
suicide, he is extremely sensitive to the course of time and anxious to master the present.
With respect to the transient quality of time, this anxiety of freezing the present anticipates
Foucault’s redefinition of modernity through Baudelaire, that is, the will to ‘heroize’ the
present. The chapter will suggest that the will to epilepsy works in the same way as the
will to ‘heroize’ the present, thereby showing that the epileptic mode of being illuminates
the understanding of modernity. To move towards the above discussion, I would like to
give an analysis of the plot.

The chronicler Anton Lavrentievich Govorov narrates a series of events in three
parts that happened recently in an anonymous Russian province over the course of about
twelve days in 1871.Govorov appears to come from an educated and reactionary Russian
class. The first part tells the story of the life of his close friend Stepan Trofimovich, who
used to be a university teacher and an active intellectual. He is the father of Pyotr

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p. 310. On the relationship between modernity and the will, see Andrea Gogrőf-Voorhees, *Defining
Modernity: Baudelaire and Nietzsche on Romanticism, Modernity, Decadence, and Wagner* (New York:
Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 53-86.

5 On *Demons*, see William J. Leatherbarrow, *A Devil’s Vaudeville: The Demonic in Dostoevsky’s Major
Fiction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005); Nancy K. Anderson, *The Perverted Ideal in
Dostoevsky’s The Devils* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Also see Hannah Arendt’s illuminative
commentary on the novel, ‘Notes on Dostoevsky’s Possessed’, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 275-281. For discussions of Stavrogin, see R. Pope and J.
Stavrogin’, *New Essays on Dostoevsky*, ed. by M. V. Jones and G. M. Terry (Cambridge, London:
Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 95-114. For the source of Stavrogin, see G. Katkov, ‘Steerforth and
Stavrogin: On the Sources of The Possessed’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 69 (1949), 469-488;
Craig Cravens, ‘The Strange Relationship of Stavrogin and Stepan Trofimovich as Told by Anton
Series of Delusion: Stavrogin and the Symbolic Structure of The Devils’, *Dostoevsky Studies*, 4 (1983), 53-
67. Also see Georg Lukács, ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’ (1922), *Reviews and Articles from Die rote Fahne*,

6 On the significance of the anonymity of the province in relation to the revolutionary plot, see Anne
Lounsbery, ‘Dostoevskii’s Geography: Centers, Peripheries, and Networks in Demons’, *Slavic Review*, 66:2
(2007), 212-229.
Stepanovich, a character based on Sergei Nachaev, a revolutionary leader who murdered his group member I. I. Ivanov for disagreeing with the idea of distributing revolutionary propaganda. Divorced twice and virtually penniless, Stepan depends financially on Varvara Petrovna, who is the widow of a rich and powerful man. Stepan is also the private tutor of Varvara’s son Stavrogin. Varvara tries hard to bring Stepan back to the current intellectual circle. She also tries to marry him off to her maid Darya.

The chronicle really begins when Pyotr Stepanovich returns from Switzerland with Stavrogin and other revolutionaries. Pyotr claims to be the representative of a secret, worldwide, revolutionary organization situated vaguely in Europe. The organization is structured in groups of five, and each member is separately affiliated to another group of five. Pyotr returns to Russia in order to incite chaos in the town and eventually destroy the tsarist order. Part 1 mainly deals with the portrayal of the older generation, namely Stepan and Stavrogin’s mother.

Part 2 spends most of its time depicting the sons. Pyotr talks to important people in the town to prepare for inciting chaos. Part of it is to organize a fête. On the other hand, Stavrogin, whom Pyotr sees as the spiritual leader of the group, is uninterested in all kinds of collective activities. Stavrogin is challenged to a duel during which he deliberately misses his shot. Four years before the duel, he pulls a socially high-ranking man’s nose at a local bar, kisses another man’s wife at a party, and bites the ear of the governor. He has a brain fever after that and is sent by his mother to Europe to recover his health. Among the many offences he commits, he seduces a ten-year-old girl who consequently hangs herself. He also marries the epileptic cripple Marya Timofeevna, the sister of Lebyadkin. A banned chapter (‘At Tikhon’s’) narrates his confession of his crimes to Bishop Tikhon. Stavrogin ends up hanging himself in the attic in his mother’s house, before which he writes in a letter: ‘One can argue endlessly about everything, but the only thing to emanate from me is negation without magnanimity, without power’ (754).

The fête, which is organized by the wife of the governor, takes place in part 3. It turns out to be a farce, during which a group of factory workers commit arson at the other side of the town. Liza Tushina, who is a relative of the governor’s wife and has a relationship with Stavrogin, rushes to the burnt village to see the dead wife of Stavrogin (Marya) and is murdered in the crowd. In the same party the literary writer Karmazinov –

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a caricature of Turgenev – delivers a lengthy speech (entitled ‘Merci’) which is severely criticized by a group of unexpected guests from the town’s lower class.

Shatov, who is based on I. I. Ivanov, is a former student of Stepan and has the skill of printing. Four years earlier, he had gone to America with Kirilov to work in a much exploited condition. Having returning to Russia, he wants to quit the revolutionary group but is later murdered by the group leader Pyotr. Kirilov, taking responsibility for the murder and the arson, shoots himself in order to actualize his suicide plan. The murder of Shatov and other crimes are discovered. Pyotr flees to Moscow and the rest of the group members are arrested. The revolutionary group disintegrates before it manages to cause enough chaos to affect the tsarist order.

In chapter 7 of part 3, the chronicle finishes by going back to Stepan Trofimovich, who decides to walk the countryside in order to get to know the Russian people (538). He falls ill during his ‘pilgrimage’ and dies within a week (630). On his death bed, Stepan interprets an episode from the Bible which is quoted by the chronicler in the epigraph. A man from Gerasenes is possessed by demons. And Christ casts them away into a flock of swine, which rush into a lake where they are drowned (Luke 8:32-5). For Stepan, Russia is analogous to the possessed man in the Bible, and the educated class, such as Stavrogin and Shatov, are analogous to the demons. Stepan prophesies that ‘a great will and a great thought (великая мысль и великая воля) will descend to [Russia] from on high, as upon that insane demoniac, and out will come all these demons, all the uncleanness, all the abomination that is festering on the surface…’ (3.7.655, 10:499). Just as the possessed man in the Bible is healed by Christ, Russia will then be healed.

I would like to expand the discussion of the ‘great will’ in order to move towards Kirilov’s task to prove hisself will. Alluding to the biblical scene, Stepan’s formulation of the ‘great will’ apparently refers to God’s will which will save Russia from being ‘contaminated’ by Western ideologies. Similarly, on another occasion, the Slavophile Shatov, paraphrasing Stavrogin, says that a navigational force is needed to sustain the operation of a country:

Not one nation has ever set itself up on the principles of science and reason […]. Nations are formed and moved by another ruling and dominating force, whose origin is unknown and inexplicable. This force is the force of the unquenchable desire to get to the end, while at the same time denying the end. It is the force of a ceaseless and tireless confirmation of its own being and a denial of death (2.1.250).
Instead of reason and science which represent a fixed set of logic and values, the formation of a nation is driven by an inexplicable force, which is similar to Stepan’s ‘a great will and great thought’. The will refers to an incessant drive which likes to rule and dominate. The will is distinguished from reason and science as the will can move both ways: it is the drive of denying an end but also that which can strive towards an end. It can be the drive to shed blood in strengthening a nation and at the same time a paranoid force to secure the boundaries of the nation. And this will is that of an infinite affirmation of ‘its own being’ and the ‘denial of death’. The way in which the will operates here to sustain a nation can be seen as a successive weaving of generative forces. The life of the nation is affirmed by appropriating the dead, which is demonstrated in national festivals and monuments. On the other hand, the deteriorating corpses which show the mundane existence of death would be cast away under the nation’s life-affirming force.

As long as the nation is not motivated by reason or science, the will holds the authority to make subjective judgement. ‘There’s never been a nation’, says Shatov, ‘without religion, that is, without a conception of good and evil. Every nation has its own conception, and its own particular good and evil’ (251). Whether a deed is good or evil is determined by the will which transforms the exceptionally good and evil into eternal values.

For Shatov, an example of this kind of decisionism is pseudoscience, which possesses the power to confuse good and evil by utilizing one’s own reasoning: ‘Half-science is a despot such as has never been seen before. A despot with its own priests and slaves, a despot before whom everything has bowed down with a love and superstition unthinkable till now, before whom even science itself trembles and whom it shamefully caters to’ (251). The advocate of pseudoscience is similar to the Jesuit figure Smerdyakov in The Brothers Karamazov who challenges the existence of God through a casuist reading of Genesis. Pseudoscience also justifies Raskolnikov’s classification of humankind into ordinary and extraordinary ones, of which the extraordinary ones such as Napoleon have the right to commit bloodshed, break the old law and found a new one. Shigalyov, a member of the group who is influenced by Fourier’s utopian socialism, formulates a similar worldview which is refracted through the voice of Pyotr. Shigalyovism

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8 ‘The Lord God created light on the first day, and the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. Where did the light shine from on the first day?’ (3.6.124). I will discuss this quote in the next chapter on The Brothers Karamazov.
(шигалевщина), a term which later entered the Russian language, divides humanity into two unequal parts:

One tenth is granted freedom of person and unlimited rights over the remaining nine tenths. These must lose their person and turn into something like a herd, and in unlimited obedience, through a series of regenerations, attain to primeval innocence, something like the primeval paradise – though, by the way, they will have to work. The measures proposed by the author for removing the will from nine tenths of mankind and remaking them into a herd, by means of a re-educating of entire generations – are quite remarkable, based on natural facts, and extremely logical (2.7.403-404).

The freedom of the one tenth is dependent on the enslavement of the nine tenths. Shigalyov himself confesses: ‘Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism’ (402). He anticipates the figure of Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov, who thinks that the majority of men would prefer enslavement to absolute freedom.9 When creating the idea of Shigalyovism, Dostoevsky may have had in mind a speech that was delivered by the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin at the ‘Congress of Peace’ in Geneva in 1867, during which he preached atheism, the abolition of large government and private property.10 The fact that Bakunin thought that violence was necessary to achieve these goals appalled Marx and Engels, who evicted Bakunin and his followers from the First International. ‘These all-destroying anarchists’, they write, ‘who wish to reduce everything to amorphousness in order to replace morality by anarchy, carry bourgeois immorality to its final extreme’.11 It should also be noted that the idea of Shigalyovism is a mix of various utopian worldviews formulated by figures such as Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Fourier and Chernyshevsky.12 Shigalyovism is a kind of pseudoscience which classifies humanity into a small group of elites and a big group of ‘herd’ which

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12 See Pevear’s note in Demons, p. 727.
have no individuality. Shigalyov’s idea goes further than Raskolnikov’s formulation of humankind by saying that the nine tenths have to abandon their will and work ceaselessly for the good of the one tenth.

After a series of deprivations the nine tenths will reach ‘primeval innocence’, an eternal state of stability in which there is absolute obedience and they are deprived of self will under the rule of the ‘greater will’. Removing the majority’s will, the despots wish to create a future which can be predicted, measured and controlled. The anxiety to will an apocalyptic ending is marked on the face of Shigalyov: ‘He looked as if he were expecting the end of the world, not at some indefinite time in the distant future according to the prophecies (which might never come true), but at some very definite time, let’s say the day after tomorrow, precisely at twenty-five past ten in the morning’ (1.4.136).

**Kirilov’s ‘fearsome freedom’**

Both Shatov’s comments on the nation and Pyotr’s refraction of Shigalyovism have introduced the structure of the ruler’s will, especially the way in which it affirms regeneration by negating death and desire for an eternal state of stability. If the ruler executes his will towards the nations, *Demons* also illuminates the problem when a person carries out his will power to discipline the self. Alexei Nilych Kirilov, one of the ‘demons’ that ‘contaminates’ Russia with western ideologies, is the despot of the self. He is a twenty-seven-year old structural engineer who wishes to obtain a position for building the railway bridge. He is ‘somewhat pensive and absentminded’; he speaks ungrammatical Russian, ‘somehow strangely shuffling his words, and became confused when he had to put together a long phrase’ (1.3.91). He is studying the increasing suicide rate in Russia and wants to know why people are afraid to kill themselves. Stepan Trofimovich is confused by Kirilov’s occupation and his interest in nihilism: ‘One thing puzzles me: you want to build our bridge, and at the same time you declare yourself for the principle of universal destruction. They’ll never let you build our bridge!’ (95). Stepan’s comical comment exposes a deep-rooted problem of the nihilist movement in 1860s Russia. On the one hand, Kirilov as well as other revolutionaries promote universal destruction (even the middle name ‘Nilych’ implies ‘nothing’). But on the other hand, he endorses bridge engineering, seeing science as a pathway for Russia to move towards a better future.

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13 Railway construction in Russia developed rapidly when *Demons* was written. Cf. Lebedev’s comment on railway in the previous chapter on *The Idiot.*
The idea of universal destruction, characteristic of the nihilist movement in the 1860s, recalls Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children*, which is the first Russian novel to coin the phrase ‘nihilist’ (from the Latin *nihil*, ‘nothing’). Turgenev’s hero Bazarov is a medical student who promotes the value of science and the destruction of the tsarist order. He defines a nihilist as someone ‘who doesn’t bow down before authorities, doesn’t accept even one principle or faith, no matter how much respect surrounds that principle’. Whether a new and better system will replace the existing one is not a concern; all idealistic creation or affirmation must be negated and abandoned. As Bazarov refracts a phrase which originally comes from Herzen and other progressives: ‘The ground must be cleared’ (5.38).

