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En los límites de la literatura: didáctica y crítica de las literaturas periféricas

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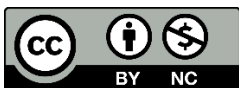


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DE LAS LITERATURAS PERIFÉRICAS

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EN LOS LÍMITES DE LA LITERATURA: DIDÁCTICA Y CRÍTICA DE LAS LITERATURAS PERIFÉRICAS

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CHALLENGING ORTHODOXY: DOSTOYEVSKY'S ROUTE TO REVITALIZING PSYCHOLOGY¹

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Edition, bibliography and notes

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In this presentation, we will delve into the realm of Dostoyevsky. We aim to unravel the age-old conflict between Dostoyevsky's conception of the human soul and contemporary psychological perspectives, envisioning the potential for a new path, a renaissance in psychology, arising from this ancient quandary.

Dostoyevsky was born in 1821 and died in 1881 at the age of 60 years old. He was a Russian novelist, but, more importantly, he was one of the harbingers and heralds of psychology, long before Freud, for example. Now, anyone who has read Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky² would instantly realize that Dostoyevsky was a grandiose narcissist, literally indistinguishable from his brainchild Raskolnikov. Dostoyevsky had gone through many traumas in life, including a mock execution and ten years in the Russian Gulag,

¹ This chapter is a transcription of the keynote address delivered by Professor Sam Vaknin at the First International Congress of Literary Studies (25-26th January 2024) (2024a, 2024b). The raw text was extracted by the editor from <https://vaknin-talks.com/> (Vaknin & DeGraaf, 2022-2024). The editor's task involved selecting a title, proofreading the automatic transcription for typos, and conducting a general style revision. To preserve authenticity, the editor maintained oral style features in the transcription. Additionally, the editor included bibliographic references and inserted explanatory notes for non-specialist readers. Any errors or inconsistencies are the editor's responsibility.

² See Frank (1976, 1983, 1986, 1995, 2002). There is also a one-volume abridgement (Frank, 2010).

but his relationship with his father might have been the greatest trauma he ever experienced and shaped his life from beginning to end.

Just to give you a hint of Dostoyevsky's extreme grandiosity and narcissism: after his second novel, *Double*, was published, he wrote, "Golyadkin, the novel's main protagonist, is turning out superbly. This will be my *chef d'oeuvre*. My *chef d'oeuvre* ..." He was talking about the second book he had ever published. "Why should I lose," he wrote, "such a superb idea, a great type in its social importance, which I was the first ever to discover and to which I was the herald?" The novel's idea, he said, was rather bright, and nothing more serious than this idea had ever been attempted in literature. So, Dostoyevsky considered himself the number one writer in history, stating definitively that nothing like that had ever been attempted in literature—a clear sign of narcissism.

Now, Dostoyevsky represents one pole, one end of a continuum of opinions regarding the validity or even the possibility of a psychology of the human mind or what used to be called the human soul. There's a war, a pitched battle between descriptive, symbolic psychology, psychology of the unconscious—of the soul, if you wish—, and the statistical variant of psychology—the pseudo-scientific, medicalized, psychologized, disease model psychology of cohorts and populations.

While early psychology, the psychology of after Wundt and James, the psychology of Freud, the psychology of Jung, the psychology of the object relations theories, and so on, dealt with the human whole, a complete human system, and worked its way through case studies, later-day psychology, the psychology of today pretending to be a science, is not and cannot be a science in principle. This psychology is based on laboratory studies, experiments, statistics, populations, cohorts, and neurobiology. Psychology, of course, can never be a science because of its raw material—the human being—being mutable. That's why psychology is subject to an enormous non-replication crisis. But I will not go into it in this presentation. On my YouTube channel³, you

³ Sam Vaknin's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@samvaknin>.

can find several videos dealing with the status of psychology as a pseudo-scientific or quasi-scientific discipline⁴.

Anyhow, Dostoevsky stood firmly on the sole variety of psychology—the kind that studied human beings, more specifically, individual human beings, the idiosyncrasies of the human mind. Dostoevsky documented individuals and how they react to other people and to society at large, to civilization. And in this sense, Dostoevsky was indistinguishable in his work from the likes of Freud, exploring civilization and its discontents. So, Dostoevsky preceded Freud, preceded Nietzsche, and in this sense, was a true pioneer of this approach and school of psychology. He studied the criminal mind in the same way Freud studied the abnormal mind—the criminal minds of Raskolnikov, Rogozhin, Stravkin, and Smerdiakov. These criminal minds in his various novels depict suffering, a search for meaning, alienation, and all of them are steeped in poverty and hopelessness. All of them are trapped in the circumstances of life, which are partly engineered by themselves. They bring their conditions and situation upon themselves, for example, Raskolnikov.

Now, while Freud regarded psychology as a branch of physics, as a kind of mechanics of the mind, hence psychoanalysis subject to an analytic discipline, Dostoevsky was much more irrational. Dostoevsky introduced God into the equation. He continuously claimed that God is the only constraint on human evil and depravity, and in this sense, God in Dostoevsky's work is the equivalent of the ego in the three-partite model of Freud. God simply engenders the consequences for our actions. God is the reality. God constrains and restrains us via his morality, commandments, and edicts, and so on⁵.

