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Ideological Infection in Dostoevsky's "Demons"

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Ideological Infection
in Dostoevsky's *Demons*

Senior Project submitted to
the Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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This project is dedicated to my parents, Sarah and Tom Reed,
for their endless love and support.

I owe many thanks to my tireless advisor, the noble protectress of letters Marina Van Zuylen, for her many revisions, and for being a constant source of inspiration. Life has not been the same since *Don Quixote* (as Dostoevsky would understand). I also owe thanks to Marina Kostalevsky for her extremely helpful comments. I would like to thank all of the professors who have inspired me during my four lucky years here, particularly Liz Frank, Daniel Mendelsohn, Bruce Chilton, and Alex Benson.

“The revolutionary enters the world of the State, of the privileged class, of the so-called civilization, and he lives in this world only for the purposes of bringing about its speedy and total destruction. He is not a revolutionary if he has any sympathy for this world. He should not hesitate to destroy any position, and place, or any man in this world. He must hate everyone and everything in it with equal hatred.”

—Sergei Nechaev, “The Revolutionary Catechism,” 1869

“Don’t worry Donny, they’re nihilists. These men are cowards.”

—Walter Sobchak, *The Big Lebowski*

Table of Contents

Instead of an Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Delusion.....	32
Chapter Two: Infection.....	66
Chapter Three: Death	101
Conclusion.....	121

Instead of an Introduction:

Dostoevsky and Ideology

The writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky illuminate an invisible process that has often swayed the course of history: the development of ideas and ideology. It is often remarked that Dostoevsky's characters are representative of ideas that are tested and developed through the action of his novels. To those unfamiliar with his fiction, this may sound like a critique, suggesting that his protagonists are flat and polemical. Nothing could be further from the truth—Dostoevsky's protagonists are animated by ideas, and this is what makes them so compelling.

Dostoevsky rejected the label of a literary psychologist, yet he was passionately interested in the psychology of his characters. He considered himself an “idealist” who depicted a deeper level of reality than was thought possible through traditional forms of realism. By investigating the ideas that drive his characters, and exposing the psychological dynamics of their inner struggles, Dostoevsky strove to illustrate the developing ideas of his era—a process that he believed was best explored through fiction. He explains his unique literary approach in one of his letters:

I have absolutely different notions of reality and realism from what our realists and critics do. My idealism is more real than theirs. Lord! If one tells the story simply of what we Russians have been through the last ten years in our spiritual development—won't the realists in fact yell that it's a fantasy! And meanwhile, it is the original, the real realism. That in fact is what realism is, only deeper... With

their realism you can't explain a hundredth part of real, actually occurring facts. But with our idealism we have even prophesied facts.¹

Through his treatment of the nihilist movement of the late 1800's Dostoevsky is often read as prophesying the development of Communism in Russia and other forms of political extremism which took hold in Europe in the decades following his death. The treatment of the writer as a Biblical-style prophet who predicts major historical and spiritual events has a long tradition in Russian letters, and Dostoevsky engaged with this tradition to create an image of himself as a literary prophet.² Dostoevsky's work continues to be treated in a prophetic mode in both Russian and Western criticism.³ However, to anticipate is not to prophesize: it is a mistreatment of Dostoevsky's work to read it merely as political and historic prophecy, or to treat the author as a prophet who was able to predict the future.

Indeed, such an approach would be the very type of over-determined allegorical reading that Dostoevsky explicitly warns us against in *Demons*. This novel (also often translated as *The Possessed* or *The Devils*) presents a model of ideological development which is complex, opaque, and web-like, rather than linear and direct. Imagine the development of ideas as a subway map. Rather than presenting one line of movement, Dostoevsky shows a series of interconnected stops and routes. No particular point on the map guarantees arrival at another because each stop is connected to multiple transit lines. Using the theory put forward by Gilles Deleuze

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Fyodor Dostoevsky, Complete Letters*, trans. David Allan Lowe (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1991), 3:114.

² Pamela Davidson, "The Validation of the Writer's Prophetic Status in the Russian Literary Tradition: From Pushkin and Iazykov through Gogol to Dostoevsky," *The Russian Review* 62, no. 4 (October 2003): 508, 512.

³ See Alain Besançon, *The Rise of the Gulag: Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, trans. Sarah Matthews (New York: Continuum, 1981), 137.

as a starting point, I will call this the “rhizomic” model of ideology.⁴ Because this model operates in a multi-linear and unpredictable manner, it rejects the premise that any development is “inevitable.” Thus, despite the prophetic aura that surrounds Dostoevsky’s writing, I will argue that *Demons* is a novel which is anticipatory of the political and religious crises which have plagued Western culture since (at least) the 1800’s, rather than a prophetic treatment of a specific dark future. While a prophetic reading of Dostoevsky’s work would focus on his *foreshadowing* of future events, I find that Gary Saul Morson’s notion of “sideshadowing” better describes Dostoevsky’s method. As Morson explains, “in sideshadowing, two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible.”⁵ In other words, Dostoevsky has an open rather than pre-determined sense of history.

It is, however, undeniable that Dostoevsky anticipated an ominous future for the nihilist and utopian movements. Writing in his weekly editorial column *Diary of a Writer* about one rural village’s descent into depravity, Dostoevsky noted “these are but insignificant events compared with the innumerable horrors of the future.”⁶ However, Dostoevsky did not pretend to know what form these future horrors would take or when they would occur—as he wrote, “it seems foolish to speculate as to what is going to happen in ten years or by the end of the century.”⁷ As tempting as it is to read passages of *Demons* as predicting the future horrors of Hitlerism,

⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁵ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 118.

⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1:187. The specific “crime” that Dostoevsky was writing about here was a group of rural villagers who decided to save the local tavern instead of the church during a fire.

⁷ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:101.

Stalinism, and yes, even Trumpism, *Demons* must be understood as a visionary rather than prophetic treatment of ideological extremism.

Of all his great novels that address the pernicious effects of ideology, from *Notes from Underground*, to *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, none is a more careful study than his masterpiece of 1871, *Demons*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the larger portion of Dostoevsky's literary project, from his 1864 novella *Notes from Underground* on, is dedicated to an attack on the nihilist ideology and "type." The expression "nihilist" was popularized by Dostoevsky's literary rival Turgenev to describe the young radicals who believed in "scientific" forms of progress and rejected traditional forms of authority such as family structure and religion. The term "nihilist" was and continues to be used broadly. For Dostoevsky, a nihilist was not someone who lacks belief in anything, but the type of ideologue who believes that civilization must be destroyed before it can be reformed.

In the scope of his literary battle against nihilism, *Demons* may be considered the point of Dostoevsky's sword; in this novel we find the most forceful and direct treatment of his ideological targets. Dostoevsky makes the personal stakes of this novel clear in his personal letters, at one point explaining that he is not writing it for money, "but exactly the opposite."⁸ The connection between *Demons* and Dostoevsky's earlier attacks on nihilism is evident from one of the earliest references to the novel in his correspondence: "I have tackled a rich idea... Like *Crime and Punishment*, but even closer to reality, more vital, and having direct relevance

⁸ Translation of this letter from Joseph Frank's, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 349.

for the most contemporary issue... it's a very burning issue. Never have I worked with such enjoyment and such ease."⁹

This attitude of ease towards his subject would not last for long—Dostoevsky quickly reverted to his usual mode of self-doubt and torment concerning the novel. As one biographer of Dostoevsky writes, “besides editorial pressure, work on *The Devils [Demons]* was hampered by Dostoevsky’s usual tormenting conditions over financial uncertainty, a nostalgia for the homeland verging on melancholia, and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war.”¹⁰

This description of Dostoevsky’s struggles surrounding the composition of *Demons* is a severe understatement. Dostoevsky began the novel while living abroad in Europe, where he had been forced to move in order to escape his creditors and the grim prospect of debtor’s prison in Russia. While living abroad in Geneva, Dostoevsky and his wife Anna lost their three month old daughter Sonya to an illness, possibly pneumonia. Dostoevsky partly blamed himself for her death, as he was unable to secure the funds for a warmer apartment. Dostoevsky’s description of his daughter’s death is truly heartbreaking, revealing his deep sentimentality and life-long adoration of children.¹¹ To add insult to tragedy, his relations with his extended family had become so strained at this point that he did not even inform them of Sonya’s death because he believed they would have no sympathy for him. Writing to his friend Maikov, Dostoevsky explained; “Don’t pass on the news about my Sonya dying to any of my relatives if you see

⁹ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:235.

¹⁰ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 413.

¹¹ “That little three-month-old creature, so poor, so tiny, was already a personality and a character for me. She was beginning to know and love me and to smile when I approached. when I sang songs to her with my funny voice she loved to listen to them. She didn’t cry and frown when I kissed her; she would stop crying when I approached. And now people tell me by way of consolation that I’ll have more children. But where is Sonya?” Dostoyevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:76.

them. At least I wouldn't like them to know about this for a while, including of course, Pasha.¹² I think that not only will none of them feel bad about my child, but perhaps even the contrary, and the thought of that alone enrages me."¹³

Given these circumstances, Dostoevsky's nostalgia for his homeland was well past the point of "melancholia" and veering towards complete despair during 1870. His letters reveal a burning desire to return to Russia, a theme which he harps on continually. Dostoevsky intended *Demons* to be a kaleidoscopic examination of the forces and ideas which he saw pushing the younger Russian generation towards extremism, madness, and suicide. He read all of the Russian newspapers and journals he could get, clipping and saving stories that related to his theme. However, the snippets of weeks-old news and pieces of correspondence that he managed to gather were insufficient material for this massive project. As he explained in a letter to his favorite niece, "I can't write it here; for that I definitely have to be in Russia, to see, hear, and participate in Russian life directly..."¹⁴ To seriously confront the forces of extremism and nihilism in Russia, Dostoevsky felt he had to examine his enemy from up close, rather than making observations from Europe, as he derided other Russian authors such as Turgenev and Herzen for doing. Dostoevsky's European xenophobia became increasingly rabid during his stay on the continent, and this attitude is visible throughout *Demons*. In the novel, Europe is designated as the origin of many of the dangerous ideas and attitudes being taken up by Russians.

¹² Dostoevsky's neer-do-well nephew, Pavel Isaev, whom he felt obligated to watch over after the death of his brother Mikhail in 1864.

¹³ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:77.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:144.