But there is a flaw in Bazarov’s nihilism. If every principle has to be abandoned, science as a principle of study should also be negated. Bazarov does not negate everything: he believes in at least one value, that is the truth of empirical science. Placing science on a higher level, Turgenev’s nihilist’s apparent negation is actually an affirmative discourse. Even more, Bazarov’s affirmation of the truth in science is ironic: he contracts a virus when he performs an autopsy to a man with typhus and at the end dies. Bazarov is a preacher of science rather than a professional practitioner. As Isaiah Berlin comments, ‘his dissection of frogs is not genuine pursuit of the truth, it is only an occasion for rejecting civilized and traditional values’. In *Demons*, Stepan also comments on Bazarov, saying that the character is ‘fake’, ‘doesn’t exist at all’, ‘cavort[s] and squeal[s] with joy like puppies in the sun’, and desires ‘to cause a sensation around his name’ (215). Or, as Stavrogin puts it, the nihilist is ‘the lackey in thought and lackey in soul’.

Kirilov’s nihilism is equally problematic. The engineer lives an ascetic life. He eats little, drinks tea throughout the night and goes to bed at dawn (113). He has the ability to

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wake up at anytime he wants (2.1.239). Kirilov is anxious to prove his will power by leading a disciplined life. But that is not enough: to prove that man has absolute control over the self he has to commit suicide, an action which Albert Camus would describe as the absurd.\textsuperscript{17} Dostoevsky keeps coming back to the subject of self-killing through his characters such as Svidrigaylov in \textit{Crime and Punishment}, Ippolit in \textit{The Idiot}, the wife in \textit{A Meek One}.\textsuperscript{18} It is through Kirilov that we can find the most extensive reflection on the subject. He discusses his project with three figures in the novel: the chronicler Govorov, Stavrogin and Pyotr. I shall look at each dialogue in order to unfold Kirilov’s suicide plan.

Kirilov explains his research on the subject of suicide to Govorov. He admits that he knows little about why people dare not kill themselves (114). But he suggests two possible reasons: first, men are afraid of the pain of death. He imagines a stone the size of a house falling upon an individual. He or she will not feel the pain but will be afraid of the idea of it. This recalls Prince Myshkin saying that the last moment of the execution – when death is imminent and certain – is unbearable. The second reason is ‘the other world’, which Kirilov does not explain any further (114). This again recalls the Prince saying that the ignorance of what will happen after death is a form of mystical terror. Kirilov’s plan aims to overcome the fear of death. He says:

\begin{quote}
God is the pain of the fear of death. He who overcomes pain and fear will himself become God. Then there will be a new life, a new man, everything new…The history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God to...the physical changing of the earth and man. Man will be God and will change physically (перемениться физически). And the world will change, and deeds will change, and thoughts, and all feelings (1.3.115, 10:94, emphasis mine).
\end{quote}

Kirilov envisages the ‘other world’ in which everything will change since men will have proven their autonomy. Notice his use of the language of regeneration, specifically the phrase ‘to change physically’ – it borrows the idea of the resurrection and applies it to the individual. The same phrase appears in Kirilov’s reflection on epilepsy, which I will

\textsuperscript{17}Camus discusses Kirilov in \textit{‘Le Mythe de Sisyphe’} to illuminate the concept of the absurd. See Ervin C. Brody, ‘Dostoevsky’s Kirilov in Camus’s \textit{‘Le Mythe de Sisyphe’}’, \textit{The Modern Language Review}, 70:2 (1975), 291-305.

discuss later. Meanwhile it is sufficient to say that the suicide project adopts a metaphysical language to describe an afterlife which cannot be known.

In the dialogue with Pyotr, Kirilov clearly states the goal of his suicide: ‘If there is a God, then the will is all his, and I cannot get out of his will. If not, the will is all mine, and it is my duty to proclaim self-will’ (3.6.617). Kirilov is not against the idea of God. Rather, he sees himself as God: ‘For three years I have been searching for the attribute of my divinity – self-will!’ (619). If Kirilov is able to kill himself freely out of pure reason but not fear or anger, he will be the master of his existence. Life does not finish according to God’s will anymore. After his suicide, he will have proved the death of God and men will not need to kill themselves (619).

In view of his determination to kill himself and the monastic life he lives, Kirilov has little enthusiasm in living the existing life. But, in his third account of the project to Stavrogin, he says that he loves life and he does not see any contradiction between self-killing and loving his life: ‘What of it? Why together? Life’s separate, and that’s separate. Life is, and death is not at all’. Kirilov’s ungrammatical reply suggests that there is no such concept as death because death is also life insofar as death will bring Kirilov a new afterlife. He reconfigures the life/death dichotomy into life/afterlife. Stavrogin continues to ask Kirilov:

‘You’ve started believing in the future eternal life?’
‘No, not future eternal, but here eternal. There are moments, you reach moments, and time suddenly stops, and will be eternal.’
‘You hope to reach such a moment?’
‘Yes’ (2.1.236).

Kirilov seeks eternity in the present instead of the future, just as the Prince envisages eternal harmonies in the ecstatic moments of epilepsy. The above dialogue suggests that eternity can even be attained within life. Here we begin to move from the will to death to the will to epilepsy. Not only envisaging a perfectly beautiful afterlife, the bridge engineer also sees eternity within the present moment. In this way, the notion of time has no significance for Kirilov, as he says earlier: ‘There will be entire freedom when it makes no difference whether one lives or does not live. That is the goal to everything’ (115). When Stavrogin evokes the passage from the Book of Revelation in which the seventh angel swears that time will cease to exist, Kirilov replies: ‘When all mankind attains happiness,
time will be no more, because there’s no need. A very correct thought. […] Time isn’t an object, it’s an idea. It will die out in the mind’ (237). Kirilov experiences something akin to a revelation at this point, seeing everything is ‘good’ and happy (237). He says: ‘If someone’s head gets smashed in for the child’s sake, that’s good, too; and if it doesn’t get smashed in, that’s good, too. Everything is good’ (237). The blissful engineer even breaks his clock in order to commemorate the moment when he finds happiness: ““And when did you find out that you were so happy?” “Last week, on Tuesday, no, Wednesday, because it was Wednesday by then, in the night. […] I was pacing the room…it makes no difference. I stopped my clock, it was two thirty-seven”’ (238).

In chapter 5 of part 3 (‘A Traveller’), Marya Ignatievna, a follower of the nihilist movement and the wife of Shatov, is pregnant with Stavrogin’s son and returns to Shatov’s flat after three years of separation. While Shatov is running around to find a midwife and the items needed for Marya’s labour, Kirilov, pacing through the night in the room next door, contemplates some moments of eternal harmony. He says to Shatov:

There are seconds, they come only five or six at a time, and you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony, fully achieved. It is nothing earthly; not that it’s heavenly, but man cannot endure it in his earthly state. One must change physically or die. The feeling is clear and indisputable. As if you suddenly sense the whole of nature and suddenly say: yes, this is true. God, when he was creating the world, said at the end of each day of creation: ‘Yes, this is true, this is good’. […] What’s most frightening is that it’s so terribly clear, and there’s such joy. If it were longer than five seconds – the soul couldn’t endure it and would vanish. In those five seconds I live my life through, and for them I would give my whole life, because it’s worth it. To endure ten seconds one would have to change physically (3.5.590, emphasis mine).

The passage recalls the Prince in The Idiot describing the similar ecstatic moments before the onset of an epileptic seizure. During those moments, Kirilov would say ‘yes, this is true’, which he compares to God who he thinks would also say the same phrase. In this way, Kirilov implies that he shares God’s vision; he can also be God. It is not accidental he uses the phrase ‘change physically’ twice. And he also uses it previously in the passage where he explains his suicide plan. The phrase suggests that he wants to transform himself into a man-god.

Kirilov says he has these ecstatic moments about once every three days. He says he does not have epilepsy but Shatov says he will get it:
‘An epileptic described to me in detail this preliminary sensation before a fit, exactly like yours; he, too, gave it five seconds and said it couldn’t be endured longer. Remember Muhammad’s jug that had no time to spill while he flew all over paradise on his horse? The jug is those five seconds; it’s all too much like your harmony, and Muhammad was an epileptic. Watch out, Kirilov, it’s the falling sickness!’

‘It won’t have time’, Kirilov chuckled softly (591).

Kirilov’s reflection echoes his view of the ‘now eternal’ but not ‘future eternal’. Eternity not only comes after life but can also be obtained in the few seconds before a seizure takes place. Like the Prince’s reflection, Kirilov says he would give his whole life for the few seconds. But what is new in this passage is his attempt to endure those moments for a longer time. To achieve this, Kirilov has to change physically, suggesting a transformation from a man to a man-god who has supernatural power. Previously, he uses ‘to change physically’ (115) to explain the requirement to overcome the fear of death and attain a new world where everything will be changed. Now he uses the same phrase twice in the above paragraph to describe the requirement to endure the few seconds of harmonious moments that take place just before an epileptic seizure. In both cases Kirilov tries to attain a state of eternity through a physical transformation. Kirilov sees himself as the exceptional man, recalling Shigalyovism, in which the one tenth of the population must make decisions for the remaining nine tenths.

What fascinate Kirilov are the ecstatic pre-seizure moments. He thinks they are essential and dismisses the spasm, convulsion and the collapse of consciousness which take place during the seizure. The will to epilepsy refers to this incessant desire for the state of eternal harmony where ‘time will be no more’. As the engineer elaborates on his ecstasy: ‘You don’t forgive anything, because there’s no longer anything to forgive. You don’t really love – oh, what is here is higher than love! […] I think man should stop giving birth. Why children, why development, if the goal has been achieved?’ (591). In these moments, the relation between Kirilov and the world is cut off. There is no responsibility involved. And there is no need to produce offspring because the individual can live eternally. This denial of the production of a new life suggests an affirmation of the regeneration of one’s existing life.

That Kirilov does not have epilepsy but only experiences moments of eternal harmony leads Nietzsche to call Kirilov a self-alienated ‘conceptual epileptic’, a phrase

19 The comment on marriage is an inaccurate reference to Matthew 22:30 and Mark 12:25, where it is said: ‘They neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven’. See Pevear’s note, p. 731.
the philosopher also uses to describe the Dominican priest Savonarola, Luther, Robespierre and Saint-Simon. Among Dostoevsky’s novels – Humiliated and Insulted, Notes from Underground, The Idiot and Demons – Nietzsche read Demons in its entirety and even excerpted a series of passages and fragments in his notebook. C.A. Miller’s in-depth study of the notebook gives an invaluable comparison between Kirilov and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. The article demonstrates how Nietzsche understands Kirilov as the figure of decadence who annihilates ‘God’ only to assert a ‘freedom’ which negates life. Kirilov is in contrast with the Dionysian principle refracted through the voice of Zarathustra, who represents the affirmation of ‘body and earth’ (Leib und Erde). Zarathustra suggests that a ‘new pride’ can be attained by repudiating God as a phantom. But this is crucially different from the way Kirilov dismisses God as fiction. Kirilov’s goal is self-deification, to see himself as the substitute of God. By doing so he will achieve absolute freedom; death, as he says, will have no meaning anymore. The existing life, the body, has to be transcended, changed physically, in order to attain a new life.

Kirilov perceives his epilepsy only conceptually by ignoring the seizure which torments the body and annihilates consciousness, and wanting to endure the unendurable few seconds of ecstasy through a physical transformation. The emphasis on the physical change suggests the transcendence of life and the repression of the body and its instinct. Kirilov would rather sacrifice his bodily needs in order to obtain truth, or what he calls the new life or eternal harmony. He does not believe in the truth given to him by Christianity. In a dialogue with Pyotr, he says that Christ tells lies to his fellow convicts on the cross and therefore the perfectly beautiful God does not exist. For Kirilov, Christ ‘was the highest on all the earth, he constituted what it was to live. Without this man the whole planet with everything on it is – madness only’ (3.6.618). Christ is supposed to represent truth. In his interpretation of the crucifixion, Kirilov annihilates the truth given by Christ and creates truth by turning himself into a man-god. His anxiety to understand truth is confirmed in Dostoevsky’s notebook for Demons, which says that Kirilov would ‘sacrifice

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21 Quoted, C.A. Miller, p. 187, originally from Nietzsche’s notebook.
everything for truth’, which is a national trait of the generation: ‘For the whole problem amounts to no more than the question as to what ought to be considered “truth”. That is what this novel is all about’. Kirilov does not accept the truth explained by an objective and transcendental power: he seeks truth by constructing it.

Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* can be useful for understanding Kirilov’s desperate will to truth, which is refracted through his will to death and epilepsy. In the very last section of the book, continuing his critique of Christianity, Nietzsche writes that men are desperate to seek for meanings, specifically in the case of suffering: ‘Man was surrounded by a gaping void – he did not know how to justify, explain, affirm himself, he suffered from the problem of his meaning. […] Man, the boldest animal and the one most accustomed to pain, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided that he has been shown a meaning for it, a reason for suffering’. Kirilov finds a ‘meaning’ for his life through self-deification. He even comes to desire the fear of death by suicide in order to obtain his ‘fearsome freedom’. Kirilov is indifferent to the reaction of his body to this grandiose plan. He has a minimal diet and stays awake all night to reflect on the epileptic moments (the chronicler says he is so good at formulating his thoughts on those moments that it seems he has written them down (590)). The problem of Kirilov’s anxiety to understand what truth ought to be is integral to the engineer’s despising of his body and its instinct. As Nietzsche goes on to write:

This hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, of the material, this revulsion from the senses, from reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this yearning to pass beyond all appearance, change, becoming, death, desire, beyond yearning itself. All this represents […] a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental pre-conditions of life, but which is and remains none the less a will!… And, to say once again in conclusion what I said at the beginning: man would rather will nothingness than not will at all… (136)

The passage articulates the problem of nihilism which has been discussed thus far. The negation of the body is an affirmation of self-will. Kirilov says he ‘loves life’. But the life he loves is a metaphysical one which does not involve the body. The will to death and the will to epilepsy refer to the anxiety to sustain a will which provides meanings for death and epilepsy which are always incomprehensible.