But, like everything else with Dostoevsky, who was, I keep reminding you, an aesthete after all with a very conflicted relationship with the truth, his exhibitionist religiosity, his ostentatious belief in God, adherence to religion, were a bit of a façade, a bit of a camouflage.

⁴ See Vaknin's videos (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). About the conundrums of psychology, *cf.* Vaknin (2006).

⁵ About Vaknin's view on God and Freud, *cf.* Vaknin (2009).

In a letter that Dostoevsky wrote to a woman who sent him the New Testament to his prison camp, Dostoevsky wrote to her that he was a child of unbelief and a child of doubt up to this moment and “I’m certain,” he said, “that I shall remain so to the grave.” Unbelief in God and doubt of God’s existence. This was the real inside landscape of Dostoevsky, and his conspicuous consumption of God was just a way to convince everyone else that he is an adherent of religion and of the belief in a higher power. In psychology, we call this “reaction formation”—it’s when you pretend to be something you are not, precisely because you reject who you are⁶.

Dostoevsky wrote, “even if someone were to prove to me that the truth lay outside Christ, I should choose to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.” But this was the ostentation, this was not the truth. In truth, he, of course, chose the side of the antichrist. All his protagonists are criminals. Even the ones stricken by remorse and regret, like Raskolnikov, are the products and the fruits of overarching ideologies which have nothing to do with God, which reject God. In this sense, Dostoevsky is very Nietzschean.

So, if you analyze the religious ideas of Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*, in *The Idiot*, in *Demons*, and in *The Brothers Karamazov*⁷, Dostoevsky constantly regurgitates and reiterates Eastern Orthodox beliefs.

⁶ In psychoanalytic theory, reaction formation (*Reaktionsbildung*) is a defense mechanism in which emotions, desires, and impulses that are anxiety-producing or unacceptable to the ego are mastered by the exaggeration of the directly opposing tendency (Rycroft, 1995).

⁷ There are several notable translations of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Constance Garnett’s translations, such as her 1918 *Notes from Underground* and 1914 *Crime and Punishment*, are historically significant and praised for their smooth readability but are sometimes criticized for being too free with the text. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, known for their literal and detailed approach, have produced highly accurate translations such as their 1994 *Notes from Underground* and 1990 *The Brothers Karamazov*, though some readers find their prose stilted. David McDuff’s translations, including his 1991 *Crime and Punishment* and 2004 *The Idiot*, are appreciated for their modern and idiomatic language. Oliver Ready’s 2014 *Crime and Punishment* is noted for its balance of readability and fidelity, making it highly praised. Ronald Wilks, Michael R. Katz, and Ignat Avsey also offer valuable translations, each bringing a unique perspective and style to Dostoevsky’s complex narratives. For those seeking accuracy and detail, Pevear and Volokhonsky are often recommended, while Ready and Avsey are preferred for their accessible prose. See complete references in the final bibliography.

But when it comes to salvation and to sin, which are critical elements in religion, he diverges from East Christian Orthodoxy. According to Townsend (1997), Dostoevsky almost seemed to embrace an in-this-life purgatory in which people suffer to pay for their sins, rather than the Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ. Jones (2005) even spotted elements of Islam and Buddhism in Dostoevsky's religious convictions. Wilson, in his book *The Outsider* (1956)⁸, described Dostoevsky as a tormented half-atheist, half-Christian. This debate, this internal dissonance and conflict with Dostoevsky erupts in *The Brothers Karamazov*. "But what will become of men then?" I asked him. "Without God and immortal life, all things are permitted then. They can do what they like." Indeed. One of the characters in *Demons* confesses,

I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion contradicts the original idea from which I start. From unlimited freedom in the absence of God, I conclude with unlimited despotism.

And this suggests that if you were to abandon God, which in Dostoevsky's mind is just a synonym for morality, if you abandon the divine for the sake of an idea or an ideology, the end will be tyranny greater than any in the past. He warns us against this deviation, this fork in the road, when we have to choose between God and reason, rational ideation. He says, "Always choose God", even though he himself was tormented by doubt and unbelief.

Now, I strongly beg to differ with anyone who says that Dostoevsky was a master of the unconscious, that all his work revolves around and pivots around the unconscious. I don't think so at all. Dostoevsky explores overt behaviors. He verbalizes cognitions and emotions. His moral dilemmas are always conscious. There's no hint of the unconscious in *Crime and Punishment*, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in *The Idiot*, in *Demons*, or in *The Double*. None. Everything is on the table. Everything is

⁸ Considered a seminal work in English existentialist literature, *The Outsider* explores the crisis experienced by individuals who feel alienated from society. Through an analysis of various outsiders in literature, philosophy, and history, such as Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Van Gogh, Wilson examines how these individuals struggle with a sense of meaninglessness and their quest for deeper understanding and purpose. Their inner turmoil and the impact of their outsider status on their creative and intellectual achievements are highlighted.