In tackling this “burning” contemporary Russian issue, Dostoevsky grappled with and expressed ideas totally antithetical to his own. His remarkable talent in this vein is part of what makes him such a master portraitist of ideology. The speeches of atheists and nihilists in his novels are often so forceful and compelling that it is often hard to believe that they came from the pen of a Christian.¹⁵ Dostoevsky’s literature transcends the narrow limitations of any particular ideology and portrays a universe of competing and contradictory ideas. To use the terms put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s work is polyphonic and dialogic.¹⁶ He engages a diverse chorus of voices, and presents dualistic rather than singular interpretations.¹⁷

In this sense, Dostoevsky’s “dialogic” narrative approach is adversarial to the object of his study: the “monological” force of ideological thought. Although this project is not an examination of Dostoevsky’s narrative form, it is worth noting that the narrator of this novel is somewhat at odds with the political interests of the novel. The narrator of the novel is also a character, although he tends to remain in the background. He says that he is a friend of the character Stepan Trofimovich, and is a fringe member of some of the radical circles that meet in the novel. The narrator often casts uncertainty on events, stitching together scenes he witnessed with stories he claims (often unbelievably), to have learned later. Dostoevsky intended this narrator to be representative of a “provincial chronicler,” reflecting the gossipy and

¹⁵ While Dostoevsky struggled with religious belief his entire life, he undoubtedly considered himself a devout Christian, although his sense of Christianity is somewhat remote from a modern Western standpoint. Throughout his vacillations of belief, Dostoevsky always remained devoted to Christ. In modern terms, we might call Dostoevsky a “Jesus freak.” As Besançon writes, his particular form of belief “was more Christism than Christianity” *Gulag*, 139.

¹⁶ See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁷ “Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality.” Bakhtin, *Poetics*, 30.

claustrophobic feeling of a small town.¹⁸ The narrator consistently undermines the political nature of the novel, and thus takes some of the polemical edge off Dostoevsky's initial plan.

While he often conceived of his novels as attacks on particular ideologies and positions, in the development of these novels Dostoevsky always expanded them beyond their original targets. *Demons* began as a polemical work, but the final novel is far more ambiguous.

Dostoevsky's treatment of his ideological opponents is never merely censorious—even at his most bitter and extreme, Dostoevsky's condemnation of ideology rarely becomes a condemnation of the individual, reflecting his Christian belief in condemning the sin rather than the sinner.¹⁹ This is certainly true of Dostoevsky's treatment of the cast of *Demons*, made up of older liberals, younger nihilists, and a motley crew of criminals, drunks, students, and outcasts who are not quite sure what they believe, but are in a frenzy to arrive at their own conclusions. While Dostoevsky portrays the failings and crimes of these characters, he also retains a degree of sympathy for even the most monstrous among them.

“An Old Nechaevist:” Dostoevsky's Experiences with Radicalism

Dostoevsky originally conceived of this ungainly masterpiece as a literary version of a political “pamphlet.”²⁰ In a letter describing his early work on the novel, Dostoevsky writes that it

¹⁸ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 473.

¹⁹ As harsh as his condemnation of ideology may be, Dostoevsky always reserves sympathy and even respect for those with whom he disagrees. For example, while Dostoevsky brutally satirizes the socialist thinker Chernyshevsky and his novel *What is to be Done?* (in both *Demons* and *Notes from Underground* in particular), he was never personally disrespectful towards Chernyshevsky in his public writing. For example, in one editorial Dostoevsky writes that “Chernyshevsky never offended me by his convictions. One can very much respect a man, even though radically disagreeing with his ideas.” Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:29.

²⁰ Cited in Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 403.

as “a tendentious piece; I want to state my opinions fervently. (The nihilists and Westernizers will start yelling about me that I’m a reactionary!) But to hell with them— I’ll state my opinions down to the last word.”²¹

Demons certainly gave the Westernizers and nihilists plenty to howl about. However, while the novel is a harsh attack on both the liberals of the 1840’s and the nihilists of the 60’s, it is not an unsympathetic portrait of either generation. As the American Dostoevsky scholar Joseph Frank noted about *Demons*, “it turned out to be impossible for Dostoevsky to write a novel that would be *only* a politically satiric denunciation of the Nihilist generation.”²² Dostoevsky’s art is too nuanced to be merely “tendentious,” as he modestly calls his initial plan.

While the writer had a great deal to condemn in both the liberal and nihilistic generations, he also identified with many of their positions. Frank writes that he “shared both the antipathy of the ‘sons’ for the pampered, pretentious, self-indulgent Westerners of the 1840s and the aversion of the ‘fathers’ for the provocatively insulting vulgarity and materialistic coarseness of their Nihilistic offspring.”²³ These sympathies and antipathies were borne from deep personal experience.

Dostoevsky maintained both conservative and liberal positions during his lifetime and had his own beliefs put through the proverbial test of fire. In his early years as a writer and editor he held liberal and reformist views, for which he was made to pay a steep price. Dostoevsky was deeply opposed to serfdom and the excessive cruelties of Russian Tsardom as a young man, and was a magazine editor and member of literary circles which shared these views during the 1840s.

²¹ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:246.

²² Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 409.

²³ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 455.

When one of these circles was infiltrated in the spring of 1849, Dostoevsky was arrested and sentenced to death. On December 23rd of that year, dressed only in a rough tunic to protect him against the freezing Russian winter, Dostoevsky was led out into the courtyard of Semyonov Place in St. Petersburg, tied to a post, and blindfolded. The order was given to fire. Dostoevsky peered through his blindfold at the gleaming dome of a Russian Orthodox church, waiting for the fateful bullet. But instead of a cascade of shots, he heard only a drum-roll announcing an arriving messenger.

The messenger delivered the news that the execution had been lifted by the Tsar, and the “conspirators” were untied and led back to their cells. Many of Dostoevsky’s compatriots lost fingers and toes as a result of frostbite while awaiting their execution, and others even lost their minds afterwards. While the fake execution was a deeply traumatic experience for Dostoevsky, he looked back on it with a strange sense of thankfulness as a crucial turning point in his spiritual awakening. The moments in which Dostoevsky awaited his death while staring up at a Russian church had a lasting influence on his life and writing, and the trauma of this experience is re-cast in various forms throughout his novels.

Following his mock-execution, Dostoevsky was given the more “lenient” penalty of five years hard labor in Siberia, plus five years compulsory military service after his sentence. He later learned that the entire affair was a ruse schemed up by the Tsar himself, and that there had never been any plan to execute to him. It was merely an exercise in intimidation, a public warning for other would-be radicals.

During his years of imprisonment, Dostoevsky saw firsthand the gaping chasm between the idealized notions of Russian communes held by aristocratic liberals like Alexander Herzen,

and the actual beliefs and needs of the common people. One fundamental difference between these two groups, whom for the sake of generality and clarity I call the Russian intelligentsia and the “common people,” was that of religion. While the intelligentsia claimed to derive inspiration from the ostensibly socialist practices of Russian villages, they consistently undermined and ignored the Orthodox faith of the common people. Dostoevsky took great umbrage at this tendency of the intelligentsia to praise an idealized notion of Russian society while denying and ignoring its underlying religious values.²⁴ He remarked that the intelligentsia tended to admire the Russian people only as a “theory,” and not as they truly were.²⁵

Because of the gulf between the Russian liberal intelligentsia and the common people, Dostoevsky believed these intellectuals could only have a backwards and undermining effect on Russian society. Dostoevsky expresses this view in a letter from February of 1861, writing “the Russian liberal cannot be considered anything other than inveterate and retrograde. They are what was formerly the so-called ‘educated society,’ a collection of people who have renounced everything from Russia, who don’t understand her and who have become Frenchified... Well, the hell with them!”²⁶ While Dostoevsky expresses his refusal to have “any dealings” with these liberal Westernizers later in this same letter, his anger belies his earlier identification and continuing sympathy with liberal values.

His years of imprisonment in Siberia marked the beginning of a long and torturous process of conversion to the conservative Slavophile perspective expressed in this letter. During

²⁴ See Dostoevsky’s plea to the Russian intelligentsia in his *Diary*, 1:452— “Please give thought to Orthodoxy: it is by no means merely churchism and ritualism. It is a live sentiment which, in our people, has become one of those basic living forces without which nations cannot exist.”

²⁵ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:204

²⁶ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3: 27.

his life, Dostoevsky had known both the earnest idealism of the liberal generation associated with the 1840's, as well as the harsh realities of peasant and convict life. From his own experiences as a member of the "educated class" in prison, he understood the general antipathy of the common people towards their aristocratic well-wishers. In this, Dostoevsky was able to bridge a cultural and class gap that was nearly impassable during his lifetime—that between the common people and the intelligentsia.²⁷ Because of his unique dual perspective, Dostoevsky was supremely qualified for his artistic quest to dismantle the unreal fantasies of both the liberals and "nihilists." However harsh his broadsides against these ideologies may be, he never lost his feeling of sympathy for the idealism that motivated them. Frank writes that "Dostoevsky always tried to maintain a balance between his opposition to revolutionary agitation and his recognition of the moral idealism that often inspired those who stirred up its flames."²⁸ The facts of his biography and evolving beliefs could hardly have allowed for any other position than that of both opposition to and recognition of the growing ideologies of his time.

Dostoevsky was particularly tortured by his realization that many of the people drawn into monstrous forms of political extremism and violence were hardly monsters themselves. According to him, it is more often the well-intentioned and well-educated who are goaded into acts of terrorism. In his one of his editorials, Dostoevsky disputed the assertion that the majority of terrorists and radicals are either villainous "good for nothings," or simply uneducated. Using the expression "Nechaevist" to broadly connote any radical leftists, (Sergei Nechaev was a terrorist and nihilist leader upon whom the nihilist character Pyotr Stepanovich is loosely based),

²⁷ See Abbott Gleason, *Young Russia: The Genesis of Russian Radicalism in the 1860s* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 17.

²⁸ Joseph Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 500.

he writes; “Do you really and truthfully believe that the proselytes who some Nechaev in our midst could manage to recruit are necessarily good for nothings? I do not believe it: not all of them. I am an old “Nechaevist” myself, I also stood on that scaffold, condemned to death; and I assure you that I stood there in the company of educated people.”²⁹ Dostoevsky’s observation that extremists and terrorists (and terrorist leaders in particular), are most often cultivated from among the well-to do and well-educated continues to resonate.³⁰ The “proselytes” he refers to as being so easily recruited for terrorist causes are not malicious degenerates, but liberals, reformists, and young idealists—the type of young people who are easily recognizable on college campuses all across the world today.

Part of the enduring horror conveyed by *Demons* is that it is “educated people” just like Dostoevsky who are most ready to plunge a knife into an innocent man in the name of some greater cause. The writer’s observation in this regard remains salient: a sober analysis of most contemporary terrorist movements will reveal that they are fed by those whose aim is not to increase, but eliminate human suffering. Further along in the same column, Dostoevsky explains that his urge to explain this paradox was a central reason for writing *Demons*:

In my novel *Demons* I made the attempt to depict the manifold and heterogenous motives which may prompt the purest of heart and the most naive people to take part in the perpetration of so monstrous a villainy. The horror lies precisely in the fact that in our midst the filthiest and most villainous act may be committed by one who is not a villain at all!³¹

²⁹ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:147.

³⁰ Nina Pelikan Straus explicitly draws the connection between the nihilists of *Demons* and modern terrorist groups in her article "From Dostoevsky to Al-Qaeda: What Fiction Says to Social Science," *Common Knowledge* 12, no. 2 (2006): 197-213, Project MUSE.

³¹ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:149.

Defining Ideology

Before dealing with the way ideology is treated in *Demons*, we must determine what ideology actually is, and how Dostoevsky conceived of it. Ideology is typically defined as a set of ideas or beliefs that determine one's behavior. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ideology as "a systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct. Also: the forming or holding of such a scheme of ideas." This definition conceives of ideology as an inter-related set of ideas or beliefs which together form a coherent world view.