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‘Death as Possibility’
In a chapter entitled ‘death as possibility’ in The Space of Literature, Maurice Blanchot comments on Kirilov’s suicide project, showing that death does not belong to the realm of experience and questioning whether one can die one’s own death. As in Thomas the Obscure (see epigraph), the man who hangs himself does not experience the entering of the void but the tightening of the rope.

In part 3, Pyotr visits Kirilov and forces him to take responsibility for the arson and Shatov’s murder and then commit suicide. Kirilov signs his name, excitedly changing his title twice, giving himself an aristocratic title (‘de Kirilloff’) and then a cosmopolitan one (‘gentilhomme-séminariste russe et citoyen du monde civilisé’) (3.6.621). He snatches his revolver and shuts himself into a dark room. After ten minutes, Peter enters the room but cannot see Kirilov, who is hiding next to the window. The chronicler describes that Kirilov is ‘motionless, drawn up, his arms flats at his sides, his head raised, the back of his head pressed hard to the wall, in the very corner, as if he wished to conceal and efface all of himself. By all tokens, he was hiding, yet it was somehow not possible to believe it’ (624). The engineer, who wants to overcome the fear of death and prove his insubordination and fearsome freedom, is paralyzed by fear and is hiding in his room to postpone the suicide. Govorov continues to describe Kirilov: ‘he did not even move, did not even stir one of his members – as if it were made of stone or wax. The pallor of his face was unnatural, the black eyes were completely immobile, staring at some point in space’ (624). Pyotr moves closer to touch the petrified engineer, who rebukes him and bites one of his left fingers. The group leader strikes the engineer’s head three times and leaves the room. Terrible shouts come from the room. Kirilov says ‘now’ ten times or so, and then shoots himself (624).

In this last moment before Kirilov kills himself, we witness the petrified Kirilov losing his will power; his attack on Pyotr suggests that he virtually enters into a state of madness. That Kirilov turns wax-like recalls the consumptive Ippolit who freezes in his bed when he sees Rogozhin visiting his room in his dream. Ippolit explains that what causes him to decide to commit suicide is the revulsion of some dark, peculiar, impossible tarantula-like power (3.6.409). The above scene also recalls Ippolit’s nature which crushes Christ into a motionless corpse. The petrified Kirilov seems to be subordinated to a similar power here.

Blanchot at this point questions to what extent Kirilov can control his own death, or whether it is death which puts him to death:
Even when, with an ideal and heroic resolve, I decide to meet death, isn’t it still death that comes to meet me, and when I think I grasp it, does it not grasp me? Does it not loosen all hold upon me, deliver me to the ungraspable? Do I die, humanly, a death which will be that of a man and which I will imbue with all of human intention and freedom? Do I myself die, or do I not rather die always other from myself, so that I would have to say that properly speaking I do not die? Can I die? Have I the power to die?

Would Kirilov still be able to prove himself a man-god if his death was not willed? The petrified moment in the dark room suggests that Kirilov does not die his own death. For him, suicide is the resolute step which will bring him to the new life. But the will to overcome death and enter into the new life is refuted by the impossibility of death as it cannot be experienced. In other words, the ‘direction’ of the will to death is ‘reversed’:

It is the fact of dying that includes a radical reversal, through which the death that was the extreme form of my power not only becomes what loosens my hold upon myself by casting me out of my power to begin and even to finish, but also becomes that which is without any relation to me, without power over me – that which is stripped of all possibility – the unreality of the indefinite (106).

The suicidal will is not vanquished by another will as in a combat. The former loses its own potency as it fails to form any relation to death. The possibility of dying is met with the impossibility of death. The wish to seek eternal harmony by committing suicide is invalid as death is ungraspable and does not belong to the realm of experience. The will to death is ‘reversed’: suicide as a re-solution is disempowered in the confrontation with the unknown.

Death is always doubled, according to Blanchot. There is one death that is understood in the realm of symbolization. For instance, suicide is able to put an end to a sufferable life; it represents courage, liberty, etc. But on the other hand, there is this death which one cannot comprehend, closer to Lacan’s idea of the ‘real’:

There is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks; and there is its double,

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which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to me by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself (104).

Kirilov sees the first meaning of death but perhaps not its second meaning. He wills for the ‘second’ death but always ends up falling into the ‘first’. In fact, the second meaning of death is beyond mastery, but Kirilov wants to conquer it. The continuous attempt to obtain the ungraspable is always already repeated in the language of death, i.e. freedom, liberty, etc. Blanchot compares the incessant but futile pursuit of death to the suicide of a phantom:

Kirilov’s feverishness, his instability, his steps which lead nowhere, do not signify life’s agitation or a still vital force; they indicate, rather, that he belongs to a space where no one can rest […] he who, through clumsiness, has missed his own death, is like a ghost returning only to continue to fire upon his own disappearance. He can only kill himself over and over. This repetition is as frivolous as the eternal and as grave as the imaginary (102).

Kirilov justifies his suicide project at least three times in the novel. And he spends all the time at night reflecting on the same problems of death and eternal harmony in epilepsy. On the one hand, this repetitive activity of consciousness is of little importance, as we know that Kirilov’s suicide will lead to the transformation of neither the self nor the world. But on the other hand, this repetitive reflection of death is important because it expresses Kirilov’s remarkable wish to contemplate and even to seize hold of the ungraspable, which would haunt any individual person who is conscious of his own death.

Notice how Blanchot describes Kirilov as a ghost. He tries to comprehend his death, but since death is always ungraspable, he always ‘misses’ death. And he keeps ‘missing’ it as he keeps reflecting on it. Besides, because he is always already vulnerable with respect to death, he is as if already ‘dead’ before he shoots himself. Each ‘shooting’ of death will be ‘missed’ as death has already taken place, turning the heroic engineer from a resolutely active into a radically passive character.

Stavrogin’s Crimes of Writing
Now I would like to move on to Stavrogin in order to further illuminate the problem of will. In the case of Kirilov, his apparent negation of life is actually an affirmation of a metaphysical life. By envisaging a physical transformation he will become a man-god. Put another way, Kirilov is apparently sceptical of the truth given in Christianity but he
actually believes in divinity more than anyone else, recalling Pyotr who says that the engineer believes in God worse than any priest (3.6.623). The engineer believes in certain principles but he is not aware of it, just as he comments on men who are not happy because they don’t know they are happy (2.1.237). Or, as Stavrogin comments on him: ‘If you found out that you believe in God, you would believe; but since you don’t know yet that you believe in God, you don’t believe’ (239). The problem with Kirilov is that he does not know he believes, just like Bazarov who is ignorant of his rooted belief in scientific principles.

The case of Stavrogin, who is also concerned with the question of faith, is more complicated. We know fragments of the life of Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin. He is a twenty-five-year-old, well-educated, sociable person and was tutored by Stepan Trofimovich. He is very well dressed and presentable in social circles. Govorov is struck by his face, which is so beautiful, even too beautiful, that he describes it as repulsive and resembling a mask (1.2.43). He is put on trial because he kills and wounds his opponents in duels. He is exiled to serve in infantry regiments. In 1863, he is rewarded for participating in the suppression of the Polish uprising. After his promotion, Stavrogin suddenly resigns and enjoys living with the ‘outcasts’ in Petersburg. He recalls Lermontov’s Pechorin in A Hero of Our Time, who also returns to his country from war and turns into a man of indifference.

Stavrogin has travelled to various places, such as Egypt, Jerusalem, Iceland, Göttingen, Paris, and Frankfurt. He has also travelled to the East, attending vigils on Mount Athos. He is registered as a citizen of the canton of Uri in Switzerland (1.2.54, ‘At Tikhon’s’, 701). Later he writes that he did not choose to live in a gloomy place such as Uri. Everywhere for him is equally alienated: ‘Nothing binds me to Russia – everything in it is as foreign to me as everywhere else. True, I dislike living in it more than elsewhere, but even in it I was unable to come to hate anything!’ (675).

Besides, Stavrogin fights a duel and deliberately fires his shot into the air, which his opponent takes as a worse insult. He is smashed in the face by Shatov for marrying Marya Timofeevna. The epileptic girl loses her memory every day and once mistakes Stavrogin for a prince. She calls him Grishka Otrepyev, known as ‘the False Dmitri’, who is an imposter in Russian history (2.2.278). In chapter 8 of part 2 (‘Ivan the Tsarevich’), Pyotr asks Stavrogin to be the imposter of the revolutionary group (2.8.421). He also reads out a confession to Bishop Tikhon about the seduction of Matryosha committed four years ago. He plans to circulate the confession and report it to the police. Instead of doing that,
he hangs himself in his mother’s attic, just as Matryosha hangs herself in the shed. Kirilov, who acts as the second for Stavrogin’s duel, says that he has a tendency to seek a burden (289). He further comments: ‘If Stavrogin believes, he does not believe that he believes. And if he does not believe, he does not believe that he does not believe’ (3.6.616). If Kirilov is possessed by western ideologies, Stavrogin is ‘eaten’ up by the idea that he believes in any of them.

What I want to examine is Stavrogin’s confession, which he reads out in his meeting with Tikhon. The confession chapter (‘At Tikhon’s’), which was supposed to form chapter 9 of part 2, was banned as the publisher Katkov thought it was too shocking. The chapter was discovered in 1921 and published a year later. The confession is written after Stavrogin seduced the ten-year-old girl Matryosha (he sometimes describes her as being fourteen).

Shatov recommends Stavrogin to see Bishop Tikhon in the Saint Yefimi-Bogorodsky monastery (2.1.256). Stavrogin tells Tikhon that he has been unwell. At night he has hallucinations and sees before him ‘some malicious being, scoffing and “reasonable”, and “invariable” faces and characters’ (686). This ghostly image turns out to be Matryosha. He says that his chief goal in visiting Tikhon is to forgive himself and seek boundless suffering. Only by doing so will the apparition vanish (710).

Tikhon reads out Stavrogin’s confession, which is full of expressions which emphasize Stavrogin’s self will. The author compares his piece with Jacques Rousseau’s confession, in which the French writer mentions his ‘vice’. Stavrogin’s confession reads: ‘I stopped [masturbation] the moment I decided I wanted to, in my seventeenth year. I am always master of myself when I want to be’ (692). This recalls Govorov saying that Stavrogin, after being slapped in the face by Shatov, demonstrates his mastery over the self by not hitting Shatov back, as though he is seizing a red-hot bar of iron in his hand in order to measure his strength of mind (204).

25 The edition I use for quotation (Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky) publishes this chapter separately in the appendix (pp. 681-714).
26 For the significance of Rousseau in Demons, see Robin Feuer Miller, Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 86-104. The Underground Man in Notes from Underground says that Rousseau ‘told a pack of lies about himself in his confessions, and even did so intentionally, out of vanity’ (1.37). The Underground Man also points out the impossibility of writing a faithful autobiography (37), which can be seen as a comment on Stavrogin’s confession, in which the confessant is more concerned with his writing style than whether the content is true or not. For discussions of the subject of confession in Dostoevsky, see Jeremy Tambling, Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 164-179; Barbara F. Howard, ‘The Rhetoric of Confession: Dostoevskij’s Notes from Underground and Rousseau’s Confessions’, The Slavic and East European Journal, 25: 4 (1981), 16-32.
Matryosha is the daughter of a family who rents a flat from Stavrogin. One day his penknife is lost. When Stavrogin finds the penknife, he decides to stay silent so that Matryosha will be blamed and birched by her mother (692). On another day, Stavrogin and the girl are left alone in the flat. Stavrogin approaches the daughter, kissing her hands, face, knees and feet. Matryosha kisses him back, after which she becomes terribly ill, murmuring words like ‘I have killed God’. Three days later, he returns to the flat, deciding to ‘finish it all’ (698). He sees Matryosha leave the flat and enter into a tiny shed in order to hang herself. Stavrogin makes note of the time and waits in the flat for the suicide to finish. He describes a fly buzzing and a red spider crawling on the wall in order to demonstrate the degree of clarity he possesses in his mind (700). After more than half an hour, he leaves the flat and peeps inside the shed to make sure the girl has killed herself, as he writes in the confession: ‘I look through that crack for a long time, it was dark inside, but not totally. At last I made out what I needed…I want to be totally sure’ (700).

Stavrogin is not so much remorseful of the seduction as he is anxious to demonstrate his ability to manipulate his memory: ‘I am setting this down precisely in order to prove the extent of my power over my memories, and how unfeeling for them I had become. I would reject them all in a mass, and the whole mass would obediently disappear each time the moment I wanted it to’ (702). The confession is more like a manifesto written to show the man’s complete control over his criminal act. Instead of reminiscence, he constructs, arranges and even creates his memories through writing, recalling Kirilov saying that time is merely an idea which can be abolished by the will.

The young man writes that he can annihilate any section of his memory if he wants to. But on the other hand, this attempt to master memory is not always workable in the confession. Stavrogin records a haunting dream of Matryosha:

I saw before me (oh, not in reality! And if only, if only it had been a real vision!), I saw Matryosha, wasted and with feverish eyes, exactly the same as when she had stood on my threshold and shaking her head, had raised her tiny little fist at me. And nothing had ever seemed so tormenting to me! The pitiful despair of a helpless ten-year-old being with a still unformed mind, who was threatening me (with what? What could she do to me? ), but, of course, blaming only herself! Nothing like it had ever happened to me. I sat until nightfall, not moving and forgetting about time […] No – what is unbearable to me is only this image alone, and precisely on the threshold, with its raised and threatening little fist, only that look alone, only that minute alone, only that shaking head. This is what I cannot bear, because since then it appears to me almost every day. It does not appear on its own, but I myself evoke it, and
cannot help evoking it, even though I cannot live with it. Oh, if only I could ever see her really, at least in a hallucination! (703-704, emphasis mine)

The apparition of Matryosha represents a different operation of time in Stavrogin’s confession. The apparition suspends Stavrogin’s will to master time as measurable and retrievable. Throughout the confession, time is often mentioned by Stavrogin to emphasize his precise memory of what happens during the seduction. But in view of the haunting of the apparition, the will to manipulate time is paralyzed by the operation of another framework of time which is marked by the recurring of a particular time in the past. The Matryosha ghost, working on a different framework of time, eludes Stavrogin’s attempt to demonstrate his self-mastery through writing the confession.