open cards. Everything is subject to observation, our observation. We are the audience, and this is the narcissist's world. The world of the narcissist is a spectacle, an exhibitionistic display for the consumption of other people. Other people are supposed to provide input and feedback, which allows the narcissist to regulate his internal environment, his sense of self-worth, for example, his self-esteem, self-confidence, self-perception, self-image, which is often inflated and grandiose and therefore fantastic. Narcissism is a fantasy defense, but the fantasy defense is communicable. It's transmitted and broadcast to others endlessly and unremittingly. And this is Dostoevsky's world, not Freud's unconscious. Raskolnikov is a "what you see is what you get" type of character. Raskolnikov analyzes himself, verbalizes his emotions, his conflicts, his dissonances, his guilt—everything is on the table, clear to see, no need to guess, no need to analyze the way Freud did. So, Dostoevsky is not a master of the unconscious. If anything, he is a master of the conflict in consciousness between motivations, actions, and the aftermaths of motivations and actions. Yuri Korigan, Assistant Professor of Russian literature at Boston University, wrote a book, *Dostoevsky and the Riddle of the Self*, published in 2017. He describes Dostoevsky's writing as a vast experimental canvas on which the problem of selfhood is continuously explored over the course of four decades (Korigan, 2017). This was Dostoevsky's main focus, the self. And the reason, of course, is that pathological narcissism, which characterized Dostoevsky's personality. Pathological narcissism is a disruption in the formation, constellation, and integration of the self. Narcissists ironically are selfless. They have no functioning ego, to use Freud's parlance. They don't have the structures that allow them to interface with reality and to maintain reality testing. So they are preoccupied with the idea of the self and with the idea of the ego. They try to make sense of who they are constantly and keep failing.

And this leads, of course, to the issue of morality because can you have a morality, a functional morality at least, in the absence of a coordinating factor inside you, a core identity, a self, an ego? Isn't morality just the outer manifestation of your essence and quiddity? People without a functioning self, people with a disrupted ego, with arrested development, are not likely to develop morality. Morality is acquired exactly

like empathy. And if childhood development is interrupted and disrupted, it's not likely to emerge on its own. Morality is an axiologically and deontically contradictory and dissonant system in Dostoevsky's work. He doesn't know how to deal with morality. He doesn't know what to do with it. It's like a hot potato. He keeps reframing it. He keeps rejecting it and then embracing it. He keeps experiencing guilt and loss. He keeps adapting to it and adopting it and then regretting it. So, Dostoevsky is not only the father of psychoanalysis, the father of existentialism. He's also the father of moral relativism. The absence of God, human choices and actions, human freedom create anxiety and angst. And this is a direct linkage to a great number of existentialists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Viktor Frankl, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre of course, and so on. So Dostoevsky is clearly one of the original 19th-century existentialists, along with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Freud wrote a letter to Stefan Zweig. He said Dostoevsky cannot be understood without psychoanalysis. He isn't in the need of it because he illustrates it himself in every character and in every sentence. Indeed, I agree with Freud. There's no need for psychoanalysis because there's no unconscious here. It's all totally on the surface, all externalized, all available for observation and therefore there's no need for analysis or any therapy. Dostoevsky is utterly self-aware and is capable of maintaining an internal dialogue or polylog between the various constructs of his personality. And in this sense, Dostoevsky has not only been unprecedented, but he is unparalleled and unequal to this very day.

Freud was ambivalent about Dostoevsky's legacy because he said that Dostoevsky was colluding with humanity's jailers, the irrational forces in the human mind. He said that Dostoevsky was irrational, dark, the dark side, the shadow in Jung's terms. But Freud should have taken into account that Dostoevsky was a Russian. This is a Russian thing, a kind of Russian psychology, a Russian soul, if you want. It's dark. It's dark not in the negative sense. It's dark in the sense of self-recognition and self-awareness of the shadow and the ability to incorporate it as a daily attribute, as a pedestrian reminder of our humanity, of our frailty, of our vulnerability, of our propensity to sin. So even though Freud said that *The Brothers Karamazov* was the most masterly novel ever written,

he rejected Dostoevsky as a whole because he said that Dostoevsky gives in to pessimism and darkness and so on and so forth. Korigan (2017) described these patterns of behavior as an extraordinary outwardness in Dostoevsky's characters, which is exactly what I've been saying here. They fled, they escaped from the rumblings of the unconscious soul. They escaped from the unconscious, and this leads to a false choice of either fusing with the collective or radically asserting the ego or the self, all in an attempt to avoid the penumbral seething cauldron of the unconscious, which, like a black hole, could suck you in if you were to give into it. Dostoevsky's work, trauma, psychic wound, the emptiness, in Kernberg's language⁹, is conscious. It's conscious. And so there is a way Dostoevsky offers us a path, a way to incorporate the unconscious, to use the model in psychodynamic, the model of childhood development. Dostoevsky allows us to identify, to internalize our shadow, to identify with it, to introject it and then to incorporate it. And this constant friction with our shadow, which is now totally conscious, totally verbalized, quoted in an ideology, like in the case of Raskolnikov or some other justification, like with *The Brothers Karamazov*, so this process of bringing to the surface our dark side –which is what psychoanalysis is all about, by the way– has lifelong repercussions. Trauma brought to the surface when dissociation is abandoned and we come face to face with the tortures of life, the pain we have suffered, the hurt we have endured, our own hopelessness, our anxiety and angst, when we come face to face, without psychological defense mechanisms and without the unconscious as a repository and reservoir, when we are skinless, a process known clinically as decompensation, when we decompensate, by coming face to face with exactly who we are, for better and for worse, this leads to maladaptive behaviors which are excessive, compulsive, and reactive. It is kind of post-traumatic existence as the patho-etiology of the characters of Dostoevsky.