This definition is not the most useful for considering such radicals as Pyotr Stepanovich or Nikolai Stavrogin, the destructive young nihilists of *Demons*. The dictionary entry reveals a confusion in terminology which is suggestive of the fundamentally transgressive nature of ideology. First ideology is described as a "scheme of ideas," then as a "set of beliefs." But there is an important, although blurred, difference between ideas and beliefs: ideas belong to the realm of reason, while beliefs are connected to faith. If we are engaging in a rational dialogue, we can be persuaded away from our ideas with facts and arguments. This is not the case with beliefs, which are rooted in a sense of faith which lies beyond the scope of reason. The use of both "ideas" and "beliefs" to describe ideology suggests that ideology is belief masquerading as reason, which is somewhat true. Ideology can be conceived of as a religious reverence towards ideas, and we see ideology in this form in *Demons*. For Dostoevsky, ideology is a dangerous and inadequate substitute for religion. However, we cannot boil down ideology to a mere *set* of beliefs because there is a fundamental difference between belief and ideology; ideology is not merely the plural of belief. We might say that the ideologue is a believer, but she would disagree,

she believes she *knows*. The ideologue pronounces herself factually and ontologically correct, and claims an empirical basis for her ideology, however vague it may be. The believer, on the other hand, acknowledges that her belief is an act of faith which is not subject to empirical proof or reasoning.

Pyotr Stepanovich and Nikolai Stavrogin *act* as ideologues in the sense that they act with certainty, but neither have more than the faint outlines of a consistent ideological schema. Pyotr Stepanovich nefariously gives voice to many positions to manipulate the citizens of his town, but he believes in nothing other than destruction. Stavrogin also ventriloquizes many beliefs, yet despite his best efforts, he finds himself ultimately incapable of holding any belief. Unlike his compatriot, Stavrogin is in search of belief; he is trying to discover whether he can live beyond the constraints of human morality, and what the basis for this new existence might be. Despite the important psychological differences between these two nihilists, they exert the same influence on their world—they are destroyers.

When Fedka, a recently returned convict and murderer, tells Stavrogin that he is hard up on funds, Stavrogin only has four words of advice for him— “kill more, steal more.” Fedka responds, “That’s the same thing Pyotr Stepanovich advises me, sir, word for word just what you say.”³² Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin may not hold belief in a coherent ideological system themselves, but they are able to inspire ideology in others, and when it comes time to act, they promote the same violence without hesitation.

We must use an alternate definition of “ideology” to describe these young extremists because their type of ideology is not dependent on belief (which is always somewhat

³² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 280.

inscrutable), but on action. I propose that the defining characteristic of ideology is not belief but certainty. This is a more useful definition of ideology, because it encompasses those who act ideologically, but who are not necessarily intellectuals or thinkers themselves. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky describes the Fedkas of the world, those who come under the influence of the ideological “vanguard,” as “scum:” “This scum, which exists in every society, rises to the surface in any transitional time, and not only has no goal, but has not even the inkling of an idea... And yet this scum, without knowing it almost always falls under the command of the “vanguard” which acts with a definite goal.”³³ Dostoevsky’s “scum” is the raw material of revolution. The vast majority of extremists in our world fall into this category.

Ideology is an input-output machine for the human soul, and this is why Dostoevsky titled his novel *Demons*. The *Demons* of the title are not characters within the novel, but the ideas which infect them. These ideas that slowly transmute into ideologies have an inherently parasitic relation to those who live by, or more accurately, within them. In his study of the development of the Leninist ideology, *The Rise of the Gulag*, Alain Besançon elucidates a concept of ideology quite similar to Dostoevsky’s. It is a mark of Dostoevsky’s acumen that Besançon draws upon his writing to explain events of the 20th century (and Besançon is hardly alone in this).³⁴

Like Dostoevsky, Besançon conceives of ideology as an infection within the human mind: “to adapt a phrase of Spinoza’s, they [the dialectical materialist ideologues] do not think,

³³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 462.

³⁴ E.g., Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: Norton, 2000). Conquest’s book draws extensively on *Demons* to explain the ideologies of both the Nazis and Communists in the 20th century.

but *it thinks them*. The scheme is in possession of their thinking.”³⁵ Besançon is here writing about a specific type of Hegelian materialist ideologue (a type which Dostoevsky portrays in numerous forms in *Demons*), but his point is applicable to ideology in general. Given any set of circumstances, an absolute ideology will provide a “correct” response, thus it is the ideology rather than the individual that does the thinking. Ideological thought is the opposite of humility — ideology, in its complete form, provides the answers to all moral, spiritual, and political questions, and allows for no variance. This is why it is impossible to argue with a true ideologue —any new or conflicting information is either rejected or synthesized within the ideological schema. Ideology strives towards totality, and to govern all outcomes and behaviors.

In its most advanced form, ideology annihilates the human will. While I tend to think of ideology as an intellectual infection, Dostoevsky emphasized it as a spiritual malady. Whether or not we conceive of it in secular terms, it is obvious that it is often a fatal condition to both the ideologue and her victims. Dostoevsky expresses the destructive nature of ideological thought in one of his weekly columns: “We have many inappropriate ideas, and that is what oppresses one. In Russia an idea crashes upon a man as an enormous stone and half crushes him. And so he shrivels under it, knowing not how to extricate himself. One fellow is willing to live, though in half crushed state; but another is unwilling and kills himself.”³⁶ In *Demons*, we meet many such men who are crushed by fallen stones, some whom are willing to live, and others who are not. The similarity between them is that they are all suffering under the weight of what Dostoevsky

³⁵ Besançon, *Gulag*, 49. (My italics)

³⁶ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:336.

calls “inappropriate ideas,” ideological forms of thought which repulse them and make them act contrary to their own interests, but from which they cannot escape.

Using our proposed definition of ideology as certainty, we can speak of Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin as ideologues despite their lack of positive belief. If ideology is the intellectual mechanism which allows one to act with absolute determination, and both Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich act in this manner, it follows that there must be an ideological mechanism (even if a half-formed one) behind their actions. Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin behave as ideologues, but in the actual exposition of their own ideology, we can only speak of them as being proto-ideologues. Both subscribe to a crude ideology of destruction, without specifying what shall follow after. Their blankly catastrophic vision is echoed in the lines of the Russian version of the Communist Internationale, “we will destroy this world of violence/ down to the foundations, and then/ build a new world.” Planning is for reactionaries, while violence is the only path for true revolutionaries. We can see the reflections of Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin’s nihilistic proto-ideology in fascistic leaders today who are far from ideological puritans, but follow an agenda of authoritarianism and violence.

Pyotr Stepanovich is an ideologically motivated character, working towards his goal of razing civilization. However, he is an outlier—most of the characters are not truly ideologues. Despite being obsessed (or oppressed) by certain ideas, even my revised definition of ideology does not fit comfortably all the characters of this book. This is because Dostoevsky’s characters are still developing their ideas—Dostoevsky is writing from an era in the 1800’s in which the ideologies of nihilism, socialism, and communism were still evolving. For this reason, I mostly refer to the characters as having ideological *tendencies* rather than being ideologues

themselves. I call these ideological forms of thought “unreal thinking” because they are fundamentally divorced from our shared physical and political realities, as well as the inner realities which drive us towards empathy and compassion. We can see various forms of unreal thinking in all the generations and “types” present in this novel, from the utopian fantasies of Stepan Trofimovich, to the obsessive allegories of his sons.

Besançon’s description of the 1860’s Russian radicals fits Dostoevsky’s revolutionaries fairly well: they are extremists who precede the complete formation of their ideology. As Besançon explains, “a type of ideological revolutionary developed in the 1860s, before an ideology had been worked out — the conviction that it could be was enough — or any coherent political programme. For a few years here and there militants sprang up without any doctrine and without any programme, practicing action for action’s sake.”³⁷ Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin are these militants who Besançon describes as practicing not just “action”, but also destruction for it’s own sake.

Far more dangerous than any of the acts of murder and arson that these nihilists inspire are the ideas they spread. What is so nefarious about the ideas spread by Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin is that they are precisely *not* a unified ideology. There is little consistency to their ideas because they tailor them to the individual. We should not confuse the ideas spread by these extremists as being representative of *their own* ideas (although there is some bleeding between the two). Rather, the infectious ideas spread by these two nihilists are tools used to achieve their goal of societal collapse. Besançon elucidates this concept of ideology as an infection in his work on the origins of Leninism:

³⁷ Besançon, *Gulag*, 49.

The history of ideology could be compared to the different successive stages in the lives of certain parasites, which go through a cycle which is apparently capricious, but which is in fact necessary to their complete development. They must, for instance, go through a river mollusk, and then pass into a sheep, and finally lodge, not without deleterious effects, in the body of a human, whence they will return to the river. At every change of location, there is an equivalent change of form.³⁸

Besançon describes the ideological parasite as a creature that is impossible to eradicate. Because it exists in multiple hosts, the death of one does not extinguish the parasite. Furthermore, the parasite is constantly adapting and becoming harder to resist as it passes from host to host, just like a viral infection. Besançon's conception of the idea as a "parasite" is similar to Dostoevsky's portrayal of the idea as a "demon," first suggested in the opening epigraph to the novel:

Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled, and and told it in the city and in the country. Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. And those who had seen it told them how he who had been possessed with demons was healed.³⁹

The Luke passage seems to imply that the demons are killed by Christ when they are exorcised into the herd of swine who then drown in the lake. But in fact, it was only the swine and not the demons who are drowned—it was believed during the time of the Gospels that demons naturally resided in water, so Jesus had only temporarily exorcised rather than destroyed them.⁴⁰ Besançon

³⁸ Besançon, *Gulag*, 19.

³⁹Luke 8:32-36, KJV.

⁴⁰ For more on the history of exorcism, see Graham H. Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1985).

and Dostoevsky conceive of ideology as a kind of demon or parasite that cannot be fully destroyed, but only temporarily subdued. In both of these passages, the infectious agent is left in the water where it can fester and wait for a new host.

The Rhizome

The spread of ideology cannot be understood by a straight-forward or direct model of inheritance, such as the model we create when mapping a family tree. Rather, the spread of ideology occurs in a way that is multi-faceted and often inscrutable. This is the model that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze labels the “rhizome.” As Deleuze describes it, “a rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles.”⁴¹ The spread of ideas and ideology is best understood through this rhizomic model. Deleuze explains that the rhizome cannot be traced directly to one root or source. Because the spread of the rhizome occurs subterraneously, its path cannot be fully traced, and thus it “is not amenable to any structural or generative model.”⁴² The rhizome is not linked to other rhizomes in a chain, but in a complex web. In thinking about ideas as rhizomes, it is helpful to imagine the spread of ideas as moving through an underground network similar to the kind that exists in forests.