Tikhon describes Stavrogin’s confession as an attempt to ‘portray’ himself as rougher than he wishes to. He says it is in parts ‘stylistically accentuated’, ‘as if you admire your own psychology and seize upon every little detail just to astonish the reader with an unfeelingness that is not in you’ (706). For Tikhon, Stavrogin has an egoistical wish for martyrdom and self-sacrifice. He wants to circulate his confession, hoping to be condemned by the public, constructing himself as a great sinner. But what he will not be able to endure are unexpected responses including people’s laughter (709). Tikhon warns Stavrogin that he will commit another crime in order to postpone the plan to publish the confession (714). If Tikhon is right in thinking that the intention to publish the confession is to refashion the self as the great criminal, committing another crime will be equally effective in achieving that. ‘Cursed psychologist!’ replies Stavrogin, who then leaves the monastery in trembling (714).

The confession remains unpublished and its author apparently does not commit any more crimes. At the end of the novel, Stavrogin returns to his mother’s house and hangs himself in the attic. The location and method are the same as Matryosha’s suicide, suggesting that her haunting image is part of the reason he kills himself. Earlier he writes: ‘I know I can remove the girl even now, whenever I wish. As before, I am in perfect control of my will. But the whole point is that I have never wanted to do it, I myself do not want to and will not want to; that I do know. And so it will go on, right up to my madness’ (704). Stavrogin does not want to be free from Matryosha’s ghost because, as Tikhon points out, he desires to be a martyr who continuously bears a guilty conscience and seeks suffering. In the attic he writes on a scrap of paper: ‘Blame no one; it was I’ (678). Recalling Tikhon saying that Stavrogin is ‘portraying’ and ‘posturing’ in the confession,
the suicide itself can be seen as part of the postures of producing the self. This is hinted at in his last letter written to his nursemaid Darya: ‘I know I ought to kill myself, to sweep myself off the earth like a vile insect; but I’m afraid of suicide, because I’m afraid of showing magnanimity. I know it will be one more deceit – the last deceit in an endless series of deceits’ (676). Stavrogin does kill himself, which he foresees as merely another delusion amongst an infinite number of delusions.

**Modernity and Perpetual Transformations**

I would like to conclude by evoking a definition of modernity in relation to the will. In his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’, Michel Foucault discusses modernity from the perspective of how men respond to the course of time. On the one hand, there is an awareness of the transient nature of our modern life, or what Baudelaire would call the ‘ephemeral, the feeling, the contingent’. On the other hand, modern man reacts to the transience by attempting to recapture something eternal within the very present moment. ‘Modernity’, Foucault writes, ‘is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the “heroic” aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to “heroize” the present’. What is described here is the modern consciousness’s reaction to the transient nature of everyday life. Having severed the link with traditions, the self is placed randomly amidst the fleeting passage of time. The will to ‘heroize’ the present can be understood as an anxiety to master that randomness. Instead of passively acknowledging the fragments, repetitions and forgetfulness experienced in the city, consciousness resists by perpetually freezing the present. Stavrogin’s confession and suicide echo the above definition of modernity. His anxiety to manipulate the course of time when confessing the crime in the form of writing, his emphasis on the ability to be unaffected by the ghostly past (Matryosha), his insistence on proving his will power to stop masturbation and other bodily desires – all these suggest the will to ‘heroize’ the present, to recapture a sense of eternity within the present moment.

The will to ‘heroize’ the present can also be understood as the desire to refashion the self. Foucault elaborates: ‘Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task

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28 Ibid.
of producing himself” (312). Stavrogin’s ‘accentuated stylization’, ‘portrayal’ and ‘posturing’ in his confession are evidence of a modern man’s writing. In it he desires martyrdom and self-sacrifice by publicizing the piece. When the chronicler Govorov mentions that Stavrogin’s face resembles a mask – hair too black, eyes too calm and clear, complexion too delicate and white, colour too bright and clean, his teeth like pearls and lips like coral (1.2.43) – there is no face behind the mask, the face literally is the mask. On the other hand, that the modern man does not ‘liberate [him] in his own being’ suggests that Kirilov’s project of liberating men and becoming a man-god, the transcendent man, is a quixotic idea in modernity. The language of liberty and freedom is outmoded because it still sees the possibility of achieving these ideals. After returning from the war, Stavrogin has no hope of changing or defending his country. He resigns and becomes a capricious dandy, continuously switching ‘masks’, perpetually transforming himself, turning the politics of the country onto his own body.²⁹

Having discussed how Kirilov and Stavrogin seize upon the fleeting moment of the present in order to deal with the unknown future, the next chapter on The Brothers Karamazov will examine how the youngest brother Alyosha Karamazov idealizes a particular moment of the past in order to cope with the trauma of his family history. Could Alyosha overcome his trauma? Does Alyosha’s relationship with trauma resemble Kirilov’s relationship with death, which cannot be mastered? For these questions I move on to this thesis’ final chapter.

²⁹ Christopher Norris suggests that modernity can be characterized by the spirit of perpetual transformation. See his “‘What is Enlightenment?’: Kant according to Foucault’, The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, ed. G. Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 174.
Chapter Five

The Karamazovs’ Other History: Childhood, Violence and the Shriekers

Contexts for the Novel

_The Brothers Karamazov_ (Братья Карамазовы) is Dostoevsky’s last novel (1878-1880). It is divided into four parts and an epilogue, with three Books in each part. In the December 1877 issue of _A Writer’s Diary_, Dostoevsky said that he was occupied by a certain ‘artistic work’, which turned out to be the last novel he would write. At that time, he had written _The Adolescent_ (A Raw Youth, 1875), a novel which is about a young man who wants to become a Rothschild, and his relationship with his biological father and step-father. The notebooks for _The Adolescent_ indicate that Dostoevsky wanted to write a novel called _Disorder_, an idea which finds its fullest expression in the dysfunctional family in _The Brothers Karamazov_. He also wanted to write a piece called _Fathers and Children_, which he said he had tried as an idea by writing _The Adolescent_. Other relevant plans included the massive project _The Life of a Great Sinner_, which emerged from _Atheism_, another unwritten novel which narrates how a great criminal becomes a hermit and wanders all over Russia to redeem his crime.

In May 1878, Dostoevsky’s three-year-old son Alyosha died after a series of attacks of epilepsy, which he had presumably inherited from his father. In the same year, the writer visited the monastery of Optina Pustyn with the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev and spoke to the elder Ambrose about his son’s death. In the middle of his voyage to the monastery, Dostoevsky stopped in Moscow and sold the periodical rights of _The Brothers Karamazov_ to the journal _Russian Messenger_ published by Mikhail Katkov. The writer returned to Petersburg and worked most of the night and slept all morning. He dictated the draft of the novel to his wife Anna Grigoryevna, who would make a typed copy for Dostoevsky to make further corrections, before sending the finalized copy to Katkov.

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The first two Books (‘A Nice Little Family’, ‘An Inappropriate Gathering’) appeared in the January issue of *Russian Messenger* in 1879. Book 3 – including a hysterical fit of Alyosha Karamazov – was published in February. Books 4 and 5 (‘Strains’, ‘Pro and Contra’) were out between April to June; the latter included the chapter ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. In July, Dostoevsky travelled to Bad Ems, a place he disliked, to seek treatment for emphysema. Books 6 and 7 (‘The Russian Monk’, ‘Alyosha’) appeared in August and September. Books 8 to 10 were published before Dostoevsky went to Moscow for the inaugural ceremony of the monument to Pushkin in May 1880, during which he gave the legendary speech on the prophetic quality of Pushkin. Books 11 and 12 – including Ivan’s dialogue with the devil-figure – came out monthly from July. In November 1880, after he had sent out the epilogue, including Alyosha’s revolutionary speech at Ilyusha’s funeral, Dostoevsky wrote: ‘Well here, the novel is finished! I’ve worked it for three years, I have been printing it for two – a significant moment for me’.³ Two months later, on 28 January 1881, the writer died of a lung haemorrhage. The funeral which was held three days later in Petersburg was attended by over thirty thousand people.⁴

*The Brothers Karamazov* is supposed to be a biography of Alyosha Karamazov in two parts, as the narrator writes in the preface:

Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity […] while I have just one biography, I have two novels. The main novel is the second one – about the activities of my hero in our time, that is, in our present, current moment. As for the first novel, it already took place thirteen years ago and is even almost not a novel at all but just one moment from my hero’s early youth.⁴

The year of the story is 1866, during which a Petersburg student Karakozov attempted to assassinate Alexander II in his carriage. The student was arrested and put on trial. He was deprived of his civil rights and sentenced to death by hanging. The coincidence of the names (Karamazov and Karakozov) and the time when the story takes place suggest that Alyosha Karamazov is based on the revolutionary figure from real life.⁵ The revolutionary motif is hinted at when Alyosha is described as transforming into a fighter in Book 7

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³ Quoted, Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky*, p. 565.
(‘Cana of Galilee’) and when he boosts the solidarity of his disciples with a commemorative speech in Book 12 (‘At Ilyusha’s Stone’). Although Dostoevsky did not live to complete the second part of the biography, according to his wife and his friend A. S. Suvorin, the grown-up Alyosha would become a revolutionary in the sequel, to be arrested and executed for a political crime. Rumours in Petersburg said that Alyosha would even arrive at the idea of assassinating the Tsar. It should also be noted that up to seven assassination attempts were organized by The People’s Will during the time the novel was written (1879-1881). Alexander II was assassinated by the same group of revolutionaries in March 1881, just after Dostoevsky had died.

**The Mothers Karamazov**

I will begin with an analysis of the plot, with emphasis on the family history of the Karamazov brothers. The novel is based on what happens to a disintegrated family in a town called Skotoprigonyevsk (‘Cattle Run’), located about 150 miles southeast of Petersburg. Fyodor Karamazov is a landowner with four sons, from two marriages and a rape. Mitya (Dmitri), twenty-eight, is the first-born son by the first wife Adelaida. Ivan and Alyosha, who are twenty-four and twenty, are from his second wife Sofia Ivanovna. The three sons are abandoned by the father at birth.

Before the main action of the novel takes place, the father, who is attracted to all kinds of females, has raped Lizaveta Smerdyashchaya, a holy fool who gives birth to the fourth son Smerdyakov. The son is discovered and raised by the family servant Grigory and his wife. The neighbours call the son Fyodorovich (assuming he is Fyodor’s son), but the old Karamazov prefers to call him Smerdyakov (Смердяков), meaning ‘the son of the stinking woman’.

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7 A reviewer, after attending the public reading of Book 10, wrote in the Odessa daily Novorossiiskii Telegraf in 1880: ‘from a few rumours about the further contents of the novel, rumours current in Petersburg literary circles, I can say only that Aleksei [Karamazov] in time becomes the village schoolmaster, and influenced by some sort of special psychological processes at work in his soul, he actually arrives at the idea of assassinating the tsar’. Quoted, Rice, ‘Dostoevsky’s Endgame’, p. 45.
The surrogate father Grigory had a six-fingered son who only lived for two weeks. He called the son a dragon and thought he ought not to be baptized. The son’s death has left ‘a stamp’ on the father’s soul. Since then he has been concerned with ‘the divine’, reading portions of religious writings such as the Book of Job and the sermons of ‘Our God-bearing Father, Isaac the Syrian’ (96). He is also interested in the non-Orthodox sectarians, the Flagellants (96), who promote castrations as a means of obtaining spiritual purity. On the same night that Grigory’s son is buried, Stinking Lizaveta, who is pregnant, climbs over the fence and falls onto Fyodor’s backcourt. The mother is strangely silent throughout the night, ‘for the simply reason that she had never been able to speak’, suggesting that she is not only a holy fool but also deaf and dumb (96). Painfully, she gives birth to Smerdyakov and dies on the spot.9

The young Smerdyakov feeds dogs food mixed with nails. He also has the habit of hanging and burying cats with ceremonies, which he may have learnt from Grigory who is associated with the Flagellants. The surrogate father discovers the son’s habit and punishes him with a ‘painful birching’: ‘You are not a human being, you were begotten of bathhouse slime, that’s who you are…’ (124). It turns out that Smerdyakov never forgives Grigory for what he has said. In a Scripture lesson, the son asks his surrogate father a question concerning cosmic origins: ‘The Lord God created light on the first day, and the sun, moon, and starts on the fourth day. Where did the light shine from on the first day?’ (124).10 The question of the cosmic origin can be read as the question of Smerydakov’s origin of birth: where do I come from? Or more precisely, who is my father? Grigory, shocked by the question, replies ‘I will show you where!’ and gives the son a violent blow on his cheek. The question of origin – both religious and biological – is returned with a blow, a violent event which recalls Smerdyakov’s traumatic birth. A week later, the son has his first epileptic fit. Smerdyakov’s epileptic condition can be understood as a lifelong marker of his traumatic birth, i.e. his mother was raped by his father. It is not accidental that Smerdyakov passes on the violence to animals. Retrospectively, the son says: ‘I came

9 I have discussed the Flagellants in chapter 3 on The Idiot, suggesting that Rogozhin represents both the image of the castrator and the castrated.
10 For the significance of the holy fool in Dostoevsky, see Harriet Murav, Holy Foolishness: Dostoevskii’s Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). Also see Ewa Majewska Thompson, Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).
11 Smerdyakov claims that he is the casuist disciple of Ivan Karamazov, who says that if there is no immortality, then everything is permitted. His casuistry is most articulated in ‘Rebellion’ and ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ in Book 5 (‘Pro and Contra’). For the relationship of Smerdyakov and Ivan, see Marina Kanevskaya, ‘Smerdiakov and Ivan: Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov’, Russian Review, 61:3 (2002), 358-376.
from Stinking Lizaveta without a father […] Grigory Vasilievich reproaches me for rebelling against my nativity: “you opened her matrix,” he says. I don’t know about her matrix, but I’d have let them kill me in the womb, so as not to come out into the world at all’ (224).