⁹ Kernberg's concept of "emptiness" is particularly relevant to individuals with severe personality disorders, such as borderline and narcissistic personalities, areas in which he is a renowned expert. Emptiness, in his view, is a profound sense of inner void, boredom, and lack of purpose. This feeling arises from significant early relational traumas and unmet developmental needs, which hinder the formation of a cohesive and stable self. Individuals experiencing this emptiness often engage in impulsive behaviors and seek external validation, but these efforts usually fail to provide lasting fulfillment. Cf. Kernberg (2023).

Dostoevsky says, there's no such thing as unconscious. Everything is conscious. And you have to confront it. You have to accept this. You have to confront this. You have to embrace this. You have to maintain this dialogue with yourself. You have to get to know yourself. Even the dark side, even the shadow, even the terrifying demons inside you, even the complexes—everything, you have to make peace with yourself. Because if you don't make peace with yourself, you will end up committing crimes. And you will end up committing crimes because there's no God and no morality left. And then you will regret it. You will feel a sense of overwhelming remorse which will consume you the way it did Raskolnikov.

The characters in Dostoevsky's work, from Golyadkin in *The Double* to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, the underground men in *Notes from the Underground*, Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*—these characters, these protagonists demonstrate how suffering stems from an inability to see beyond the delusions that trap us in cycles of self-destruction, what Freud called much later “repetition compulsions”¹⁰. Dostoevsky was an advocate of facing our delusions head-on. And no matter how painful, no matter how devastating, crush, destroy these delusions, fight them like hell, ruin them, eradicate them, obliterate them to set us free. Because if we adopt the concept and the construct of the unconscious, if we agree that huge parts of us are inaccessible to us, except through analysis later on, inaccessible to us, if we deem ourselves dark, penumbral, shadows and complexes with the conscious part, the tip of an iceberg, if this is the vision, then we are deluding ourselves. How can we form any kind of self-awareness and self-consciousness if we don't have access to 95% of who we are? And these delusions, they're the ones which create repetition compulsions, bad decision-making, horrible wrong choices and ultimately self-defeat, self-traction, self-destruction. Of course, this gives rise to self-rejection, self-loathing, self-hatred,

¹⁰ In psychoanalytic theory, repetition compulsion is an unconscious drive to reenact early traumatic experiences in an effort to gain control over them. These traumas are often relived in new situations that symbolically represent the original trauma. This compulsion acts as a barrier to therapeutic progress because therapy aims to help individuals remember and understand the trauma's impact on current behavior rather than repeatedly experiencing it.

which are typical and characteristic of literally all the heroes, anti-heroes, and protagonists in Dostoyevsky's novels.

For Dostoyevsky, the good life in the Aristotelian sense, if you wish, in the Greek sense, *eudaimonia*, good life was a kind of embodied reciprocal exchange between self and other. Conscious self, aware self, accessible self and other. And this exchange serves as the foundation for a life that is lived, not rejected, not constricted, not deformed, but lived. Through the intellectual grasp of truth, we can then choose life over the alternative, our shadow, which is death, *thanatos*. Dostoyevsky, therefore, exactly opposite to what Freud thinks, was not a prophet of the irrational. Dostoyevsky was a huge believer in the intellect. And we see Raskolnikov, for example. He's developing theories, he's analyzing everything. The characters in Dostoyevsky's work constantly argue and reason and debate. They're highly verbal, they're highly analytical. But, having said so, Dostoyevsky did choose relationships with others, the relational model, which underlies object relations theories in the 1960s, especially the UK school of object relations. Dostoyevsky says, relations with other people define us, they give us life, they propagate us, they perpetuate our legacy, they provide us with inner peace, and we should value relationships with others over the intellect. So if you wish to call this irrationality like Freud did, go ahead. I think it's actually very rational. I also think it's very factual. We are the sum of our relationships, period. As Lacan (1966) had observed, even our unconscious is the sum total of other people and their statements. It's a hive mind. No one has an idiosyncratic, solipsistic mind. The mind is an outcome of zillions of interactions throughout life¹¹. And so if we want to grasp the truth, the intellect is a useful tool. If we want to live, we need others, and we need relationships with others. Is this not the essence and the core of object

¹¹ Lacan's idea that the unconscious is fundamentally social and constituted by external influences can be found in his discussion on how the unconscious is structured like a language. He argues that the unconscious is not an isolated, individual phenomenon but rather is interwoven with the language and desires of others. This perspective is encapsulated in his famous assertion that "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other." In his works, Lacan elaborates that our unconscious thoughts and desires are deeply influenced by our interactions and the expectations of those around us. This concept diverges from Freud's more isolated view of the unconscious and emphasizes the social dimension of our inner lives.

relations schools? Is this not a precursor of the concept of the other in the work of many existentialists? It is.