Scientists have discovered that trees are not solitary forms of life that merely collect water and nutrients from their own roots. Rather, in most forests, all of the trees are connected with one another via a complex system of underground roots.⁴³ Trees share vital nutrients with

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 49.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

⁴³ *Radiolab*, "From Tree to Shining Tree," episode 19, WNYC, July 30, 2016, hosted by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich.

one another via these underground connections, so that minerals that are only found directly under one tree will eventually turn up in others miles away. Where the mineral originally came from cannot be determined with any certainty, because the nutrients shared between trees go through this massive web before arriving at their final destination—any of the trees could have been the original source.

If ideas are spread in a similar way, then we have no hope of ever tracing an idea back to its “original” source. Each idea is transformed not only by the host who accepts it, but by its complex and subterranean method of transmission. Furthermore, even if we could identify the original source of any idea, killing the source would in no way guarantee the extermination of the idea. Attempting to eradicate the sources of ideas in human societies is especially counter-effective, for as Dostoevsky pointed out, most humans have a inherent attraction to martyrs.⁴⁴ Killing the human sources of ideas tends to simply spread them farther, as proven by the history of most religions. To return to the analogy of the forest, let’s say there was one toxic nutrient infecting the entire forest ecosystem as it was being spread along the trees’ network. Even if a group of ecologists is able to identify and remove the tree responsible for spreading this toxin, it is too late to remove the poison because it has already entered the network. The virus will eventually re-appear in other trees when it is passed along, and even if these trees are also killed, it will continue to spread.

Thinking about ideology as a parasite which develops out these underground “rhizomic” networks, it is easy to see the liberal and nihilistic generations as representing early stages of this disease. This would explain why Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin are so clearly infected with

⁴⁴ See Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:572.

idea-parasites, but are unable to elucidate any coherent ideology themselves: their disease has not yet assumed its complete form. As Besançon notes, the ideology-parasite changes form as it moves through bodies, and it is not fully developed in any of the forms we see it in *Demons*. However, the rhizomic model of infection rejects any one-directional route of development—it has neither a single origin nor a final destination. It cannot be that the liberal generation of the 40's is the *sole* source for the nihilism of the 60's. A close reading of *Demons* reveals this to be the case; the liberals of the 40's are not the original sources of the infection, but contracted their disease from a myriad of European sources. Stepan Trofimovich is not the beginning of the ideological disease, and his students do not represent its end. Both are merely precursors to a larger infection.

From Enlightenment to Despotism

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky illustrates the paradox that the ideas of the European enlightenment which expound freedom and equality for humans often turn into instruments of despotism. This development from enlightenment to violence was already visible in the 18th century from the history of the French revolution, and Dostoevsky anticipated a similarly bleak future for ensuing utopian movements. As one character who is struggling to develop his own ideology within the novel admits, “I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion directly contradicts the original idea from which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism.”⁴⁵ Reading such passages, it is hard not to see an a startling prophecy of the future of Communism and other extremist movements.

⁴⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 402.

Importantly, Dostoevsky saw the psychological dynamics that allowed those with ideological positions to steamroll those with less absolute forms of belief. He understood the power of persuasion in extremism which moderation lacks. Consider one of the most chilling passages of the novel, in which Pyotr Stepanovich is trying to convince the members of his conspiratorial circle to murder someone whom he claims is an informer. After bullying the other members of the circle into silent acquiescence, a man named Virginsky stands up and makes his protest:

“I’m against it; I protest with my whole soul against such a bloody solution!” Virginsky rose from his place.
 “But?” Pyotr Stepanovich asked.
 “What *but*?”
 “You said *but*... so I’m waiting.”
 “I don’t think I said *but*... I simply wanted to say that if it’s decided on, then...”
 “Then?” [Said Pyotr].
 Virginsky fell silent.⁴⁶

This passage is one of the most illuminating in the novel in its portrayal of the power of extremism. When Virginsky’s timid ethics are pitted against Pyotr Stepanovich’s uncompromising theory of destruction, Virginsky immediately gives way. The ideologue always finds a way to insert this “but,” the seed of doubt that undermines moral convictions, in the minds of less resolute men. And almost everyone is less resolute than Pyotr Stepanovich.

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 402.

Slavophilism

While Dostoevsky's work often condemns and transcends ideology, he was not entirely free from the pull of unreal thinking himself—his fiction is highly informed by his Christian and Slavophile beliefs. Dostoevsky's major novels (and *Demons* in particular) reveal that even the most immoral and atheistic of his characters are constrained by Christian values. Dostoevsky's major nihilists, such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and Stavrogin in *Demons*, challenge the constraints of human morality and strive towards a vision that is, to use the expression of a philosopher who was himself influenced by Dostoevsky, "beyond good and evil."⁴⁷ However, not even nihilists are able to escape these boundaries, because for Dostoevsky life without faith "is unnatural, unthinkable, impossible."⁴⁸ In Dostoevsky's universe, as open-ended and polyphonic it may seem, the law of Christ remains as inescapable as the law of gravity.

The Christ-centric nature of Dostoevsky's work in some ways marks the limits of his exploration. No matter how independently Dostoevsky portrays other ideologies, they always exist in a universe that must subscribe to his own Christian dictates. Through the plot of *Demons*, Dostoevsky signals his belief that secular ideologies will always be a poor and perverse substitute for religious faith. For him, no one can be saved through secularism; all non-Christian

⁴⁷ Nietzsche actually took notes on Dostoevsky's *Demons*, which he used as a basis for sections of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. See Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1997), 155. The similarities between certain aspects of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche's thought is truly striking, giving their radically different perspectives. Both writers were pre-eminently concerned with the collapse of religious belief and tradition, what Nietzsche called "the death of God." As Paperno explains, "Both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky viewed the declaration that "God is dead" not as a dogmatic statement about supernatural reality, but as a diagnosis of the current psychological state of man. The death of God was an event in the history of human experience, a psychological fact." 157.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:538.

ideologies in the book end in either self-destruction or renunciation, proving his belief that life without Christ is “impossible.” Dostoevsky recognized the dangers of extremist and ideological thinking, but he was less cognizant of the similarities between his own utopian beliefs and the ideologies he fought against. As one scholar remarked, the “Slavophile ideas that affected him so powerfully had themselves contributed to the satanic social doctrine against which he fought so hard.”⁴⁹ While one can detect a certain amount of cognitive dissonance between the dogmatic views expressed in Dostoevsky’s letters and his battle against dogmatic ideologies in *Demons*, Dostoevsky did explore the dangerous possibilities of his own beliefs in this novel, as discussed in the following chapters.

Dostoevsky’s particular form of Slavophile belief is not only Christ-centered, but also infused with nationalism. This blending of spiritual and political beliefs, which is hardly foreign to contemporary politics, has a long tradition in Russia and was a dominant mode of conservatism during Dostoevsky’s lifetime. While I discuss Dostoevsky’s Slavophile views, I have avoided calling him an outright “Slavophile,” as this definition unnecessarily constrains the writer to one perspective. As he explained himself, “in many respects I hold Slavophile convictions, even though I am not quite a Slavophile.”⁵⁰ The Slavophile movement encompassed a number of views, but can be generally understood as a form of Russian patriotism mixed with Orthodox beliefs. Dostoevsky’s particular version of Slavophilism sets Russian orthodoxy as a supreme form of belief which will ignite a Christian renewal of the entire world. He elucidates his belief in the unique spiritual role of Russia in one of his letters to his editor, Apollon Maikov:

⁴⁹ Gleason, *Young Russia*, 122.

⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 2:779.

A great renewal of the Russian idea (which is tightly knit together with Orthodoxy, you're right) is being prepared for the whole world, and that will come to pass in a century or so—that is my passionate belief. But in order for this great matter to come to pass, the Great Russian tribe's political right and supremacy over the whole Slavic world has to be realized finally and unquestionably. (And our trashy little liberals preach the dissolution of Russia into confederate states! Oh, the shitheads!)⁵¹

Dostoevsky's Slavophile worldview places Russia at the center of the spiritual world, but this spiritual mission needs political supremacy in order to be enacted. There is a material dimension to Slavophilism, but it relies heavily on Orthodox mysticism and an appeal to emotion.⁵² While Slavophilism has some of the trappings of political ideology, such as an insistence on its correctness and the necessity of accepting its program, we cannot speak of Slavophilism as an absolute ideology such as Communism, nor as a proto-ideology similar to Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich's. In truth, Slavophilism lies somewhere on the continuum between religious belief and political ideology.

What Slavophilism has in common with political ideology is its tendency to rely on myths and simplistic formulas in order to answer complex moral, spiritual and political questions. We can see Dostoevsky engaging in this form of ideological myth-based thinking in numerous letters he wrote around the time of *Demons*. For example, in another letter to Maikov, we can see Dostoevsky indulging in one of the most prominent fictions of Slavophilism, the idyllic relationship between the Russian people and their Tsar: “Our constitution is in fact the reciprocal love of the monarch for the people and of the people for the monarch... here abroad I

⁵¹ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:28.

⁵² As Besançon notes, “the Slavophile vision of the world, for all that it claims empirical foundations, can always get away from empirical criticism by escaping upwards, in claiming superior understanding, which one has to believe in before being able to attain it: and that is typical of ideology... Once installed in the religious heart of Russia, the Slavophile fiction became ineradicable.” *Gulag*, 75.

have definitely become an absolute monarchist for Russia.”⁵³ Interestingly, Dostoevsky’s comment suggests that it was easier for him to indulge in this kind of mythical thinking while leaving abroad. Similar to many of the characters in *Demons*, Dostoevsky’s thinking seems to become more ideological when it is abstracted and distanced from the object of his study.

It would be wrong to call Dostoevsky an ideological author because his novels reveal a conception of humanity far too expansive to fit into any single ideology. We see the more of the ideological side of Dostoevsky expressed in his personal letters and editorials, where he gives free-rein to his nationalistic views. However, his novels still contain element of ideological thinking, which often take an ugly and morally stunted form at variance with the overwhelming sympathy he shows for his characters. Dostoevsky’s private letters reveal not only a willingness to accept fantastical forms of religious and nationalistic thinking, but also contain vulgar expressions of anti-semitism and xenophobia. While there are traces of anti-semitism in *Demons* (for instance, the caricatured appearance of the Jewish character Lyamshin), the anti-semitism in his novels is far more muted than what comes through in his letters and editorials. For instance, in one letter from 1871 Dostoevsky describes his reaction after mistaking a Russian church for a Jewish temple: “I got lost in town, and when I reached the church I’d taken for a Russian one, I was told at a shop that it wasn’t a Russian one, but a Jewish one. It was as though I’d had cold water poured one me.”⁵⁴ The fact that Dostoevsky’s bigotries are far more restrained in his fiction as compared to his letters and editorials is one indication that “Dostoevsky’s integrity as

⁵³ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:57.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:341.

an artist surpasses his ideological fury,” as well as surpassing his religious and national intolerances.⁵⁵

Given Dostoevsky’s indulgence in Slavophilic fantasies, it is clear that he is not opposed to ideology or idealism as such. Rather, Dostoevsky is searching for a set of beliefs that will maintain order and continue the transmission of cultural and religious values. For Dostoevsky, the danger of liberal and nihilistic ideologies is not that they are fantastical, but that they are destructive rather than constructive forms of belief. Dostoevsky puts the matter much more forcefully; “I firmly believe that if all these modern, sublime teachers be given ample opportunity to destroy the old society and to build it up anew, there would result such a darkness, such chaos, something so coarse, so blind, so inhuman, that the entire edifice would crumble away to the accompaniment of the maledictions of mankind.”⁵⁶

The aim of this project is to to examine the lessons of these “sublime teachers” and the ensuing fate of their students. *Demons* is a case study in how utopian dreams can quickly turn into violent agendas. By examining the continuous yet twisted line of thought that spreads from the liberals of the 1840’s to the nihilists of the 60’s, and on to further generations, we can see how progressive ideologies can exert a regressive influence on society. Understanding the development from idealism to extremism is just as important today as it was in Dostoevsky’s time, as the dangers which he perceived in extremist movements are hardly unique to the 19th century.