This chapter will explore how Smerdyakov’s epileptic seizure, or hysterical fits in the case of other brothers, becomes an indexical moment to a violent family history which was silenced. To read epilepsy in The Brothers Karamazov means to re-articulate the history of violence and at the same time the violence of history. Smerdyakov’s traumatic birth will illuminate the other three brothers’ traumatic past, which also has to do with the violence of the father.

Smerdyakov is twenty-four when the narrative begins. His physiognomy is ‘disproportionate to his age’ and is like that of a eunuch (125). He spends virtually all his salary on clothes and fashions. He often falls into thoughts and stands still on the spot, a phenomenon which the narrator compares to the peasant in solitude in I.N. Kramskoy’s picture The Contemplator (1876). The peasant is contemplating some impressions which he never relates to others, which the narrator describes: ‘having stored up his impressions over many years, he will drop everything and wander off to Jerusalem to save his soul, or perhaps he will suddenly burn down his native village, or perhaps he will do both’ (127). The strangely broad capacity of the Karamazovian consciousness is picked up again in Mitya’s reading of beauty: ‘Can there be beauty in Sodom? Believe me, for the vast majority of people, that’s just where beauty lies – did you know that secret?’ (3.4.108).

In the third night of the story, Smerdyakov shams an epileptic fit and pretends to have fallen into unconsciousness. When the servants are asleep, he wakes up and murders Fyodor by smashing his skull with a paperweight. He also steals three thousand roubles which he never uses. He has a real and severe epileptic fit shortly after the murder. A week later he hangs himself. There is a strange repetition of the two fits of Smerdyakov: the first one takes place after being punished by the surrogate father Grigory; the second one happens after killing the biological father. The two moments of seizure can be

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12 Smerdyakov is the eunuch figure and his surrogate father is associated with the Flagellants. Similarly, Rogozhin in The Idiot lives in the house of the Castrates and his father sympathizes with the sectarians. Both Smerdyakov and Rogozhin are associated with the image of a Castrate and have committed a murder. For further comparison, see Irene Masing-Delic, “The “Castrator” Rogozhin and the “Castrate” Smerdiakov: Incarnations of the Dostoevskii’s “Devil-Bearing” People?”, Dostoevsky Studies, New Series, 10 (2006), 88-144.
understood as a reminder of Smerdyakov’s traumatic birth and the violence of the two fathers in the past.\textsuperscript{13}

As for Mitya, he is completely forgotten by the old Karamazov (1.2.10). The first-born son changes hands five times in the course of his upbringing. He never finishes high school; he studies in a military school and later serves in the Caucasus. He leads a wild life and spends a great deal of money, often thinking that his father is hiding his deceased mother’s inheritance. Book 1 opens with the family history; Book 2 moves on to the father meeting his sons (except Smerdyakov) in the monastery to settle the money issue. Mitya several times hints that he will murder the father. This is also hinted at when Zosima kneels down before Mitya: ‘Forgive me! Forgive me, all of you!’ (1.6.75). The elder senses that parricide is going to happen. And he orders Alyosha to leave the monastery and stay with the other brothers.

On the night of the murder, Mitya visits the father’s house to see if Grushenka – a woman for whom he and the father are competing – is with him. Mitya mistakenly wounds Grigory while he is leaving the house, causing the family servant to have the impression that Mitya is the murderer. Due to all sorts of disadvantageous evidence – such as his manifest aggression, Smerdyakov being physically too weak to kill, etc – Mitya is arrested for parricide.

During the police interrogation in Book 9, Mitya insists on his innocence. But something happens at the end which changes his mind: ‘He had a strange sort of dream, somehow entirely out of place and out of time’ (507). The brother dreams of himself in a carriage, flying past a burnt-down village. And a line of peasant women – thin, wasted, with brownish faces – are standing in front of it. The scene suggests that the women have just committed arson. In fact, as Cathy Frierson points out, arson was a popular form of protest of ‘a beleaguered daughter-in-law or wife against patriarchal powers in her household’.\textsuperscript{14} Burning houses would also attract hysterical women and some of them would jump up and throw themselves to the fire.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{14} Cathy A. Frierson, \textit{All Russia is Burning!: A Cultural History of Fire and Arson in Late Imperial Russia}, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 145.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 57.
Mitya’s dream could be a group of oppressed women who have committed arson or they could be hysterics who are attracted to it – in both cases the women in Mitya’s dream appear to suffer from patriarchal powers in their household.

One of the women in the line, with her breast dried-up and possibly hysterical, is holding a baby who is ‘crying, reaching out its bare little arms, its little fists somehow all blue from the cold’ (507). Mitya ‘wants to weep, he wants to do something for them all, so that the wee one will no longer cry […] And it must be done at once, without delay and despite everything, with all his Karamazov unrestraint’ (508). Mitya wakes up at this point and declares that he will accept any charges against him. ‘I had a good dream’, he says. And just before the trial he says to Alyosha: ‘I’ve sensed a new man in me, a new man has arisen in me! […] Why did I have a dream about a “wee one” at such a moment? […] It’s for the “wee one” that I will go. Because everyone is guilty for everyone else’ (591). The ‘wee one’ dream causes Mitya to accept punishment even though he is innocent. Perhaps he is taking upon himself the sin which was committed by his father in the past.

Previously, Mitya writes a note and hides it in his pocket: ‘For my whole life I punish myself, I punish my whole life!’ (8.5.403). The note recalls the theme of The Life of a Great Sinner and suggests a kind of confessional writing. Mitya is eventually sentenced to hard labour in Siberia. The ending shows Ivan, who also feels guilty of parricide, trying to arrange an escape for Mitya to America.

In Book 11, Ivan has three consecutive meetings with Smerdyakov, during which the latter explains the details of the murder. He accuses Ivan: ‘I want to prove it to your face tonight that in all this the chief murderer is you alone, sir, and I’m just not the real chief one, though I did kill him. It’s you who are the most lawful murderer!’ (11.8.627). According to Smerdyakov’s casuistry, Ivan knows the parricide is going to happen but he still decides to leave Skotoprigonyevsk for Moscow, unconsciously ‘allowing’ Smerdyakov to take his father’s life. Ivan is confused and seems to agree with what the casuist has said to him. After the meeting, he has a hallucination, in which he sees a devil-figure telling him about the life in hell. Ivan is split between his thoughts, not knowing if the devil-figure is his own hallucination or a living individual, suggesting a kind of schizophrenia. Ivan becomes seriously ill and has an attack of brain fever. In the trial, Ivan claims that Smerdyakov killed the father, but no one believes: ‘He killed him, and killed him on my instructions…Who doesn’t wish for his father’s death…?’ (686).

Ivan is talented in learning and has studied in the university. He sustains himself by writing sketches of street lives in newspapers, for which he signs ‘Eyewitness’. In
Book 5 (‘Rebellion’), he talks to Alyosha about cases of child abuse which he has collected from newspapers. Calling the cases ‘lovely pictures’ (241) (‘картинки прелестные’, 14:220), Ivan introduces each story like creating a cinematic montage: ‘I’m an amateur and collector of certain little facts; I copy them down from newspapers and stories, from wherever, and save them – would you believe it? – certain kinds of little anecdotes. I already have a nice collection of them’ (239). The first of the collection is about the Turks’ torture of Slav children in Bulgaria; the second is about the young man Richard, who has grown up like a ‘little wild beast’ with a shepherd, being guillotined for killing an old man in Geneva; and the last three have to do with Russian parents torturing their children and images of mutilation of children. Not accidentally, Ivan is also abandoned at birth by his father, suggesting that the son is actually complaining against his father in his fascination with child abuse.16

Ivan’s last picture is about an eight-year-old boy having mistakenly thrown a stone at the paw of a general’s favourite dog. The general captures the child and locks him up for the night. On the next day he strips the child naked and orders his flock of hounds to attack him. The general also has the child’s mother to witness the killing. Ivan questions Alyosha: ‘[The general] hunted him down before his mother’s eyes, and the dogs tore the child to pieces…! […] Well…what to do with him? Shoot him? Shoot him for our moral satisfaction? Speak! Alyosha!’ (243). ‘Shoot him!’, Alyosha replies softly with a remarkably twisted smile (243), suggesting a kind of hidden aggression against the father figure in Ivan’s ‘lovely pictures’.

Alyosha’s mother Sofia Ivanovna dies when he is four-year-old. He is snatched away by her benefactress and comes to live with various guardians of the female sex. From adolescence, he has a ‘wild, frantic modesty and chastity’ (20). His unconditional generosity, echoing Lizaveta’s, is compared to that of a holy fool. He cannot bear certain words and conversations about women among his schoolmates’ discussions. Just before he finishes high school, he returns home and visits his mother’s grave, after which he enters the monastery and becomes the disciple of the elder Zosima. Alyosha has a vivid memory of her mother’s face and caresses: ‘As if she were standing alive before me’ (18).

Alyosha’s memory of the mother is described as that which ‘emerge[s] throughout one’s life as specks of light, as it were, against the darkness, as a corner torn from a huge picture, which has all faded and disappeared except for that little corner’ (18).17

But on the other hand, something quite contrary to what Alyosha remembers happened. The sixteen-year-old orphan Sofia Ivanovna married the old Karamazov in order to run away from her tormenting benefactress, an aristocratic old lady. Sofia ‘was once taken out of a noose that she had hung from a nail in the closet’ (13). The relationship between Sofia and her benefactress recalls Humiliated and Insulted, where Nelly is also constantly abused by her landlady (2.4.118). And it should be noted that they suffer from hysteria and epilepsy. Fyodor is particularly attracted to Sofia, whose ‘innocent eyes cut [his] soul like a razor’ (13). Seeing himself as her benefactor who has saved her life, Fyodor pays no respect to Sofia. He invites various women to launch orgies in his house. The terrorized experiences she has with Fyodor and her benefactress causes her to suffer from hysterical seizures: ‘this unhappy young woman, who had been terrorized since childhood, came down with something like a kind of feminine nervous disorder, most often found among simple village women, who are known as shriekers because of it. From this disorder, accompanied by terrible hysterical fits, the sick woman would sometimes even lose her reason’ (13).

Sofia’s shrieking, which is symptomatic of this ‘terrible woman’s disease’, is prominent in peasant women who are oppressed by exhausting work, improper birth giving, desperate grief, and beating (47). Medical research suggested that the shrieks of the peasant women were often caused by the ‘exceptionally harsh conditions of rural life’, implying that the shrieking is a symptom produced under patriarchal oppression.18 References to the shrieker permeate the novel: apart from Sofia, a peasant woman who visits Zosima suddenly starts ‘screeching, hiccupping and shaking all over as if in convulsions’ (1.3.47). Shrieking is also associated with Katerina Ivanovna and Grushenka. And it also happens to Alyosha’s fiancée Lise, who imagines crucifying a four-year-old boy by cutting off his fingers (11.3.584). Liza Knapp points out that the shriekers like

17 For the importance of maternity in the novel, see Carol Apollonio, ‘The Mothers Karamazov’, Dostoevsky’s Secrets: Reading Against the Grain (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 145-162.
Sofia are equivalent to hysterical women in Western Europe. In fact, in the same period when *The Brothers Karamazov* was published, the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot was conducting a notorious study on hysterical women in the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. One of his approaches to the hysterics was to photograph and publicize their seizures. Charcot’s studies in hysteria became a spectacle, causing the surrealist writers Breton and Aragon to republish some of Charcot’s photographs of the hysterics, saying that hysteria was the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century. Just as the shriekers were oppressed under patriarchy, the hysterics in Western Europe, as Charles Bernheimer suggests, also suffered from the split between their own personal impulses and the demands of patriarchy. That hysteria refers to sufferings produced by patriarchy has initiated a long history of feminist critique.

Besides, in the dictionary of Russian folklore culture by Vladimir Dal (1863-66), shrieking (кликлуша) was defined as ‘one possessed by a form of falling sickness, to which peasant women are especially susceptible’. The medical phrase *hystérie-épilepsie* was still often used to describe hysterical symptoms in later nineteenth-century Europe;

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19 Liza Knapp, ‘Mothers and Sons in *The Brothers Karamazov*: Our Ladies of Sktoigovevsk’, *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov* (Evanston; IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), p. 37. Also see James Rice, ‘The Covert Design of *The Brothers Karamazov*’, 355-375.


21 In an increasingly industrialized society, the Victorian woman was looked up to as representative of the purity, order, and serenity of earlier, less anxious times. Gentle, submissive, naïve, and good, she was also expected to be strong in her righteousness, perfectly controlled in her decorous conduct, and skilled in her domestic managerial capacities. Faced with this conflict, numerous Victorian women developed unconscious defensive strategies whereby they disavowed the intense anger and aggressive impulses for which the culture gave them no outlet. […] Women transformed their repressed hostility and desire into physical symptoms that simultaneously acknowledged and disowned those feelings’. Quoted, Charles Bernheimer, *In Dora’s Case: Freud-Hystera-Feminism*, ed. by C. Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 5-6.