Dostoyevsky's intellect doesn't cease to amaze. He gave birth to most major intellectual and philosophical trends in both the 19th and the 20th centuries, single-handedly. The German novelist Thomas Mann said of Dostoyevsky's writing that "I am filled with reverence before this prototype of the downtrodden and possessed, in whom the saint and the criminal are one." This is very reminiscent of the work of Jean Genet. Nietzsche said of Dostoyevsky that he was the only psychologist that he had anything to learn from. And yes, Nietzsche regarded Dostoyevsky not as a novelist, but as a psychologist. In a letter that Nietzsche wrote to the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes in 1888, Nietzsche said that "Dostoyevsky had provided the most valuable psychological material. I know. I owe him a debt of gratitude."¹² When Nietzsche said this, when he wrote this letter in 1888, and also in his book, *The Twilight of the Idols*, which he published the following year in 1889¹³, he was actually criticizing, however circumspectly and indirectly, Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt was the founder of the first psychology lab at the University of Leipzig in 1879¹⁴. Ironically, Leipzig, this university, was Nietzsche's *alma mater*. Anyhow, Wundt, together with William James, to some extent, they were the grandfathers of psychology as a standalone discipline and a kind of medical field, like another branch of medicine: endocrinology, cardiology, psychology. They pretended that psychology was a science. They tried to reduce it to science by deploying the scientific method. And Dostoyevsky rejected it completely, rejected this attitude and approach. And so did Nietzsche.

Remember the battle, the pitched battle, between the two schools of psychology: the individualistic, human soul, holistic school, which relies

¹² Regarding Nietzsche's knowledge of Dostoevsky and the role Brandes played in the process, cf. Stellino (2008). On Nietzsche's familiarity with Russian literature, cf. Pacini (2001).

¹³ See Nietzsche (1889). English translation by Hollingdale in Nietzsche (1968).

¹⁴ Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) is indeed renowned as a founding figure in psychology. He established the first psychology laboratory at the University of Leipzig in 1879, marking the formal inception of psychology as a distinct scientific discipline. Wundt's work laid the foundational principles for experimental psychology, emphasizing introspection and the study of the human mind's structure. Cf. Blumenthal (1998).

on case studies and introspection, and the pseudoscientific statistical medicalized school, which studies populations and cohorts and can say very little with any efficaciousness with regards to the individual. That's why there's a giant replication crisis. The biopsychosocial model of psychology is the predominant model today in universities. We teach biopsychosocial models. And these are heavily influenced by Wundt and James and so on and so forth. Wundt himself was originally an assistant to Hermann von Helmholtz, a physiologist, a giant of German science¹⁵. So he was kind of a wannabe doctor. He was heavily influenced by the psychosocial, a psychophysical paradigm. Helmholtz was the first to propose it. And so Helmholtz suggested that a person was basically a mechanism, determined and activated by physical, chemical, and electrical forces. And this is how we see human beings today, to this very day. Wundt has won. Freud has lost. Dostoyevsky has lost. Nietzsche has lost. We live in a world that is ruled by lab coats, lab vats, grant funds, statistics, and other paraphernalia of science. That's not the way to study human beings, said Dostoyevsky. Nietzsche echoed him and so did Freud and Jung and everyone until the sixties, with the exception of the behaviorist.

In the remainder of his correspondence with Georg Brandes, Nietzsche wrote in 1889 about Dostoyevsky: "He still remains one of those who has afforded the greatest relief to my mind." So Dostoyevsky restored in Nietzsche inner peace and harmony. It is a relief to finally be understood, to make sense of one's madness. You do recall that Nietzsche ended up in a mental asylum. Dostoyevsky was the greatest chronicler of a pernicious, incremental, metastasizing kind of insanity that suddenly erupts in a form of acting out or psychosis. And this is the kind of insanity or madness that Nietzsche was subjected to, and much later Althusser and many others. Dostoyevsky accomplished this ability to chronicle and document insanity, its various microstages, its cumulative effects, its inevitable eruptions. He was able to accomplish all this by

¹⁵ Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) was a German physicist and physician who made foundational contributions to understanding the conservation of energy, mechanics, electrodynamics, thermodynamics, and the physiology of vision and hearing. His work bridges physics, biology, and psychology, influencing diverse scientific fields.

using symbols. His novels read like elaborate, inescapable, inexorable riddles or nightmares, more precisely. They are surrealistic. Dostoyevsky's use of symbolism, dreams, for example, in *Crime and Punishment* and in *Demons*, transcended physical or tangible entities. Dostoyevsky often used symbols such as dreams, as I said, folktales, religious symbols to construct powerful metaphorical messages about life and death, about love, about hate, about spiritual struggles, about human beings. And this, of course, is the precursor of Freud's work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud was a literary figure. He was an author, much more than a psychologist. He was a neurologist by training. But many of his books and many of his essays read like prime literature. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for instance, Dostoyevsky uses the symbol of a cross. Throughout the novel, there's this cross, and the cross kind of evinces and triggers guilt, faith, and morality through the characters' lives and journeys. The use of symbolism in Dostoyevsky and the use of subtext allowed him to create a complex version of reality. And this complex version of reality is not necessarily unconscious; it is mediated via symbols, but the symbols are utterly clear, unequivocal, monovalent, and accessible, unlike in dreams where interpretation is called for. There's no need to interpret the symbols in Dostoyevsky's work. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky uses snow, frost, ice whenever Raskolnikov harbors ill feelings towards society.