⁵⁵ Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 98.

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:151.

The project is organized into three chapters, each of which is concerned with a different aspect of ideological thought: the principle, enactment, and consequences. These chapters do not examine ideology in the abstract, which I have defined as best I can here, but through specific characters in *Demons*. A number of ideologies are expressed in this novel and I try to be attentive to the specificity of each character's beliefs. However, I will explore most of these ideas under the broad category of "nihilist ideology." Using Dostoevsky's conception of nihilism, this form of ideology can be defined by two traits: it is based upon atheistic principles, and calls for destruction and violence. While many of the characters examined in this project are neither nihilists nor ideologues, their ideas and actions nevertheless all relate to the phenomenon of nihilistic ideology. The first chapter examines the principles of nihilist ideology, as portrayed through Stepan Trofimovich. The second addresses the enactment of nihilistic ideology, how it is spread by Nikolai Stavrogin and put into action by Pyotr Stepanovich. The final chapter explores the consequences of this ideology, represented by Kirillov and Ivan Shatov.

As Dostoevsky suggests in *Demons*, the evolution of ideological thought is better understood as a spreading disease rather than a developing argument. Although ideological thought spreads in a rhizomic rather than linear manner, the progression of my chapters (as well as the characters within the novel), should be understood to move towards a more advanced stage in the disease. The chapters of this project are also titled to reflect the various stages of the ideological disease: "Delusion" representing the origins of the disease, "Infection" detailing its spread, and "Death" being the outcome. The spread of ideological extremism beyond Dostoevsky's time lies mostly outside the scope of this project. However, it is my hope that this

exploration of *Demons* will also indirectly shed some light on the countless acts of violence and destruction committed in the name of “progress” in our own age.

Chapter One: Delusion

Stepan Trofimovich

In the summer of 1876, Dostoevsky complained about the alienation of the Russian intelligentsia from its homeland in his weekly editorial: “educated Russians, the overwhelming majority of them, are still nothing but intellectual proletarians, creatures without solid ground beneath their feet, with neither soil nor principle, international, mental ‘neither here nor there’ men driven by any stray European wind.”⁵⁷ Dostoevsky’s tirade against educated Russians perfectly describes his aging liberal from *Demons*, Stepan Trofimovich Verhovensky, a man whose love for European intellectualism leaves him empty of both “soil” and principles. It is evident from this column written four years after the publication of *Demons* that the misdirection of Russian liberalism still greatly vexed Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky had grown up within the liberal movement of the 1840’s, and his early experiences with these radicals, idealists, and reformers exerted a lasting influence on his work and worldview. However, as he saw this movement continuously undermining its original ideals, he could not avoid expressing his outrage. We see Dostoevsky attack Russian liberalism most directly in his editorials, but it was through the character of Stepan Trofimovich Verhovensky in *Demons* that he made his most complete and nuanced exploration of the dangers of liberalism. This chapter will examine Dostoevsky’s critique of Russian liberalism (a term I use broadly to connote progressive, socialist, and atheist ideologies) through Stepan Trofimovich. His character demonstrates the regressive potential of

⁵⁷ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:403.

liberal ideologies, which in Dostoevsky's view, can "reduce man to absolute impersonality, to a total emancipation from all personal moral duty, reduces him to a state of the most miserable slavery that can be conceived."⁵⁸

Stepan Trofimovich bears a large degree of responsibility for the nihilistic chaos which engulfs his town, as the logic of the novel makes clear. The central conceit of *Demons* is that the ill-conceived liberalism of the 1840's generation gave birth to the nihilism of the 60's. In the novel, Stepan Trofimovich stands in for many of the intellectual and moral failings of his generation. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky portrays this liberal as the intellectual and biological father of nihilism. The language of cultivation comes up repeatedly in the novel, and Stepan Trofimovich, in his role as an absent father and dangerously present tutor, is the figure most often pointed to as the planter of the poisoned seed. As the Governor of his province accuses him, "in the course of twenty years you have been a hotbed of all that has now accumulated... all the fruit."⁵⁹ Through *Demons*, Dostoevsky attempted to portray the poisonous legacy of the 1840's liberals, and to confront them with their deformed offspring.⁶⁰ Stepan Trofimovich is not the origin of the intellectual infection which he passes to his children, for he is hardly the inventor of liberalism. However, in biological terms, he is both a reservoir and a vector of the disease.

⁵⁸ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:13.

⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 448.

⁶⁰ Dostoevsky explained this himself to the crown prince of Russia, when he requested that the writer personally send him a copy of the novel along with a note explaining its meaning. The author complied with this request, writing that it was "precisely this kinship and continuity of thought which evolves from the fathers to the children that I wanted to express in my work." Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 58.

“The Cornerstone of Everything”

Stepan Trofimovich was not originally intended to be the central protagonist or the hero of the novel, but rather “the cornerstone of everything”—the character whose ideas serve as a foundation for others. Partly due to an act of government censorship, his role in the published version of the novel is far greater than it was in Dostoevsky’s working drafts.⁶¹ While Stavrogin was first written as the centerpiece of Dostoevsky’s novel, Stepan Trofimovich usurped this role in the final published version. Thus a novel which was intended to focus on the fate of the nihilistic “sons” instead draws the reader’s attention towards that of the fathers.

In a letter sent in the middle of the novel’s composition, Dostoevsky describes the role he envisioned for Stepan Trofimovich: “[he] is a secondary character; the novel won’t be at all about him; but his story is closely linked to other events (main ones) in the novel, and therefore I’ve taken him as though the cornerstone of everything.”⁶² Throughout Dostoevsky’s evolving plans for the novel, Stepan Trofimovich remained the “cornerstone” of nihilistic thought. While Pyotr Stepanovich and Nikolai Stavrogin act more or less as the motors of the plot, propelling it forward with their violent energies, it is Stepan Trofimovich who revs these motors into action.

Like most of Dostoevsky’s fiction, *Demons* is a novel without heroes, and Stepan Trofimovich is hardly the heroic type. Yet strangely, he comes closest to fulfilling the role of hero of the novel. He is one of the only characters who challenges and repudiates the extremism of the younger “nihilist” generation. More importantly, through the renunciation of his beliefs at the end of the novel, he is afforded the possibility of redemption by Dostoevsky. This

⁶¹ Joseph Frank, "The Masks of Stavrogin," *The Sewanee Review* 77, no. 4 (Autumn 1969): 686, JSTOR.

⁶² Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:324.

misguided aging liberal, who Dostoevsky clearly identifies as having a destructive effect on his community, is also brought close to redemption by his author and treated with a great deal of sympathy. Reading *Demons*, it is hard to avoid a feeling expressed by Dostoevsky himself: “I love Stepan Trofimovich and profoundly respect him.”⁶³ While Dostoevsky’s love for Stepan Trofimovich is understandable, his respect for him is more intriguing, and a theme I will return to in this project’s conclusion.

As Bakhtin and many other critics have noted, Dostoevsky’s fiction is highly attuned to duality and paradox.⁶⁴ Stepan Trofimovich is emblematic of this; he may be naive and childish, yet his influence on others is immensely dangerous. As he admits of himself, “I am a whimsical child, with all the egoism of a child, but with none of the innocence.”⁶⁵ He is portrayed throughout the novel as pretentious and haughty, yet simultaneously childish and uncertain in his relation towards others. His naïveté makes him a sympathetic character, yet this same quality also makes him especially dangerous as a tutor. Stepan Trofimovich fancies himself a scholar, and loves to extoll various gems of wisdom from his library, but in terms of his understanding of the world around him, he is absolutely lost. As the narrator of the novel says: “such full, such total ignorance of everyday reality was both moving and somehow disgusting.”⁶⁶

The facts of Stepan Trofimovich’s life suggest that he is man who is almost entirely ignorant of reality, and his politics and writings reflect his misguided attempts at understanding it. Stepan Trofimovich is a quintessential ‘man of the 40’s; he styles himself as a liberal reformer

⁶³ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:379.

⁶⁴ See Introduction, footnote 17.

⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 121.

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 430.

and a new man. He is ostensibly a scholar, but he “did very little as a scholar, nothing at all, apparently.”⁶⁷ The snippets of his scholarly work (to use the term quite loosely) that we see in the novel are representative of his own life. The one thesis that he managed to write was on the “nearly emerged civic and Hanseatic importance of the German town of Hanau, in the period between 1413 and 1428, together with the peculiar and vague reasons why that importance never took place.”⁶⁸ Later, he attempts a work on “the reasons for the remarkable nobility of some knights in some epoch, or something of that sort.”⁶⁹ The unfinished work is hard to understand, but our narrator notes that, “at any rate, some lofty and remarkably noble idea was upheld in it.”⁷⁰ Just like the German town of Hanau, Stepan Trofimovich considers himself to be someone who ought to have been imminently recognized, and was on the verge of being so, but was prevented by a “whirlwind of concurrent circumstances,” both vague and out of his control.⁷¹ As our narrator informs us, “it turned out later that there had been not only no “whirlwind” but not even any “circumstances,” at least not on that occasion.”⁷² The true “whirlwind” in his life takes place during the action of the novel, and is unknowingly caused by him.

Stepan Trofimovich is well suited to his town—he is a provincial version of the intellectual. I call him a liberal because that is how he is identified in the novel, and Dostoevsky paints him as a representative of the liberal generation. It should be noted, however, that there is

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 9.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 9.

⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 9.

⁷⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 9.

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 8.

⁷² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 8.

almost no content to his liberalism—it is a muddled form of romanticism which values art and beauty for aesthetic reasons alone. Our narrator describes his ideology as that of “higher liberalism. . . that is, a liberal without any aim,” a particular brand of politics that he notes is possible only in Russia.⁷³

Only in a backwoods place could such a “neither here nor there” liberal come to have the degree of influence over others that he does in the novel. In a large city such as Petersburg or Moscow, Stepan Trofimovich would be lost in the mix of other aging liberals and reformers, but in the rural Russian town that is the setting of *Demons*, his minimal biography actually gives him some prominence and respectability. The rural setting of *Demons* becomes the perfect petri dish for Dostoevsky’s exploration of the consequences of liberalism. In such a confined setting, we can see how Stepan Trofimovich’s “neither here nor there” principles begin to take root. While Stepan Trofimovich himself is about as far from a man of action as one can be, his muddled teachings do have massive implications. His liberal atheism undermines the religious beliefs which for Dostoevsky form the basis of Russian society. When his naive ideology is released out into the world and implanted into the minds of men more resolute than himself, the consequences are disastrous.