23 Quoted, Rice, ‘The Covert Design of *The Brothers Karamazov*’, p. 362.
the two diseases were virtually indistinguishable, and I am going to go forward with this identification.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{‘A moment of danger’}

Alyosha on the one hand has a tendency towards creating a ‘good memory’ of his mother. But on the other hand, there are other memories – such as Sofia being terrorized by Fyodor – which have to do with the traumatic side of the family history. There are moments in which the novel points back to the strained relationship between the son and his parents. Smerdyakov’s epileptic seizures, Mitya’s dream of the dried-up hysterical women, Ivan’s ‘lovely pictures’ in which the mother witnesses her son being tortured, Alyosha’s mother’s hysterical shrieks – these images flit by in the course of the narrative, exposing the other side of the ‘good memory’, the ‘other’ history of the brothers Karamazov. And this ‘other’ history finds its expression at the moments of the attack of hysteria and epilepsy, the two major illnesses which haunt all the Karamazovs. This chapter explores these moments, examining how they point to an alternative, silenced side of history, which is discussed by Walter Benjamin in \textit{Theses on the Philosophy of History} (1950), when he writes: ‘The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again’.\textsuperscript{25} In the next section he adds: ‘To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’ (VI, 247).

Diane Thompson suggests that the function of memory in \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} is to propel the narrative and exemplify the discourse of Christian Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{26} Her argument neglects a less predictable memory, which always disrupts the voluntary ones. In contrast to Thompson’s approach, I am interested in the point that what


Alyosha seems to remember coherently about his mother is actually fragmentary. And these fragmentary memories of the past have to do with a series of violent acts afflicted by the father, which often involved sexual activities. I will consider three moments in the novel. First, Alyosha’s memory of his mother in Book 1, which involves a mixture of disconnected images. One of them is derived from Claude Lorrain’s *Acis and Galatea*, a painting which Dostoevsky saw in Dresden, suggesting that Alyosha is idealizing his memory of the past. Second, Alyosha’s first hysterical seizure in Book 2, which is virtually identical to his mother’s. The repetition suggests that the mother’s trauma of being abused by the father is passed on to the son. Third, Alysha’s second hysterical fit in Book 7 (‘Cana of Galilee’), in which he dreams of Zosima and Christ. I suggest that Fyodor also appears in the dream, causing an overlapping of three fathers. This ‘carnivalization’ of fatherly images – the elder, the divine and the rapist – destabilizes Alyosha’s relationships with his fathers, resisting the attempt to write a single and undisturbed family history. I will conclude by discussing the ending in Book 12 (‘At Ilyusha’s Stone’), where Alyosha delivers a speech for Ilyusha, showing how the brother is anxious to preserve a ‘good’ memory of the past, to create a history which is fixed with beautiful images.

**A Corner of the Picture**

In Book 1, where Alyosha is introduced, his memory of his mother is presented vividly and is compared to the untainted corner of a huge picture:

This is exactly how it was with [Alyosha]: he remembered a quiet summer evening, an open window, the slanting rays of the setting sun (these slanting rays he remembered most of all), an icon in the corner of the room, a lighted oil-lamp in front of it, and before the icon, on her knees, his mother, sobbing as if in hysterics, with shrieks and cries, seizing him in her arms, hugging him so tightly that it hurt, and pleading for him to the Mother of God, holding him out from her embrace with both arms towards the icon, as if under the protection of the Mother of God…and suddenly a nurse rushes in and snatches him from her in fear. What a picture! (Вот картина!) Alyosha remembered his mother’s face, too, at that moment: he used to say that it was frenzied, but beautiful, as far as he could remember (19, 14:18).

This picture can be divided into at least five separate images. And these images are pre-cinematic insofar as they, like a camera, penetrate different levels of the field of vision. First, the picture depicts the quiet summer evening with the slanting rays of the setting sun,
resembling a cinematic ‘long shot’. Second, the picture zooms into the house of the father, showing the icon, oil-lamp, the mother and the son. Third, there is an extreme close-up of the mother’s prayer. The picture shows the mother hysterically pressing against her son, hoping to protect him by borrowing the power from the Mother of God. Fourth, which comes after an ellipsis, the nurse comes and takes away the son. And fifth, there is another close-up picture of the mother.

These images seem to form a story about the mother and son. Indeed this story is what has been forged in Alyosha’s memory. However, a rereading of these images will suggest that they did not necessarily take place in a linear sequence. It appears that Alyosha is creating his own memory of his mother, instead of preserving a story which has objectively taken place.

In A Writer’s Diary (1873), Dostoevsky comments on historical painting after visiting an exhibition. He writes:

Ask any psychologist you like and he will tell you that if you imagine some event of the past, especially of the distant past – one that is completed and historical (and to live without imagining the past is impossible) – then the event will necessarily be imagined in its completed aspect, i.e., with the addition of all its subsequent developments that had not yet occurred at the historical moment in which the artist is trying to depict a person or event. And thus the essence of a historical event cannot even be imagined by an artist exactly as it probably happened in reality (‘Apropos of the Exhibition’, 1.215).

The impossibility of representing a historical event can be seen as a commentary on Alyosha trying to ‘paint’ his mother’s history. A rereading of Alyosha’s memory of his mother means to examine how Alyosha imagines the past in relation to his mother, and how he supplements that imagination with additional images drawn from the present.

For instance, it is not accidental that Alyosha remembers the ‘slanting rays of the setting sun’, which appears again in Zosima’s biography in Book 6, ‘The Russian Monk’. The elder says: ‘I bless the sun’s rising each day and my heart sings to it as before, but now I love its setting even more, its long slanting rays, and with them quiet, mild, tender memories, dear images from the whole of a long and blessed life – and over all is God’s truth, moving, reconciling, all forgiving!’ (292). As Zosima’s disciple, perhaps Alyosha has supplemented his memory of his mother with a phrase used by his mentor. And it should be noted that the biography is written down from memory by Alyosha some time after Zosima’s death. So it is equally possible that he has ‘borrowed’ the memory of his
mother and used it when writing the biography. In other words, the image of the setting sun is not attached to any original voice presented in the novel.

Moreover, the ‘slanting rays of the setting sun’ is a phrase used frequently in other novels. In Stavrogin’s confession in Demons, he writes that he dreams of seeing Claude Lorrain’s painting Acis and Galatea in the gallery of Dresden, a painting he likes to call ‘The Golden Age’. For Stavrogin, the painting represents the best period of Europe before it was contaminated by civilization: ‘A corner of the Greek archipelago; blue, caressing waves, islands and rocks, a luxuriant coastline, a magic panorama in the distance, an inviting sunset – words cannot express it. Here European mankind remembered its cradle, here were the first scenes from mythology, its earthly paradise…Here beautiful people lived!’ (‘At Tikhon’, 703). Stavrogin’s dream reflects the desire for a utopia. He continues: ‘The rocks and sea, the slanting rays of the setting sun – it was as if I still saw it all when I woke up and opened my eyes, for the first time in my life literally wet with tears’ (703).

And yet, Stavrogin’s fantasy is disrupted by the image of a girl: Matryosha – the girl he seduces and who is now dead – reappears in his dream, shaking her head and raising her fist at him (703). The golden-age fantasy is dissolved by the traumatic image of the dead child. Similarly, in The Adolescent, the surrogate father comments on the same painting before his son, pointing to the disappearance of the golden age: ‘I had woken up and opened my eyes which were literally wet with tears […] By that time it was already evening […] And then you see, dear boy, the setting sun of the first day of European humanity which I had seen in my dream was instantly transformed for me when I woke up into the setting sun of the last day of European humanity!’ (3.2.492).

Claude’s Acis and Galatea on one hand represents the image of happiness, origin, and love. But on the other hand, the painting is always already a marker of the decline of humanity. In fact, the painting has frozen a seemingly joyful moment of a Greek myth. In Sicily, a Grecian colony, Acis and Galatea are in love with each other and are oblivious of the world around them. This is the moment captured in the painting, which is also the moment which evokes the association of ‘the golden age’. And yet, what is not shown in the painting is that the Cyclops Polyphemus, who is the guard of sea, is also in love with Galatea. He is distracted and forgets to block the coastline from letting boats to pass. As Ovid writes: ‘His unstaunched thirst for blood is quenched: ships may pass and repass
safely’. According to the myth, the Cyclops will hurl a rock at Acis and kill him. As Richard Peace comments: ‘Claude has caught the scene at an idyllic moment of repose, but it is an idyll soon cruelly and violently to be shattered’ (21). Alyosha’s seemingly beautiful memory of the ‘slanting rays of the setting sun’ is integral to the image of destruction, which is unspoken throughout the passage of the Alyosha’s memory of the mother. Claude omits violence in his painting, just as Alyosha ‘paints’ his picture of memory by forgetting the violence involved in his childhood.

The image of the setting sun is followed by a close-up of the mother, who is pleading hysterically before the icon, ‘as if under the protection of the Mother of God’ (19). The image of pleading is followed by an ellipsis and then a nurse comes and takes away the child (‘under the protection of the Mother of God…and suddenly a nurse rushes in…”).

The ellipsis suggests a narrative break between the mother pleading and the nurse’s appearance. Alyosha remembers his mother in a ‘quiet summer evening’. Strangely, it is also evening when Alyosha and Ivan are snatched away by their mother’s benefactress:

Exactly three months after Sofia Ivanovna’s death, the general’s widow [the benefactress] suddenly appeared in person in our town […] It was evening. […] She] made straight for the

cottage and the two boys. Seeing at a glance that they were unwashed and in dirty shirts, she gave one more slap to Grigory himself and announced to him that she was taking both children home with her, then carried them outside just as they were, wrapped them in a plaid, put them in the carriage, and took them to her own town (14).

At the age of four, Alyosha may have mistaken the benefactress for a nurse. Besides, Sofia is already dead when the benefactress takes the children away, meaning that the last image of Alyosha’s memory (‘a nurse rushes in’) cannot possibly happen in the mother’s presence. Each little image in Alyosha’s memory refers to an event that happened in discrete time and space. Only through Alyosha’s recollections are these images pieced together and turned into a narrative.

**Alyosha’s Hysteria**

Why is Alyosha’s mother weeping in his seemingly beautiful memory? Another part of the novel repeats this image of the mother’s sobbing. In Book 3 (‘Over the Cognac’), the drunken old Karamazov meets Ivan and Alyosha in his house. Speaking of the charm of the female sex, he gives an account of how he sexually abused Sofia:

Listen, Alyoshka, I always used to take your late mother by surprise, only it worked out differently. I never used to caress her, but suddenly, when the moment came – suddenly I’d lay myself down before her, crawling on my knees, kissing her feet, and I always, always sent her – I remember it as if it were today – into that little laugh, a shivery, tinkling, soft, nervous, peculiar little laugh. It was the only kind she had. I knew that that was how her sickness usually began, that the next day she’d start her shrieking again, and that this present little laugh was no sign of delight – well, it may have been false, but still it was a delight (3.8.136-137).

The passage hints at a primal scene, in which the son ‘witnesses’ the father sexually abusing the mother. That Sofia is only a sixteen-year-old in the above passage suggests that the scene is also a form of child abuse. And the primal scene is not unconsciously evoked in Alyosha’s mind but directly told by the father. The passage also suggests that the father seduces the mother just in order to provoke her hysterical fit, suggesting a kind of sadism in him. The passage also recalls *Humiliated and Insulted*, in which Nelly is nearly raped and breaks into an epileptic fit, before being saved by Vanya (2.7.138-139).

The father moves on to recount another abuse of his ‘little shrieker’ (137) (‘кликушечка’, 14:126). In the first year of the marriage, the father thinks the mother is
praying too much. He picks up her icon and threatens her: ‘Look…look, here’s your icon, here it is, I’m taking it down. Now watch. You think it’s a wonder-working icon, and right now, before your eyes, I’m going to spit on it, and nothing will happen to me…!’ (137).

Spitting de-consecrates the icon, severing the relationship between the Mother of God and Alyosha’s mother. The spitting of saliva not only profanes the mother’s prayer, but also evokes the image of the abject. That is, the saliva, which exists in liminal space, both inside and outside the membrane, engenders a threat to body boundaries. It is at this point of boundary intrusion that the mother breaks into a hysterical fit: ‘Lord, I thought, now she’s going to kill me! But she just jumped up, clasped her hands, then suddenly covered her face with them, shook all over, and fell to the floor…just sank down…’ (137).

Alyosha, listening to his father telling how he abused his mother, suddenly breaks into a hysterical fit which is identical to his mother’s:

The old man jumped up in fright. From the time he began talking about his mother, a change had gradually come over Alyosha’s face. He flushed, his eyes burned, his lips trembled…The drunken old man went on spluttering and noticed nothing until the moment when something very strange suddenly happened to Alyosha – namely, the very same thing he had just told about the ‘shrieker’ repeated itself with him. He suddenly jumped up from the table just as his mother was said to have done, clasped his hands, then covered his face with them, fell back in his chair as if he’d been cut down, and suddenly began shaking all over in a hysterical attack of sudden trembling and silent tears. The remarkable resemblance to his mother especially struck the old man (137).

Now we have a clearer picture to explain why the mother is sobbing and pleading before the icon in the Alyosha’s memory. She might have been abused by the father and wanted to protect his son from being abused as well. Alyosha chooses to remember a scene which happened just after the primal scene – that he was seized tightly in the mother’s arms – rather than the scene itself, suggesting that his memory has a tendency to disavow the traumatic past. But the mother’s hysterical sobbing and seizing of the son are the ‘symptoms’ hinting that violence had taken place. Similarly, the moment of Alyosha’s seizure is the moment where the ‘good’ memory of the mother is burst open by images of

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28 Saliva is disgusting but because it is part of the body secretion, it cannot be fully rejected. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 1-31. Cf. Georges Bataille, who sees spit as the image of formlessness, which is comparable to the power of destabilizing boundaries in abjection. See *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31. I have quoted the passage on the formless at the end of chapter 3 on *The Idiot*.
sexual abuse. The fit becomes the moment at which the history of violence is exposed to the Karamazov consciousness.

Besides, the history of violence has no ‘origin’, as we know that Sofia was maltreated by her benefactress. Alyosha’s seizure therefore is indexical not to a single but to multiple images of violence which involve different tormentors of both sexes. The seizure becomes a montage of violent images, recalling Ivan’s animated sketches of his ‘lovely pictures’ of child abuse.