By far, Dostoyevsky's greatest novel, in my view, is *The Brothers Karamazov*. Though *Notes from the Underground* is making a comeback nowadays, it's a lot more incisive and insightful and a lot shorter, if I may add. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, of course, the main event is the murder of the father. And Freud latched on to this in his essay, dated 1928, "Dostoyevsky and Parricide"¹⁶. I will not dwell on what Freud had to say. He linked it to the Oedipus complex, which I think is a bit tenuous. I will also not deal with political and social issues in Dostoyevsky's work. Others have done it much better than I could ever hope to do. But Ivan's reaction to the death of his father is ambivalent. It illustrates the conflicting emotions, the dissonance in Dostoyevsky when his own father

¹⁶ See Freud (1928). English translation by Tait in Freud (1997).

died. Louis Breger, an interpreter of Dostoyevsky, wrote that it is certain that the father's death produced a dual effect on Fyodor. On the one hand, he must have felt glad. Finally, justice was done, revenge taken on the tyrant who had oppressed him. On the other side, he must have felt guilty over the actualization of his own murderous wishing. It's an example of magical thinking. The child believes that his wishes come true in reality, that his thinking, his cognitions have an effect on the universe. Yet it is Smerdiakov, the epileptic—Dostoyevsky was epileptic, by the way, not hysterical epileptic as Freud tried to claim, but really epileptic. So Smerdiakov is epileptic. He is also a bastard. No one knows if he is really Dr. Dostoyevsky's son. And he is the one who murders the father, not the other two, not the other brothers. He is the one who murders the father. And Breger says by showing how Smerdiakov uses his disease for manipulative and selfish ends, Dostoyevsky confronts the same tendency in himself. We are beginning to see that most of Dostoyevsky's novels, if not all of them, are autobiographical. It's very reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn. It's autobiographical. Raskolnikov is the young Dostoyevsky. He's a narcissist. And Smerdiakov is absolutely Dostoyevsky. He has epileptic seizures and his father-killing wish.

So Dostoyevsky has a conflicted relationship with life. His own life has been denied him in reality through his imprisonment. And, also, his own life has been denied to Dostoyevsky symbolically through his mock execution. He has been losing his life regularly, repeatedly, constantly. This loss, which is the ultimate loss, the loss of life, has been his companion throughout his life. And so he chose truth. Dostoyevsky is committed to the truth unflinchingly. He looks at the mirror and he documents every wrinkle, every aberration, every sign of impending doom and gloom, and every hint of encroaching death. Yet Dostoyevsky criticizes exactly this in his novels. So his commitment to the truth, his extreme self-analysis in life, he criticizes in the novel. He said it's a bad thing. It can lead to madness. It can result in crime. But this is, of course, a form of self-justifying. When he regards Raskolnikov's extreme self-involvement, almost self-infatuation, as negative, he's criticizing himself, Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky self-rejects. There is self-loathing. The narrator in *The Brothers Karamazov* laments that this desire to sacrifice

everything for the truth, including life itself, is perhaps the easiest of sacrifices to make because it doesn't require the grinding courage to live—Sartre's *angst*. And instead, it represents the laying down of personal responsibility. "I don't care about life anymore." Seeking the truth in Dostoyevsky's world is the equivalent of giving up psychological suicide.

Alyosha, who abandoned his studies, entered the monastery, is under the mentorship of Zosima, is struck by a vision. And this vision provides him, "a way out for his soul struggling from darkness to light." We would now refer to this, to paraphrase John Wellwood, as "spiritual bypassing"¹⁷, the desire for a shortcut, or a ready answer to a spiritual question that can only be answered through lived experience. The rejecting life and adopting the truth or the pursuit of truth –rationally, by the way, contrary to what Freud had believed. This is an abrogation of life. And as long as you don't pursue life, as long as you're not committed to life, as long as you're not invested in life, as long as the rational truth is your new God, you will never find spiritual awakening or salvation from your sins. Coming back full circle to the religious undertones and overtones of Dostoyevsky's work. The narrator, Alyosha, says,

The sacrifice of life is the easiest of all sacrifices in many cases, while to sacrifice, for example, five or six years of their ebulliently youthful life to hard, difficult studies, to learning, in order to increase tenfold their strength to serve the very truth and the very deed that they loved and set out to accomplish, such sacrifice is quite often almost beyond the strength of many of them.