A Legacy of Abandonment

Stepan Trofimovich is a father of nihilism. He is the parent of the most physically destructive nihilist in the novel, Pyotr Stepanovich, and the tutor of the most psychologically destructive character, Nikolai Stavrogin. While there are a number of distorted reflections of

⁷³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 33.

Stepan Trofimovich in his son, the old liberal cannot be blamed for misleading his son through his upbringing, as he abandoned him as a child and fails to even recognize the younger Verhovensky when he returns to town a number of years later. However, Stepan Trofimovich is connected to nihilism not only through his own teachings, but also through what I will call his legacy of abandonment.

By sending away his son, Stepan Trofimovich denied him a sense of connection to his Russian heritage and family. At the same time, the effects of Stepan Trofimovich's tutoring of Stavrogin demonstrate that being raised by him would have been at least as damaging as being abandoned by him. Tellingly, the effects of Stepan Trofimovich's teaching are almost the same as his abandonment—both his “sons” are denied a connection to their homeland and infected with foreign ideologies. Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich are portrayed as “rootless” figures without fathers (Stavrogin's died as a child). Like their father, these nihilists can be described as “neither here nor there,” “international” men, and it is this lack of native roots that makes them such fertile spawning ground for nihilistic ideologies.⁷⁴

There is a deliberate irony in the fact that *Demons*, a novel that is so deeply concerned with the theme of fathers and sons and the concept of intellectual inheritance, is also “a novel that is extremely short on actual biological fathers. They are simply absent.”⁷⁵ There are even indications in the text that Pyotr Stepanovich may not be Stepan Trofimovich's biological son,

⁷⁴ Both nihilists are identified as having spent a long time abroad in Europe, particularly in Geneva, Switzerland.

⁷⁵ Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*, 93.

potentially leaving no living fathers within the novel.⁷⁶ *Demons* is often compared to Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, written one decade previously. In his novel, Turgenev also addresses the generational chasm between the liberals and nihilists movements, and the way that the younger generation sprouted out of the dreams of the older. Contrary to Dostoevsky's work, Turgenev treats the divide between the 1840's and 60's generations as mostly resulting from cultural and political differences. While Turgenev's novel "barely touches upon religion," Dostoevsky's is explicitly focused on the spiritual dimension to the generational split.⁷⁷ It is telling that in Dostoevsky's treatment of this theme, there is an absence of actual fathers. This absence indicates that Dostoevsky was interested in a form of inheritance that is far less biological and direct than what Turgenev was writing about. As other critics have noted: "[*Demons*] is largely governed by a poetics of absence... The book makes it point, in other words, by strategic omission on various levels."⁷⁸ Dostoevsky is concerned with a form of intellectual inheritance that is centered around absence, especially the absence of familial, cultural, and religious ties. In the absence of these physical bonds that tie together families and communities, dangerous intellectual bonds begin take root.

The abandonment of his "children" is Stepan Trofimovich's primary legacy.

Abandonment, on both literal and metaphorical levels, is a theme that carries through the novel

⁷⁶ After Stepan Trofimovich asks Pyotr Stepanovich "But tell me finally, monster, are you my son or not?" he replies "I don't blame mother; if it's you, it's you, if it's the Polack, it's the Polack... Does it make any difference to you whether I'm your son or not?" Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 306-7. While Stepan Trofimovich's abandonment of his son is never fully explained, his son's comment about his dubious parentage provides one clue.

⁷⁷ R. L. Busch, "Turgenev's Ottsy i deti and Dostoevskii's Besy," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 26, no. 1 (March 1984): 6.

⁷⁸ David K. Danow, "Stavrogin's Teachings: Reported Speech in *The Possessed*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 214.

as these discarded children come back to haunt Stepan Trofimovich and wreak havoc on his world. Aside from the central nihilists of the novel, Pyotr Stepanovich and Nikolai Stavrogin, there is a third character who can be read as another of Stepan Trofimovich's abandoned children: a former serf of his whom we know only as Fedka the convict. This character perfectly illustrates the disastrous outcomes of Stepan Trofimovich's legacy of abandonment.

Stepan Trofimovich forced Fedka into military service to pay off a gambling debt. While we know little of Fedka before he was sold off, the other characters speak of him after his return as a changed man—freshly damaged and dangerous. Like Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin, Fedka is a child who has been abandoned to dangerous ideas. Fedka, referred to as “the convict” was imprisoned in Siberia for some unknown crime he committed during his military service, and escaped to return to town. Later in the novel Fedka takes a central role in implementing Pyotr Stepanovich's terroristic plots. Describing Fedka to Stavrogin, Pyotr Stepanovich explains:

There's a certain Fedka the Convict wandering around town and hereabouts, a fugitive from Siberia, imagine, my former household serf, whom papa packed off to the army fifteen years ago, to make some money. A very remarkable man... A man ready for anything, anything—for money, naturally, but there are convictions there too, of his own kind, of course.⁷⁹

Stepan Trofimovich's treatment of Fedka is one indication of his liberal hypocrisy; while railing against the cruelties of serfdom, he does not hesitate to sell his own serf into a life of misery. During the literary “fete” which serves as the disastrous turning point of the novel, he is accused by a nihilist provocateur of destroying Fedka: “Allow me to ask: if you had not sent him [Fedka] to the army fifteen years ago to pay off a debt at cards—that is, if you had not quite simply lost in a card game—tell me, would he have wound up in hard labor? Would he go around

⁷⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 228.

putting a knife in people as he does now, in his struggle for existence? What have you got to say, mister aesthete?”⁸⁰ Stepan Trofimovich has no reply to this accusation, but it is clear that the truth of these words cut him deeply. Through his hypocritical behavior—abandoning his own serf while calling for more humane treatment of the lower classes—Stepan Trofimovich shows the hollowness of his liberal ideals.

Bad Teachers

We can see Stepan Trofimovich as the “cornerstone” of liberal and nihilistic in his role as tutor to other characters; his teaching undermines any sense of respect for authority, tradition, and religion in his students, projecting a distorted and simplified image of the world. Through his tutoring, he spreads the idea-rhizomes which will eventually turn into nihilistic ideologies, as they are passed from his students onto others. However, Stepan Trofimovich does not just instill dangerous philosophies into his students, but also teaches them to be bad readers and interpreters of the world. The danger of his teaching cannot only be understood in terms of its ideological content—the answers he provides to these “cursed questions.” It must also be understood in terms of the method it uses to address these questions. Stepan Trofimovich’s quest for truth is guided by an impoverished model of reading in which allegory or metaphor stands in a 1:1 relation to reality. For him, metaphorical interpretation is not a tool to be used to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of reality, but a key that can unlock its singular meaning.

A careful analysis of Stepan Trofimovich’s tutoring, in terms of both the style and content of his lessons, is needed to understand how his form of romantic liberalism led to the cruel and

⁸⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 487.

destructive agendas of his offspring. To fully appreciate Stepan Trofimovich's role within the novel, we must also consider the larger context of Dostoevsky's quarrel with liberalism.

In Russian history, the liberalism of the 1840's *did* give rise to the more radical "nihilist" generation of the 1860's. Dostoevsky depicts this paradoxical development—the surprisingly fast shift from utopianism to extremism—through the relationships of the characters within *Demons*. However, even to readers who are familiar with the historical context of this novel, the relationship between Stepan Trofimovich and his students (Nikolai Stavrogin in particular), seems highly puzzling and anachronistic. How did this blustering dreamer help create a generation of terrorists and murderers? Within the text of the novel, Dostoevsky only gives us a few hints as to the nature of Stepan Trofimovich's "lessons," and why they proved so dangerous for his students. In one of the only passages that directly addresses Stepan Trofimovich's tutoring of Stavrogin, the narrator describes a relationship between the two that clearly transgresses the appropriate boundaries between adult and child:

One must do Stepan Trofimovich justice: he knew how to win his pupil over. The whole secret lay in his being a child himself. I was not around then, and he was constantly in need of a true friend. He did not hesitate to make a friend of such a small being, once he had grown up a bit. It somehow came about naturally that there was not the least distance between them [Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin]. More than once he awakened the ten or eleven-year-old friend at night only to pour out his injured feelings in tears before him, or to reveal some domestic secret to him, not noticing that this was altogether inadmissible. They used to throw themselves into each other's embrace and weep.⁸¹

Although the narrator does not describe the content of Trofimovich's lessons to Stavrogin, it is clear from this passage that he greatly unsettled the boy. Stavrogin's father was

⁸¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 40.

already dead at this point, and he had little love for his mother.⁸² His tutor was a father figure to him, yet because he was “a child himself” Stepan Trofimovich failed to provide his pupil with any guide to adulthood. When he burst into Stavrogin’s room in the middle of the night, he came to him not as a comforting adult, but as another child who frightened and unsettled him. Dostoevsky satirically portrays him as a teacher who seeks comfort and guidance from his pupils, rather than providing it to them. It is Stepan Trofimovich’s childish naïveté that allows him to get so close to his students, and this naïveté is central to his dangerous legacy.

Stepan Trofimovich uproots his students from their national and religious environment, ensuring that they are unable to form a connection to their native “soil” or religion. Dostoevsky conceived of religious faith as being a natural inclination, so for him, Stepan Trofimovich was stunting and diverting the development of his students by pushing them towards atheism.⁸³ While the old liberal may be a kind-hearted sentimentalist, it is clear that Dostoevsky conceived of his tutorship as being a very destructive and traumatizing experience for his students. In one of his editorials, Dostoevsky articulated more fully the way the younger generation was misled and abandoned by liberal fathers like Stepan Trofimovich, and how their “progressive” upbringing led to regressive outcomes:

In point of fact: whose children are they? They are, precisely, the children of those “liberal” fathers, who, at the beginning of Russia’s renaissance during the present reign [of Nicholas I], detached themselves en masse from the general cause, imagining therein lay progress and liberalism... And just think what hasn’t been said and asserted; what abominations haven’t been set forth under the guise of honor and progress!... What then, could the children of those days have beheld in their fathers? What reminiscences could they have retained about their childhood and their youth?—Cynicism, scoffing, pitiless assaults on the earliest, tender, holy

⁸² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 41.

⁸³ For Dostoevsky’s conception of religion as a “natural” value, see Introduction, footnote 24.

beliefs of children... Well, at length our youth began to decipher and rationalize all this! In this way such a “liberal” upbringing could have caused altogether reverse consequences.⁸⁴

In this editorial, Dostoevsky argues that the perdition of the “sons” generation of the 60’s was grounded in their father’s cynical renunciation of everything that did not conform to their “progressive” and materialist views. While Stepan Trofimovich’s lazy idealism seems to have little in common with the destructive nihilism of his progeny, Dostoevsky portrays the ideology of the “fathers” and “sons” generations as sharing a certain logic, or “continuity of thought,” as he wrote in his letter to the Russian Crown Prince.⁸⁵ One belief that he does share with his students is that political action and scientific progress can fundamentally change the nature of the world for the better. In a sense, this liberal and his nihilistic offspring are all reformers. However, Stepan Trofimovich and his students do not just dream of the typical liberal reforms of their era, such as the abolition of serfdom—they dream of a radically new society and a new form of man to inhabit it. In this sense, they are all also utopians.