A psychoanalytic reading of Alyosha’s memory will help us further understand the seizure. In 1886, Freud returned from Paris after studying hysteria with Charcot in the Salpêtrière Hospital. He began to write extensively on the subject of hysteria. In ‘Hysteria’, he summarizes his observations of a complete hysterical fit, suggesting there are three distinctive phases:

The first, ‘epileptoid’, phrase which resembles an epileptic fit. […] The second phrase, that of the ‘grands mouvements’, manifests movements of wide compass, such as what are known as ‘salaam’ movements, arched attitude (arc de cercle), contortion and so on. […] The third, hallucinatory, phrase of a hysterical attack, the ‘attitudes passionnelles’, is distinguished by attitude and gestures which belong to scenes of passionate movement, which the patient hallucinates and often accompanies with the corresponding words.

One of the discoveries Freud made in Salpêtrière is that the above symptoms have no organic cause, which leads Freud to explore meanings ‘beneath’ these symptoms. He is particularly interested in the hallucinatory phase of hysteria. The patients’ hallucination is often connected to the memory of the past, particularly traumatic memory. He, in collaboration with his colleague Josef Breuer, writes in Studies in Hysteria:

Our attempted explanation takes its start from the third of these phases, that of the ‘attitudes passionnelles’. Where this is present in a well-marked form, it exhibits the hallucinatory reproduction of a memory which was important in bringing about the onset of the hysteria – the memory either of single major trauma or of a series of interconnected part-traumas (such as

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underlie common hysteria). Or, lastly, the attack may revive the events which have become emphasized owning to their coinciding with a moment of special disposition to trauma.\textsuperscript{31}

The passage can be summarized by an observation by Freud and Breuer: ‘\textit{Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences}’ (2:7). That is, hysteria has to do with the physical suffering conditioned by a selective blockage of memory.\textsuperscript{32} Freud furthers these observations in the essay ‘\textit{Screen Memories}’ (1899), in which he says that the formation of hysterical symptoms has to do with the ‘building up of our store of memories’.\textsuperscript{33} In a dialogue with an educated man aged thirty-eight, Freud asks his patient to recollect his childhood memories. In the process of his recounting, the analyst notices that the man has amalgamated two sets of phantasies of his childhood: ‘[he] projected the two phantasies on to one another and made a childhood memory of them’ (3:315). The kind of memory which is constructed from various phantasies and genuine events is what Freud calls a ‘screen memory’. He shows that when the man recollects his childhood scenes, the subject does not experience the scene from the perspective of the child who was in the scene, but rather as an observer from outside the scene: ‘A picture cannot be an exact repetition of the impression that was originally received. For the subject was then in the middle of the situation and was attending not to himself but to the external world’ (3:321). Not memory from the past, but memory of the past – hence Freud concludes his essay by raising the question of whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: ‘Memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, \textit{emerge}; they were \textit{formed} at that time’ (3:322).\textsuperscript{34}

Through looking into the slips, gaps and silences in the patient’s stories, the psychoanalyst examines how a symptom in the present is linked to the past. The memory of a certain event told by the patient can be that which happened before or after an event which the subject has unconsciously disavowed. In other words, a seemingly trivial event can be the trace of the silenced area in memories. And this part of memories of childhood has often to do with sexual elements which were not developed into consciousness (317).

\textsuperscript{32} See Berheimer, \textit{In Dora’s Case}, p. 11. \\
\textsuperscript{34} On ‘\textit{Screen Memory}’, see Richard King, Memory and Phantasy, \textit{Modern Language Notes}, 98:5 (1983), 1197-1213.}
Freud’s studies in hysteria offer a way of reading which sees trivial words as symptoms. The epileptic/hysterical seizure can be read as the symptom of a traumatic past. Smerdyakov’s epilepsy is indexical to the fact that his mother was raped by Fyodor and he himself was abused by Grigory. Alyosha’s seizure points to the primal scene where his mother was sexually abused. Ivan’s obsession with his ‘lovely pictures’, including the child who is torn into pieces in front of his mother, rearticulate a history of abused children (including himself). And the dried-up hysterical women with the ‘wee one’ crying in Mitya’s dream imply their sufferings which are created under patriarchal oppression in their household. All these symptomatic moments are suggestive of the primal scene which always involves violent abuses. And these abuses, particularly for Smerdyakov and Alyosha, are often sexually violent.

**Cana of Galilee**

How does Alyosha attempt to deal with the traumatic past? In Book 7 (‘Cana of Galilee’), Zosima has passed away and his body deteriorates. Alyosha is disillusioned; he leaves the monastery and meets Rakitin, who wants to destroy his purity by making Grunshenka seduce him. After meeting her, Alyosha returns to the monastery and prays ‘almost mechanically’ next to Zosima’s corpse (359). Meanwhile, he hears an elder reading a passage from the Gospel of St. John, in which Christ turns water into wine in a wedding banquet (John 2:1-11). As the reading goes on, Alyosha falls into a dream, in which he sees Zosima serving wine in the banquet: ‘I, too, my dear’, says Zosima, ‘I, too, have been called, called and chosen […] Why are you hiding here, out of sight…? Come and join us. We are rejoicing […] We are drinking new wine, the wine of a new and great joy’ (361). Alyosha’s dream, like his memory of the mother, amalgamates the wedding banquet with the death of Zosima (the joyful, even carnivalesque ambience of the banquet is absent in the Gospel). The dream continues to create new images, as Zosima addresses Alyosha: ‘And you, quiet one, you, my meek boy, today you, too, were able to give a little onion to a woman who hungered. Begin, my dear, begin, my meek one, to do your work! And do you see our Sun, do you see him?’ (361). Alyosha replies strangely: ‘I am afraid…I don’t dare to look’ (361). The Sun in the wedding banquet represents Christ. Alyosha, who is tempted to fall into sensuality, is ashamed to look at the Sun. Zosima replies with something equally strange:
Do not be afraid of him. Awful is his greatness before us, terrible is his loftiness, yet he is boundlessly merciful […] He is waiting for new guests, he is ceaselessly calling new guests, now and unto ages or ages. See they are bringing the new wine, the vessels are being brought in… (362)

In the Gospel of St. John, Christ did not call new guests endlessly and there is no new wine being brought into the banquet. This carnivalesque detail of the dream, however, has a parallel to what would happen in an orgy organized by Alyosha’s other father, that is, the old Karamazov. And it is no coincidence that Fyodor is completely drunk when he recounts the sexual abuse in Book 3 (‘Over the Cognac’). We do not see Alyosha helping Zosima to serve in the banquet; the dream finishes after the image of the drunken father is hinted: ‘Something burned in Alyosha’s heart, something suddenly filled him almost painfully, tears of rapture nearly burst from his soul… He stretched out his hands, gave a short cry, and woke up…’ (362). Three fathers have visited in Alyosha’s dream: Zosima, Christ and the old Karamazov. And these images are interchangeable in the dream. Put another way, the father figure is both the divine and the debauched, recalling the Karamazovian beauty which is always marked by the ideal of Madonna and that of Sodom at the same time (3.3.108). The father figure represents both the elder who teaches the doctrine of immortality as well as the rapist who abused Alyosha and his mother. The condensation of the father images points to Alyosha’s ambivalent attitude towards his fathers. That the son is asked to join the rapist’s orgy even suggests a homosexual attraction between the fathers and son.

It is said that Alyosha will become a revolutionary and decide to assassinate the Tsar in the sequel. If we take the Tsar as another father figure for Alyosha, his attitude towards his fathers will become more ambivalent. He would be killing the father figure of Russia, echoing Smerdyakov killing the father of the Karamazov brothers. Although the sequel is unwritten, we can read it symptomatically and say that Alyosha’s assassination of the Tsar is indexical to the country’s trauma, i.e. the long history of sufferings produced under autocracy, just as the ways in which parricide in this novel opens up the silenced and painful side of the Karamazovs’ history.

After the dream, Alyosha steps out of the monastery and has his second hysterical fit:

He stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly
to kiss it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to live it unto ages of ages (362).  

Susanne Fusso suggests that the earth (земля, feminine in Russian) evokes the image of the maternal. And she sees Alyosha’s frenzied kissing as some sort of masturbatory moment, after which the son ceases to be a virgin. But, if we take into account the idea that Alyosha is suffering from hysteria at this moment, we will see that the kissing scene refers to the son’s memory of the past. As we recall, in his vivid memory, the mother embraces Alyosha so tightly that it creates pain. And she is pleading for the protection of Mother of God. Here, outside the monastery, Alyosha reenacts the picture he used to paint: he embraces his mother (the earth), weeps over it and loves it without reserve. And not only the biological mother does he embrace: ‘The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars… […] With each moment he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul’ (363). Figuratively, the son merges himself with the earth, which is then merged with the heavens. From the reference to the drunken father to the ecstatic kissing of the motherly earth, Cana of Galilee ends with the fantasy of reuniting with the mothers, which empowers the son: ‘He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life, and he knew it and felt it suddenly, in that very moment of his ecstasy. Never, never in all his life would Alyosha forget that moment’ (363). Just as he would never forget the memory of his mother, his transformation into a fighter is founded upon some ‘good’ memory, and at the same time on the disavowal, the ‘screening out’ of the traumatic past.

The two moments of hysterical fit which this chapter has discussed are indexical to Alyosha’s traumatic past. This traumatic past cannot be traced back to an original violent event as that event is connected to other violent events. It is this lack of origin, the fragmentary nature of the violent events that makes the past more traumatic. Besides, the overlapping of the elder, Christ and the rapist in Alyosha’s dream further traumatizes the subject. The dream disrupts the possibility of writing a bourgeois family history, as it suggests all kinds of sexualities – including homosexuality – between the father figures

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35 The image of Alyosha being cut down echoes the same image used to describe his first hysterical fit in part 3 (‘Over the Cognac’): ‘[He] fell back in his chair as if he’d been cut down, and suddenly began shaking all over in a hysterical attack of sudden trembling and silent tears’ (3.8.137). See James Rice, ‘The Covert Design of The Brothers Karamazov’, 370.

and the son. I have focused on Alyosha’s hysteria, but it should be remembered that Smerdyakov’s epileptic condition also indexes his traumatic birth and childhood. Mitya dreams of the hysterical women and decides to accept the charge of parricide, seeing himself as responsible for his violent father. Ivan is being accused of and haunted by being the murderer of his father. After that he hallucinates and sees the devil-figure, not sure whether he is part of the self or a separate individual. Both incidents suggest that Ivan, like the other three brothers, also struggles in dealing with his ambivalent attitude towards his father, which results in a series of mental disturbances. In other words, all the Karamazov brothers have shown symptoms of bearing a traumatic past. And since this chapter has taken the approach that reading a seizure is like reading a symptom of the traumatic past, we can say that the brothers are ‘epileptic’ by nature.

It is significant that the traumatic history of the Karamazovs is set in the countryside: while the Petersburgers, as Svidrigaylov in Crime and Punishment puts it, are all half-mad and like to talk to themselves on the street (6.3.467), the Russian rural inhabitants are traumatized by their parents at birth. ‘Our Russian destiny’, Dostoevsky writes in A Writer’s Diary, ‘will not be finally resolved by Petersburg. And therefore every new feature, even the smallest, that serves to characterize these “new people” may be worthy of our attention’ (‘Vlas’, 1.160). Dostoevsky’s reading of Russia does not stop at the Petersburg novels, i.e., Humiliated and Insulted, Crime and Punishment and The Idiot; the problems which strike him extend to the country, which he explores through Demons and The Brothers Karamazov. If Petersburg is ‘epilepsy-inducing’, creating the epileptic mode of being, Alyosha’s countryside, the emblem of Russia, is equally ‘epileptic’ due to the traumatic history which the family has repressed and which flashes in the moment of seizures.

At Ilyusha’s Stone
Three days after Zosima’s death, Alyosha leaves the monastery. In Book 12, he delivers a speech to commemorate Ilyusha, who dies of consumption after fighting against the Karamazovs for humiliating his father Snegiryov. What happened was that before the main action of the novel takes place, Mitya ‘seized [Snegiryov] by the beard in front of everyone, led him outside in that humiliating position, and led him a long way down the street’ (4.5.193). Ilyusha witnessed the entire process. He ‘saw it and went running along beside them, crying loudly and begging for his father, and rushing up to everyone asking them to defend him, but everyone laughed’ (193).
Standing by ‘Ilyusha’s stone’, the place where the son wants to be buried, Alyosha gives an uplifting speech to Ilyusha’s friends. Alyosha is anxious to build a ‘good’ memory of Ilyusha: ‘Let us remember his face, and his clothes, and his poor boots, and his little coffin, and his unfortunate, sinful father, and how he bravely rose up against the whole class for him!’ (775). Alyosha pushes further to suggest that a ‘good’ memory is the key to salvation: ‘Some such beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life. And even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve some day for our salvation’ (774). A powerful brotherhood, as Alyosha’s speech suggests, has to be built upon some beautiful memory from childhood, which ensures the grown-up children will remember their capacity to love and keep themselves away from ‘great evil’ (775). But if we recall Freud’s analysis, there is no such thing called memory from the past, but only present-day memory of the past. The way in which the children remember Ilyusha depends largely on how Alyosha interprets the dead child’s past. The ‘beautiful and sacred’ memories from childhood are always already mediated by Alyosha’s speech on forming the brotherhood.

But before the speech, Alyosha is haunted by another picture of Ilyusha, which is very different from what he proposes to his young disciples:

They all silently stopped at the big stone. Alyosha looked and the whole picture of what Snegiryov had once told him about Ilyushechka, crying and embracing his father, exclaiming: ‘Papa, papa, how he humiliated you!’ rose at once in his memory. Something shook, as it were, in his soul (774).