He holds young people in contempt, because they go the easy way. They give up on life. Raskolnikov isolates himself. He becomes a schizoid, a hermit. He rejects life. He avoids it. He negates it. He withdraws. In *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov delves into an intense moral dilemma over whether to commit a murder in order to free himself from

¹⁷ The term "spiritual bypassing" was coined by psychotherapist John Welwood in the 1980s. It describes the tendency to use spiritual ideas or explanations to avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, or developmental tasks. Welwood noted how people (including himself) used spirituality as a defense mechanism instead of dealing with difficult emotions or unresolved problems. While this evasion can protect individuals and promote internal harmony, it doesn't actually resolve the issue, leaving it unaddressed. Cf. Welwood (2000) and Piccioto, Fox and Neto (2018).

poverty or not. What kind of dilemma is this? Are you ever justified in committing murder for the sake of self-enrichment or elevating yourself from the status of poverty? *The Brothers Karamazov* confront questions of faith. When Alyosha is forced to choose between God or humanity, it is a source of meaning in life. These are artificial dilemmas and they emerge at all—they should not have emerged, but they emerge—because of the wrong choice to reject life. Anyone who chooses life would not hesitate, would not have these dilemmas. Of course, you should not murder. And, of course, if you have to choose between God and humanity, you should choose one or the other. There's no dilemma here. There's no dissonance. There's no conflict except if you have rejected life and grandiosely trust your mind and your brain to come up with the answers by pursuing rationally the truth and knowledge.

Through his novels such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky offers us characters that fall into temptations—sinful characters that find themselves struggling between accepting corrupt desires or attempting to redeem themselves for salvation and an honest life. The irony is that Dostoyevsky is hyper-rational. Everything is analyzed in the most reasoned and rational way imaginable. It is just that his conclusion is that perhaps this is not the best way. Perhaps lived experience is superior to anything we can accomplish via rationality. That doesn't render him irrational. Maybe this conclusion is actually rational. Maybe it is factual. Maybe it is only through life that we can aim to seek the truth and possibly find it. Maybe the truth is life and in life, and if you were to avoid life and resort to artificial structures and constructs such as logic, arithmetic, and maybe physics, you will end up committing sin. Not sin in the biblical sense. Committing sin against life. According to Dostoyevsky, the rejection of life is sinful. What dooms Dostoyevsky's characters, what cuts them off from their soul, is what Richard Pevear referred to as "inner fixity". He wrote a foreword to his translation of *Notes from the Underground* (Dostoyevsky, 1994a). Pevear said,

The one quality his negative characters share is inner fixity, a sort of death in life. Inner movement, on the other hand, is always a condition of spiritual good, though it may also be a source of suffering, division, disharmony in this life. What moves may also rise.

So even if the price we pay by choosing life is suffering, disharmony, this is the price we are paying because the only possibility for improvement and optimism is in life itself. What moves may also rise. Pevear refers to inner fixity as a kind of narrow-mindedness, obscurantism, blinkeredness. It's a spiritual death, but not necessarily the spiritual death of the actual. It's also the spiritual death of the potential, the potential to participate in life, to explore it, to revel in it, to flourish and to thrive in it.

For the highly irrational, Ivan, you know, he is divided. He's divided from the world. He's divorced from the world. This death in life, Ivan's death in life, is revealed to him in a dream where it is as though he is awake in his own sleep, divorced from himself. And his dream is simply a recreation of his rooms where the windows and doors are locked to the outside world, but where the devil still manages to enter. And Ivan's conversation with the devil, who continually points Ivan back to himself, rightly so, forces Ivan to reflect on his old ideas, recycled ideals. It symbolizes how he's been cut off from an internal source of spiritual sustenance. Ivan is desolate, but he's desolate not only in his dream but in his waking consciousness. He constantly represses and suppresses who he is or, more importantly, who he could be or could have been. His potential, Ivan never self-actualizes, to use Abraham Maslow's terms¹⁸. He's fixed in place: inner fixity. He's cut off. He has no sustenance. He's impoverished. There's no potential for his soul, conscious or unconscious.

This fixity is also seen in the rantings and ramblings of the guy in the *Notes from the Underground*. He believes that he would be a hero if only the right moment would present itself, a kind of contingent hero. And he says,

This was the point that I blindly believed then that through some miracle, some external circumstance, all this would suddenly extend and expand. Suddenly, a horizon of appropriate activity would present itself. Beneficent, beautiful, and above all, quite ready-made. And thus, I would suddenly step

¹⁸ Self-actualization in Maslow's theory refers to realizing one's full potential and achieving personal growth and self-fulfillment. It is the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, involving the pursuit of creativity, problem-solving, authenticity, and meaningful goals. Cf. Maslow (1954, 1962).

forth under God's heaven, all but on a white horse and writhe in laurels. A secondary role was incomprehensible to me. And that is what ruined me because in the mad, I comforted myself with being a hero.

This is, of course, narcissism. It's exactly narcissism. It's a fixed mindset. It's a rigid personality structure to use the lingo of the diagnostic and statistical manual. Dostoyevsky preceded Freud by half a century in describing to the minutest, most excruciating details the absence that is narcissism, pathological narcissism. It is a retreat into a fantasy which is both grandiose, so cognitively impaired—reality testing is impaired—and delusional. It's a kind of warped faith, a private religion, a vision in a vacuum that dissolves and dissipates when in contact with reality and with minimal experience. It's a renouncing of life. It's choosing death.