Stepan Trofimovich’s students, including Nikolai Stavrogin and Ivan Shatov, share his simplistic belief that all spiritual and political dilemmas can be resolved through ideological mechanisms. The fundamental distinction between the teacher and his students is of action rather than principle—the father is merely a blatherer, while his sons seek to enact his ideological fantasy. Unfortunately for the residents of their town, Stepan Trofimovich’s pupils also share his conviction that utopia can only be realized after their society is burnt down to its foundations.

⁸⁴ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1: 271-72.

⁸⁵ See this chapter, footnote 60.

“Some Sort of Allegory”

Dostoevsky’s liberal may seem too full of bluster to have a coherent set of politics, but he does have one organizing idea: the principle of destruction. This ideological principle is revealed through his poem in the beginning of the novel. His poem is crucial to the novel because it represents the starting point of nihilistic thought within Dostoevsky’s scheme. This poem, which was published in a revolutionary magazine without his approval, is not printed verbatim in the novel, but we get a sense of its meaning from the narrator’s summary:

It is some sort of allegory, in lyrical-dramatic form, resembling the second part of *Faust*. After some drawn-out and opaque choral scenes, the scene changes again, and a wild place appears, where a civilized young man wanders among the rocks picking and sucking at some wild herbs... [he] is seeking oblivion, and finds it in the juice of these herbs... Suddenly a youth of indescribable beauty rides in on a black horse... The youth represents death, and all the nations yearn for it. Finally, in the very last scene, the Tower of Babel suddenly appears and some athletes finally finish building it with a song of new hope, and when they have built it to the very top, the proprietor of, shall we say, Olympus flees in a comical fashion, and quick witted mankind takes over his place and at once begins a new life.⁸⁶

This satirical allegory not only reveals Stepan Trofimovich’s ideological vision, but also contains the plot of the novel in seed form, if only slightly out of order. The youth sucking on the “wild herbs” are the men of the 60’s such as Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin who consume the “herbs” of European philosophy which cause them to lose their reason. Once the younger generation becomes intoxicated on these philosophies, they feel as if they have become immortal and begin completing their Tower of Babel so they can replace God (who is given the disparaging title ‘the proprietor of Olympus’ by Stepan Trofimovich), with their liberal and scientific ideals. The fact that Stepan Trofimovich’s poem refers to God as a “proprietor” is

⁸⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 10.

revealing of his materialistic ideology. He does not realize the ramifications of his own vision, because he adopts it more as a style rather than as a true conviction. However, his view of the world is undeniably materialist and atheistic. Hence in his poem, God is no more than a “proprietor,” someone who keeps the books and makes sure everything is running properly. When Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich come into the picture, the ideological vision expressed in his poem is turned into a practicable agenda. If ‘God’ is a mere proprietor, and humans now have the methods to do a better job than He can, then why not just chase Him out, as the allegory suggests? This is just what Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin set out to do when they arrive in town, through a series of sacrilegious acts of vandalism, arson, and murder. As one of Stavrogin’s victims accuses him; “you killed God.”⁸⁷

It is worth pausing in our examination of Stepan Trofimovich’s allegory to take note of his religious views, or lack of them. Dostoevsky portrays this character’s atheism as being central to his disastrous legacy. Stepan Trofimovich’s values are entirely secular, and his allegory reveals this atheistic perspective. While he denies his atheism, he does so only in the most thread-bare fashion: “I do not understand why everyone here makes me out to be a godless man,” he used to say occasionally. ‘I believe in God, *mais distinguons*, I believe as in a being who is conscious of himself in me... So far as Christianity is concerned, for all my sincere respect for it, I am not a Christian. I am rather like an ancient pagan, like the great Goethe, or like an ancient Greek.’⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 698.

⁸⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 37.

Stepan Trofimovich's irreligious beliefs reveal his fundamental hypocrisy and vanity. If he truly is a pagan, "like an ancient Greek," then this assertion is undermined by his poem which gives both the pagan and Christian God the boot. His claim to be a "pagan" is merely another of his unconscious lies—the more telling statement here is his comment that he believes in God only as "a being who is conscious of himself in me." This ego-centric reversal of a clichéd expression is quite typical of Trofimovich, and presumably a satiric dig at Feuerbach. Stepan Trofimovich does not believe in God as something that he can recognize within himself, he thinks God is the one who should recognize *Himself* in Stepan Trofimovich! Only a master satirist such as Dostoevsky could compose such an irreligious declaration of faith. Stepan Trofimovich's atheism leaves a gaping absence of meaning within his own life which he constantly tries to fill with new pursuits and beliefs. For Dostoevsky, his view of human nature is destructive not because it is malicious, but mistakenly optimistic. Stepan Trofimovich believes that humans are sufficient enough to create utopias independent of God, a view which Dostoevsky vociferously criticized in other radical utopians.⁸⁹

The only scene that needs re-ordering for Stepan Trofimovich's allegory to correspond to the structure of the novel is the one in which death in the guise of youth comes riding in on a black horse.⁹⁰ This is the natural consequence of man having replaced God with himself—far from the "new life" that he and his spawn imagine. Stepan Trofimovich's allegory of the destruction of God helps explain how he ignites nihilism in his tutees. He has no respect for God

⁸⁹ For example, writing in one of his personal letters about the Russian radical Belinsky, Dostoevsky explains, "In reviling Christ he never asked himself what we should erect in place of Him—surely not ourselves, when we're so vile. No, he never pondered the fact that he himself was vile." *Complete Letters*, 3: 361.

⁹⁰ An obvious reference to the "black horse" of Revelations 6:5, representing death and corruption.

or religious tradition, and puts all his faith in materialist philosophies which declare human civilization must be guided by science rather than custom and religion. Stepan Trofimovich has not only taught his students that they are fit to chase out God and replace him, but that it is their supreme *duty* to do so.

Stepan Trofimovich taught his pupils to be bad readers of their world by eliminating the most difficult questions. For him there are no moral or spiritual dilemmas, only practical problems. This simplistic, materialistic view is an integral part of his legacy and teachings. Stepan Trofimovich has accepted the false proposition “that positive science is capable of determining the *moral* boundaries between individuals.”⁹¹ For Dostoevsky, this is a fatal error. We can see this fundamental confusion between moral and scientific principles further expressed in Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin, who have little appreciation for nuance and no sense of morality.

Dostoevsky portrays Stepan Trofimovich and his students as striving to make the world comprehensible, while lacking the religious beliefs which would enable them to do so. The Russian Orthodox faith which Dostoevsky subscribed to puts a heavy emphasis on mysticism, and both the liberals and nihilists of his era tended to strongly reject this sentiment. Because their world is organized empirically, they cannot accept any mystery within it—any question can be answered by filling in the necessary data. In their own way, each of these characters struggles to construct a black-and-white universe which will finally resolve all human dilemmas. Stepan Trofimovich uses Western philosophy and literature to create this simplified image of the world for himself.

⁹¹ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 2:580.

Stepan Trofimovich's confusion about the respective roles of philosophy, art, and religion, is another integral aspect of his legacy. Stepan Trofimovich is always looking for answers in the wrong places—expecting aesthetic works to reveal moral truths, and philosophy to reveal spiritual truths. In this fallacy, he is representative of the intellectual shortcomings of his generation, which considered Western philosophy as a promising replacement for Russian religion. As historians have noted, this Russian tendency to look towards the West for wisdom was not just unique to Stepan Trofimovich's liberal generation, but was visible in the first meetings between Russian and European intellectuals:

The first Russians sent to study in England at the turn of the sixteenth century were particularly interested in the famous Cambridge student of astrology, magic, and spiritism, John Dee. The rapid fortune-telling, divination, and even gambling in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveals a popularization of astrological ideas current throughout Renaissance Europe. Thus, during this early period of Western contact, *Russians were fatefully conditioned to look to the West not for piecemeal ideas and techniques but for a key to the inner secrets of the universe.*⁹²

This feeling of inferiority towards European intellectualism was particularly prevalent among the Russian intelligentsia and aristocratic classes.⁹³ This history helps explain how European philosophy came to be seen as a replacement for Russian religion by men like Stepan Trofimovich from early in their education:

From the beginning of the enlightenment, philosophy held for the Russian mind some of the exotic fascination of soaring comets and distant lands. Almost from the first introduction of philosophy into the curriculum of The Moscow

⁹² James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 88. (Italics my own.)

⁹³ This phenomenon can be partly explained by Russia's relatively short intellectual and religious history — Russian orthodoxy was mainly adapted from the Byzantine forms of worship, and the Russian version of Orthodoxy tended to focus on the Byzantine rituals rather than on their intellectual tradition. Thus, Russian orthodoxy relied heavily on ritual and mysticism, and did not lead to as rich and diverse schools of theological thought as existed elsewhere in the Judeo-Christian world.

University, it acquired the subversive reputation of being a rival and potential substitute for religion.⁹⁴

Stepan Trofimovich's allegory of God being chased from the heavens by men armed with knowledge makes it clear that he regards philosophy as just such a substitute. The original intentions or beliefs of the philosophers he utilizes mean very little to him. No perversion is too great in order to arrive at new answers to the "cursed questions" which troubled the Russian empire. Stepan Trofimovich represents the confused liberals of the 1840's who, "in their heated desire to find answers for the 'cursed questions,' mixed fact, fantasy, and prophecy at every turn."⁹⁵

Stepan Trofimovich's *Sistine Madonna*: Beauty Sans Dieu

Stepan Trofimovich's liberal principles rest on a muddled ideal of aesthetic beauty, and a fundamental confusion between art and reality. Dostoevsky's character proudly declares this viewpoint during the disastrous "literary fete" in the middle of the novel, for which he prepares a speech: "I proclaim that Shakespeare and Raphael are higher than the emancipation of the serfs, higher than nationality, higher than socialism, higher than the younger generation, higher than chemistry, higher than almost all mankind!"⁹⁶ Stepan Trofimovich's speech is a deliberate play on the radical socialist and utilitarian Russian thinker Chernyshevsky's famous statement that "boots are higher than Pushkin," the socialist idea that something with a practical value is always better than that which is valued for aesthetic reasons alone. For Dostoevsky, this nihilistic credo

⁹⁴ Billington, *The Icon*, 310.

⁹⁵ Billington, *The Icon*, 352.