There is another part of Alyousha’s memories which is not addressed in his speech. That is, the very fact that Ilyusha’s father was humiliated by Alyosha’s elder brother Mitya. This segment of memory – which again returns in the form of a picture – tells the traumatic moment when Ilyusha witnessed his father being humiliated in public. This image remembered recalls a desperate complaint. And yet the humiliation done to the father has not been expiated. This little picture of Ilyusha is ‘screened-out’ from the massive, beautiful and even sacred picture Alyosha would like to paint before his disciples.

When the children are carrying Ilyusha’s coffin to the churchyard, his mad mother has a hysterical fit. But just like the previous picture of Ilyusha pleading his father, the image of hysteria flits by and the mother is not mentioned in Alyosha’s speech at all:
They picked up the coffin, but as they carried it past his mother, they stopped in front of her for a moment and set it down, so that she could say her farewells to Ilyusha. But suddenly looking so closely at that dear little face, which for the past three days she had only seen from a distance, she began suddenly shaking all over, wagging her gray head back and forth hysterically above the coffin. ‘Mama, cross him, bless him, kiss him,’ Ninochka [her daughter] cries to her. But she kept wagging her head like an automaton, and then silently, her face twisted with burning grief, she suddenly began beating her breast with her fist. They moved on with the coffin (770).

Just as Alyosha has the hysterical fit which points back to the violence done to his mother, here we have Ilyusha’s mother falling into a fit before the corpse of her son, who tried to fight for his humiliated father. The hysterical mother permeates the novel: the line of dried-up peasant women in Mitya’s dream; Ivan’s woman who is forced to witness her son’s torture; Alyosha’s mother who has been terrorized since childhood; and Smerdyakov’s holy fool mother who was raped. These silenced pictures are supplemented by Ilyusha’s mad mother. This is another moment where the traumatic side of family history is implied. And this side of the past does not enter consciousness but rather finds its expression in the form of severe seizures.

The dialectical tension between the compulsive return of traumatic memory and Alyosha’s urgency to give a speech which crystallizes a ‘good’ memory can be summarized with this chapter’s last picture. In thesis nine of Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he discusses Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, calling the figure in the painting the angel of history:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.37

The ‘good’ memory Alyosha wants to create, the sacred family history he would like to imagine – they are what we usually see and what Benjamin calls ‘a chain of events’. But the shocked angel with an opened mouth sees something different: he is like the hysterics, such as Alyosha’s mother, who testify to the sexual violence afflicted to them in the past. The angel wants to stay and awaken the dead, to rearticulate the traumatic past. This is forbidden by ‘progress’ which idealizes history, taking it as a chain of events. Similarly, Ilyusha’s mother’s hysterical seizure – which evokes the painful side of her son’s death – is ignored by the children as ‘they moved on with the coffin’ (770). The storm is blowing from Paradise, suggesting that the movement driven by the storm is not merely negative. But to affirm the traumatic past is not necessarily positive either. The passage offers a double vision for reading the family history of the Karamazovs: it urges a reading of what is ‘screened-out’, silenced, and traumatized in the past; at the same time, such reading has to be placed in a dialectical relationship with a progressive reading of the future, such as Alyosha’s memorial speech. Only in this way, the subject can be hopeful to not to remain in the state of shock and to strive to reach Paradise.

Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus, 1920*
Conclusion

Death Sentences: Infinite Postponement

This thesis has traced and examined the appearances of epilepsy in five of Dostoevsky’s novels, suggesting that the writer’s works can be characterized by the epileptic mode of being. For this particular existence, I have referred to the infinite alternation between the desire to seize upon the present moment and the impossibility of seizing it. The moment which is impossible to seize upon has been understood as the caesura, the moment of incomprehensibility which ruptures the sense of continuity of the novels’ narratives. This is the moment where Dostoevsky’s heroes are thrown into a state of traumatic shock, even the collapse of consciousness.

On the other hand, I have also demonstrated that the heroes are compelled to return to the traumatic side of their life, hoping to make sense of and even master it. The dualistic and repetitive pattern of existence echoes Dostoevsky’s comparison between his epilepsy and the experience of death which advances and retreats. The alternation can also be compared to Freud’s Fort/Da game, in which the child obtains postponed pleasures by repeatedly throwing out a cotton wheel and pulling it back.\(^1\) In this conclusion, I want to suggest that the epileptic existence demands that Dostoevsky’s heroes live in infinite postponement. That is to say, there is a sense of delay in the epileptic existence, which necessitates a kind of subjectivity which is always deferred and unfinalized.

I would like to illuminate the point about postponement by looking at Maurice Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death* (*L’Instant de ma mort*, 1994). This short story about a young man surviving a firing squad is said to be the reminiscence of Blanchot’s own experience of surviving a German military shooting during his involvement with the French Resistance in 1944.\(^2\) Since that time, the French writer had been concerned with the subject of death in his fictions and literary essays, such as ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary’, *Thomas the Obscure, The Space of Literature* (I have discussed these in chapter 3 and 4), ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ and *Death Sentence* (*L’Arrêt de mort*) In the last example, a short story published in 1948, the narrator tells a story of his female friend who suffers from a fatal disease but goes on to survive for an unexpectedly long

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period of time. It would be fifty years before Blanchot articulated the trauma of survival in *The Instant of My Death*. Similarly, in 1849, Dostoevsky was also reprieved at the last moment from his death sentence, which was then commuted to hard labour and conscription to the army. The first time he extensively articulated his experience of execution was eighteen years later, when he wrote *The Idiot*, in which Prince Myshkin relates a story told by ‘a certain man’ who is given a death sentence for a political crime and is pardoned at the last minute (1.4.60-61). Another instant of delay, among many others, can be found in *Notes from Underground* (1864), where the Underground Man tells an anecdote in part 2 (‘Apropos of the Wet Snow’) which took place sixteen years ago, the year of Revolution, and which ‘refuses to be gotten rid of’ (1.11.38).

*The Instant of My Death* tells the story of a young man who lives with his family in a country house in France. One day, he opens the door to a group of Nazi soldiers who order the family to go outside the house: ‘The Nazi placed his men in a row in order to hit, according to the rules, the human target’. On his request, the children and elderly are allowed to stay until the rest of them are killed. At this point, the narrator writes: ‘I know – do I know it – that the one at whom the Germans were already aiming, awaiting but the final order, experienced then a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however) – sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death?’ (5). The narrator, knowing that he may have misread the moment, suggests that the young man experiences a kind of ‘extraordinary lightness’ in his encounter with death. The encounter with death has a sort of beatitude, but it has little to do with the beauty of the resurrection or an afterlife. Rather, the young man engages in a peculiar relationship with death: ‘he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship’ (5).

Just before the guns are fired, the lieutenant is distracted by the noise of an explosion in a nearby battle. As he moves away to investigate the noise, the soldiers suspend the shooting. One of them, approaching the young man with a laugh, makes a sign for him to disappear. He runs away and hides himself in a distant forest. Except the country house, the entire area is searched and burnt. Three farmers’ sons are slaughtered but the young man – whom the lieutenant perceives as noble class – survives.

The young man, who should have already died, continues to live by injustice. Here I follow Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of the survivor: ‘One who has come into

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contact with death in some bodily or psychic fashion and has himself remained alive’. Thereafter, the ecstasy which elates the young man at the firing squad is gone: ‘No doubt what then began for the young man was the torment of injustice. No more ecstasy’ (7). The instant of the young man’s death does not pass away with the narrative, it stays inside him as he continues to live:

There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? The infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. ‘I am alive. No, you are dead’ (9).

The young man is alive insofar as he has survived the firing squad; hence the death which is outside of him. And yet, he is already dead in the sense that the shooting, which was missed, is ‘no longer but to come’, suggesting a state of suspension, endless waiting. And this suspended mode – in which death is always about to come – marks the young man’s ‘posthumous’ existence. He has survived and yet, he is always already dead. At the end the narrator summarizes: ‘All that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance (en instance)’ (11). The word ‘in abeyance’ (en instance) has a legal implication: ‘instance’ can mean the process in a court of justice, e.g. court of first instance (OED). In this way, ‘in abeyance’ (en instance) involves the story’s title (L’instant de ma mort), suggesting that the instant of my death is always pending, just as the process in the court. The opening line reads: ‘I remember a young man – a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself – and perhaps the error of injustice’ (3). It is death which ‘disallows’ the young man to die. Death is like the judge in the court who sentences the young man to a

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7 The original text reads: ‘Seul demeure le sentiment de légèreté qui est la mort même ou, pour le dire plus précisément, l’instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance’ (10). Hent de Vries’ translation renders: ‘What remains is solely the sentiment of lightness which is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death which is from now on always pending’. See Hent de Vries, ‘“Lapsus Absolu”: Notes on Maurice Blanchot’s The Instant of My Death’, Yale French Studies, 93 (1998), 41.
death penalty which is always already to be executed. Rather than me who die my own death, it is death which stops me from dying. Death as the object turns into the subject which puts me into incessant trials, recalling Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, in which Joseph K is told that his trial is always pending and yet he can be arrested at anytime.⁸

Death announces its power in the life of the survivor, announcing to him a death sentence which is infinitely postponed. Hent de Vries writes: ‘Death does not stop to arrive, yet a death that at every instant goes on to arrive never arrives as such. Put otherwise, its arrival as such retains an element or structure of ineffaceable delay or postponement’.⁹ Death is ungraspable but at the same time, consciousness keeps running after death; the former moves towards but never arrives at death, and yet, death is always pending in life. For Dostoevsky and Blanchot, there were death sentences, but death can also be the ‘subject’ which ‘sentences’, putting the survivors into a state in which they are always already dead.

The point about postponement in *The Instant of My Death* can be seen as a commentary on Dostoevsky’s post-execution, post-Siberian, ‘posthumous’ novels. In *Humiliated and Insulted*, the Schillerian figure Ivan Petrovich is mocked by the Sadean libertine Prince Valkovsky. This mockery terrorizes Ivan, challenging the moral ideals he wants to achieve. This moment of shock has been compared to the mystic terror which strikes him in the middle of writing, making mockery of the philanthropic self. The hero is constantly subject to mockery of his romantic pursuit of moral ideals, marking an existence which can be characterized by continual postponement. With these moments of mockery, like a caesura, a break in the text, the Schillerian hero’s project of building lofty ideals is always delayed.

In *Crime and Punishment*, I have demonstrated that the murder of the pawnbroker happens completely by chance in the carnivalesque Haymarket. The chance-effect fits into what the Underground Man calls the unintentional side of the city (1.2.8). Raskolnikov meticulously plans the murder and he wishes to become a Napoleon, to be able to speak the ‘new word’ by killing the pawnbroker. And yet, the randomness of the murder has proved that it is actually a postponement of what he intended to achieve. The Napoleonic ideal, just as any other justifications Raskolnikov creates for his crime, is unachieved, missed and delayed.

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⁹ Hent de Vries, “‘Lapsus Absolu’”, p. 39.
In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin attempts to analyze what the convict has in mind at the very last moment before the guillotine blade is released. The Prince indulges in thinking about that particular moment, even hoping to experience it himself. Likewise, the consumptive boy Ippolit is fascinated by Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, which causes him to doubt the resurrection. Both the Prince and Ippolit are fascinated by the instant of death; they are anxious to reflect on it and hopefully understand it. Similarly, this is what happens to the Prince’s epileptic condition. He compares the moment of attack to the biblical phrase ‘time shall be no more’. The Prince wishes to see the moment in epilepsy as a beautiful and timeless instant which can be retrieved when it is wanted; he desires for no more postponement. But on the other hand, the Prince also admits that the seizure is nothing more than a banal illness which continually torments him. The logic of the writing of epilepsy never moves towards a single conclusion and therefore never confirms a single identity. What is reached at the end of the Prince’s conclusion is another delay in his thoughts. He knows very well that the ‘highest moments’ are idealistic but all the same, he will go on to reflect on it. Consciousness is torn between the fascination of epilepsy and the awareness that such fascination is idealistic, creating a delay, a ‘disappointment’ in existence.

*Demons* has further demonstrated that the desire to seize the present is infinitely postponed. This is proved in Kirilov’s attitude towards his own death and his imaginary epilepsy. By committing suicide, he wants to master death, to prove his ‘fearsome’ freedom and his insubordination to God. And yet, the death which Kirilov has ‘mastered’ is only the death which circulates in the language of liberty. The ‘second’ death, which has no relation to the living Kirilov, is beyond the realm of experience and is therefore ungraspable. Kirilov can kill himself but he cannot master his own death. Death is infinitely postponed.

Kirilov says he will ‘transform physically’ and become a man-god after the suicide. Similarly, he uses the same phrase to say that he desires a physical transformation, through which he will be able to overcome the pain of the epileptic attack and to enjoy the ecstasy of it. The desire to master death in Kirilov has meant to be the same desire to overcome epilepsy: both are the attempts to create meanings, to appropriate the ungraspable to the realm of experience. However, death and epilepsy – which appears in the form of ‘sudden death’ – always eludes these desires, causing desire to be infinitely missed and postponed.
In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha is anxious to keep a good memory of his mother, holding on to an image of the past. But a symptomatic reading of his remembrance and dream has shown that the seemingly beautiful and sacred images of the mother hardly exist. What the brother recalls instead are fragments of memory of the past. And these pieces of memory are indexical to the traumatic past of his mother and himself. Alyosha’s reading of his family history is idealistic, which has been contrasted with other Dostoevsky heroes who want to seize hold of the moment. While Kirilov in *Demons* wants to control the indefinite future by killing himself, Alyosha desires to sculpt an untainted and eternal past. It is this beautifully preserved history he wants to pass on to his children disciples. And yet, there is always the other side, the traumatic side of memory which is silenced, and which flashes through the moment of a seizure. In this way, Alyosha’s good pictures of memory are always marked by a caesura which remains unbridgeable and therefore causes delays and postponements in his remembrance. His attempt to ‘paint’ a historical past is futile because it always misses the traumatic parts of it.

Infinite postponement necessitates a Dostoevskian subject which is always deferred and unfinalized, characterizing the ‘posthumous’ writings of an epileptic survivor.
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