The anti-hero of the novel holds a preference for a perfect conception, a perfect self-image, perfection. It perceives itself as a perfect entity, a perfect being, and it's a fixed and rigid conception and it creates anxiety because when you have such a brittle, unrealistic conception of yourself, anything can burst your bubble. Anything can puncture and shatter your fantasy. And so it's better to avoid life because it is reality that pushes back. It is life that challenges your fantasy. Your grandiose inflated, fantastic perception of yourself becomes a paracosm, a virtual alternative to reality, and you'd rather inhabit it, you'd rather reside there where it's safe because you're fully in control of your own imaginings and reveries, and the abyss between a flawed self-conception and the inconvenience of reality is bad enough, but the abyss between a grandiose, perfect self-conception and the inconvenience of reality is threatening. It's ominous. It is filled with despairing envy and hatred for those who don't have to endure this abyss, this discrepancy.

Do you remember Nietzsche? Stare into the abyss? These encounters with others shatter the mirror of narcissism, the intellectual rigors invested in the fantasy. So you avoid other people, or you transform them into internal objects, or you devalue them and discard them. Unwilling to go and accept contradictions and conflicts and dissonances and hypocrisies because this is the sum total of life. Life is comprised of losses, of contradictions, of hypocrisies. This is life, especially life populated by other human beings. If you are not willing to accept this, if you are

rigidly perfectionistic and rigidly moralistic and self-righteously sanctimonious, you fester. You are like an unplanted seed. Nothing will come out of you. Potential growth is extinguished by an unwillingness to expose yourself to the vagaries and exigencies and vicissitudes of experience, because it is experience that molds you. Experience and losses are the twin engines of personal growth and development.

In *Crime and Punishment*, the mental state of the protagonist, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, before and after he commits a totally unnecessary, gratuitous, brutal crime, is besieged by guilt and remorse. And this is offset by flights of grandiose fantasy. It's kind of a compensatory mechanism. We know almost nothing about Raskolnikov outside the context of the novel. For example, his childhood. We know nothing about this. How does Raskolnikov come to develop those beliefs that he is an extraordinary *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's much later term? What impels him to commit this crime? He indulges in fantasy. We know that. And fantasy gives him a lot of pleasure, restores a sense of harmony and inner tranquility. It's a deflection. It's a decoy. And his fantasies grow into the emptiness and the vacuum and the void that he is: Raskolnikov. And the days preceding his crime, Raskolnikov spends almost all his time imagining the murder in vivid detail. And there's a view of himself as larger than life. A heroic individual. He says, "I have learned to chatter this last month, lying for days together in my den, thinking of Jack the giant killer." And yet he's not about to slay a giant. He's about to slaughter an old woman, however cantankerous and atrabilious and obnoxious. Still, just an old woman. But he loves the idea of the extraordinary man and the man who is a law unto himself. This is his compensatory response to his own perceived sense of inferiority, to use Adler's term, to a bad object¹⁹. The bad object inside him, the constellation of voices and introjects that keep informing him how worthless he is, how bad he is, how useless he is, how inadequate, what a failure. He needs to confront these voices before they drown him out,

¹⁹ According to Adler, individuals often develop feelings of inferiority stemming from early childhood experiences and interactions. These feelings can lead to a compensatory drive for superiority and power, often manifesting as attempts to prove oneself through extraordinary actions or beliefs. Cf. Adler (1927).

overwhelm him, destroy him, drive him to insanity and to psychosis. And the only way to do this is to show them, to demonstrate to them exhibitionistically, that he is exactly the opposite. He is a moral hero in that he transcends human laws. He explains in the novel,

An extraordinary man has the right that is not an official right but an inner right to decide in his own consciousness to overstep certain obstacles and only in case it is essential for the practical fulfillment of an idea or the benefit of the whole of humanity.

And so there are extraordinary humans. And Raskolnikov is one of them. People like Lycurgus, Solon, Mohammed, Napoleon. He says these are extraordinary humans because they're not controlled by society-implemented super-ego. He doesn't use the word super-ego, of course. That's Freud's invention, but the equivalent. Society's voice, socialization, society's edicts. These men, explains Raskolnikov, were all without exception criminals from the very fact that making a new law, they transgressed the ancient law. And they did not stop shorted bloodshed either if that bloodshed were of use to their cause, and he admires them for that because he's aggressive. The aggressive instinct plays a huge role in Raskolnikov's life, and it is coupled with a libidinal instinct.

Raskolnikov's life force is the death force. It's the only force that operates inside him and keeps him alive somehow. He says, "I didn't go out for days together and I wouldn't work. I wouldn't even eat. I just lay there doing nothing." Raskolnikov's avoidance and withdrawal from the world. He wants to escape from the relentless eyes of others, but also from society as it is internalized in his mind, for example, his conscience. He wants to erase any hint of others. He wants, in short, to remain the only human being, a solipsistic aspiration which would render him automatically extraordinary. His conception of crime is an experiment, but not an experiment on others. An experiment on himself. Is he truly one of these extraordinary individuals? Is he really affected by society's voice, the relentless voice in his head? Or can he overcome it? Is any extraordinary man in history a done? Can he commit a crime and bloodshed in order to transcend existing law and put down a new law, establish a new ideology, start a new movement and a new idea? Coming to think of it, Raskolnikov was a prototype of Adolf Hitler, of Vladimir

Lenin, and similar people. People who gave rise to fascism, Mussolini, Nazism, communism, all these “isms”, they, exactly like Raskolnikov, considered themselves extraordinary men, and we, the ordinary, had to pay the price.

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