⁹⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 485.

was a revolting rejection of anything of spiritual or moral value in the world. Yet, in Stepan Trofimovich's speech, and in many other instances throughout the novel, Dostoevsky uses characters who hold beliefs he finds unacceptable to ventriloquize his own ideas. In this case, the liberal's tirade against the philistinism of utilitarianism comes almost straight out of Dostoevsky's own editorials:

Nowadays the words: "I understand nothing about Raphael," or "I have purposely read all of Shakespeare and, I confess, I found absolutely nothing particular in him"—these words today may be accepted not only as the sign of profound intellect, but even as something valiant, virtually as a moral exploit. And is it only Shakespeare or Raphael who is subjected to such judgement and to such doubts?⁹⁷

Dostoevsky's last sentence suggests the link between the abandonment of artistic ideals, and the rejection of religion. While Dostoevsky was a committed opponent of Chernyshevsky and attacked his views in a number of his novels (including *Demons* and *Notes from Underground* in particular), Stepan Trofimovich is not being used here as a mouth-piece for Dostoevsky's own beliefs. It is a mistake to read *any* of Dostoevsky's characters as representing his own views; in fact *Demons* provides a number of examples of Dostoevsky critiquing and satirizing viewpoints that were close to his own.

What exactly does Stepan Trofimovich mean when he claims "Raphael is higher than boots"? His defense of Raphael is fundamentally different than Dostoevsky's. Stepan Trofimovich's words are more than just a rejection of the utilitarian and anti-aesthetic attitudes of the 60's generation. In his rejection of Chernyshevsky's utilitarianism, Dostoevsky is defending the unquantifiable spiritual and moral value of art. Stepan Trofimovich on the other hand, is not

⁹⁷ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1: 536.

merely rejecting utilitarianism, but making a Quixotic declaration of the supremacy of illusion to reality. Not only is art “higher” than reality to him, it is actually *realer* than reality.

Stepan Trofimovich’s defense of beauty shows the inherent emptiness of his philosophy, and suggests how it led to the perdition of his pupils. While he values art and beauty, he does so only out of aesthetic appreciation. He is totally devoid of any moral or spiritual principles, and that is why he himself is a type of nihilist. As he admits himself, “I speak the language of nihilism.”⁹⁸ Stepan Trofimovich’s form of nihilism, as reflected in his speech, is aesthetic and romantic, while that of his students is a political and destructive nihilism. Despite the glaring external differences between the liberal ideology of Stepan Trofimovich and the nihilism of his students, both are based upon empty principles.

Stepan Trofimovich is an example of what Joseph Frank calls “Dostoevsky’s relative freedom from political prejudice when it came to literary-cultural matters: he was quite capable of conceding the truth of an insight even though uttered by someone whose politics he abhorred.”⁹⁹ While Dostoevsky empathizes with his character’s defense of art, he also portrays the dangerous hollowness behind it. Part of the irony here is that Dostoevsky himself was a great admirer of Raphael, and proudly declared the artist superior to Chernyshevsky’s “boots.” Famously, Dostoevsky kept a print of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* above his writing desk. The writer treated this print as a kind of personal ikon, a spiritual painting for contemplation and

⁹⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 341.

⁹⁹ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 356.

worship. In one of her letters, his wife Anna describes, “how many times I found him in his study in front of that great picture in such deep contemplation that he did not hear me come in.”¹⁰⁰

The beauty and attraction of this image is inextricably linked with its spiritual value, for “in Dostoevsky, beauty is never merely aesthetic form but always *presupposes* a spiritual dimension.”¹⁰¹ The image of the *Sistine Madonna* was a holy image for the writer, similar to the icons worshipped by the Russian Orthodox Church. For Stepan Trofimovich, the art of Raphael is merely beautiful, and his appreciation of it is entirely secular. As he declares later in his speech during the fete, “do you know that mankind can live without the Englishman, it can live without Germany, it can live only too well without the Russian man... without science, without bread, and it only cannot live without beauty, for then there would be nothing at all to do in the world!”¹⁰²

If one were to replace the word “beauty” with “Christ” in this speech, one could easily imagine an agitated Dostoevsky giving this same address. However, for his author, Stepan Trofimovich’s appreciation of beauty without God is toxic. This small example begins to illustrate Dostoevsky’s conception of the poisonousness of Russian liberalism—any ideals that are not rooted in religious faith, even when he agrees with them in principle, are inherently dangerous because they lack the grounding which gives them their true meaning. Stepan Trofimovich’s adoration of the *Sistine Madonna* rings hollow for Dostoevsky, despite how closely this statement mirrors his own most cherished beliefs.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Frank’s *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, with a new preface by the author ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 801.

¹⁰¹ Marina Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev: The Art of Integral Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), 164.

¹⁰² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 486.

The inability of the Europhiles to appreciate anything of spiritual value is linked to Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* at other points in the novel as well. Dostoevsky uses the reaction of his liberal characters to this painting to illustrate the fundamental philistinism of the Russian intelligentsia. At one point in the novel a member of the aristocracy says, "I sat for two hours in front of that painting and went away disappointed... Karmazinov also says it's hard to understand."¹⁰³ The intelligentsia's attempt to "understand" the painting is indicative of their spiritual shortcomings. Having rejected any religious conception of the world, they rely on their reason alone to make sense of their surroundings. However, for Dostoevsky, reason is not enough to comprehend our world, and is an insufficient basis for human life because it does not acknowledge our moral and spiritual needs. The beauty of the *Sistine Madonna* cannot be "understood," it must be felt. The beauty and true meaning of the world is inaccessible to those who approach it only through "reason."

Europhiles: Thinking in French

Dostoevsky conveys the "rootlessness" of Stepan Trofimovich's liberalism through his grandiloquent speech. Stepan Trofimovich is a man in love with language, although he pays little attention to its meaning. His absurd use of French, which he inserts as decorative flourishes, is a deliberate satire of the aristocratic tics of his generation. This tendency of the Russian upper classes to use French separated them from the common people even more: "although the Russian aristocracy was also to create modern literary Russian, *they continued to speak to one another*

¹⁰³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 300. "Karmazinov" is the aristocratic Russian writer within the novel, who fawns before the young nihilists Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin. This character was intended as a not-so-subtle of Dostoevsky's rival Turgenev, and his supposedly spineless stance towards the younger generation.

and even to think largely in French. This new language brought Russian noblemen into the mainstream of European culture, but also helped isolate them more than ever from their own countrymen.”¹⁰⁴ For Dostoevsky, this language barrier between the Russian intelligentsia and the common people meant that the aristocrats had also moved further away from God. Because Dostoevsky’s particular conception of Christianity is deeply based in Russian orthodoxy and a nationalistic mission, true faith for him is always attached to a connection to one’s people and homeland. Describing Stepan Trofimovich’s liberal generation, Dostoevsky wrote that “having detached themselves from the people, they naturally also lost God.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, Dostoevsky did not even consider the aristocratic class to be true Russians, and refers to them as “read-born emigrants” in his editorials.¹⁰⁶

The adoption of the French language by the Russian intelligentsia also led to a general “Europeanization” of their thought, because many words describing abstract concepts and internal sentiments were absent from the Russian language.¹⁰⁷ While Stepan Trofimovich’s use of French is satiric, it also serves a purpose; he uses philosophic words and expressions which truly did not exist in Russian at the time. However, to say that Stepan Trofimovich thinks largely in French would be to give him undue credit—thought is almost entirely foreign to him, in

¹⁰⁴ Billington, *The Icon*, 210. (Italics my own.)

¹⁰⁵ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:5.

¹⁰⁶ “Hertzen did not emigrate, no, he was already born an emigrant. They all, akin to him, were ready-born emigrants, even though the majority of them never left Russia.” Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1: 5.

¹⁰⁷ “Basic literary concepts, most of them to do with the private world of the individual, had never been developed in the Russian tongue: ‘gesture,’ ‘sympathy,’ ‘privacy,’ ‘impulsion,’ and ‘imagination’—none could be expressed without the use of French... Hence Russian writers were obliged to adapt or borrow words from the French to express the sentiments and represent the world of their readers in high society... This ‘salon style’ derived a certain lightness and refinement from its Gallicized syntax and phraseology. But its excessive use of French loan words and neologisms also made it clumsy and verbose.” Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 51.

French or any other language. Dostoevsky believed that the intelligentsia's attachment to French was connected to their inability to have any original or independent thoughts. As he explained in one of his editorials; "slavishly crawling before the forms of language and the opinion of [the French], Russian Parisians, naturally, are also slaves to French thought. Thereby they doom their poor heads to never having a single thought of their own."¹⁰⁸

Carried away by his "slavish" infatuation with European language and ideas, Stepan Trofimovich pays little attention the actual meaning of his words. At the end of the novel, he will admit this himself when he declares on his deathbed, "I've been lying all my life. Even when I was telling the truth. I never spoke the truth, but only for myself... The worst of it is that I believe myself when I lie."¹⁰⁹ Dostoevsky treats his character's foreign fantasies quite harshly throughout the novel, as Stepan Trofimovich's death-bed confession indicates. The old liberal again exposes the rootlessness of his ideology, as well as his inability to believe in what he says, in an impromptu speech he delivers to his friends. This speech is yet another example of Stepan Trofimovich ventriloquizing beliefs close to Dostoevsky's own, as we can find a model for the character's call for Russian intellectual labor in Dostoevsky's editorial writing.¹¹⁰

'We are unable to live by our own labor. And what is all the fuss nowadays about some public opinion being 'born'— did it just drop from the sky, suddenly, for no rhyme or reason? Don't they understand that in order to acquire an opinion what is needed first of all is labor, one's own labor! ...And since we shall never labor, those who have been working for us all along will have the opinion instead— that

¹⁰⁸ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1: 398.

¹⁰⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 652.

¹¹⁰ "It is no longer a time for theories, for journalistic skirmishes, but the time for work and practical decisions. All of a sudden it becomes necessary to pronounce positive judgements—on education, on pedagogy, railroads, zemstvos, medical matters, etc., on hundreds of topics—and, what is most important, it has got to be done right away... Since we all [Russians], due to two centuries of lack of habit of work, have proved altogether incapable of any." Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1: 199.

is, Europe again, the Germans again, our teachers from two hundred years back... For twenty years now I've been ringing this alarm and calling to labor! ...I still ring and shall go on ringing to the end, to my grave... until the bell rings for my funeral!¹¹¹

Stepan Trofimovich's comments are here, as usual, filled with self-undermining statements and unwitting lies. As he admits himself, he is a liar of the most dangerous variety—the type who does not know when he is lying. Here Stepan Trofimovich is criticizing the younger generation for trying to give birth to a new “public opinion” (or ideology), without having done any intellectual “labor” to justify it. Having failed to accomplish this labor themselves, the Russians turn to others who have done the intellectual labor before them. Since the younger generation of Russians, just like Stepan Trofimovich's generation, are mostly Europhiles with little respect or understanding for their homeland, their ideas are unmistakably derivative and inflicted with a foreign, atheistic taint.

Stepan Trofimovich's speech comes remarkably close to Dostoevsky's own perspective on the failure of Russians to develop their own nationalistic creed. Consider Dostoevsky's own views on the importance of being steeped in Russian culture and the dangers of Europeanism, which he expressed in one anguished missive written during the composition of *Demons*: “I'm not afraid of being Germanized, because I hate all Germans, but I need Russia; without Russia I'll lose every bit of my strength and talent. I sense that, sense that with my entire being.”¹¹²

Dostoevsky believed one needs to be steeped in one's native culture to create meaningful work, the same idea that Stepan Trofimovich hypocritically voices in his speech. What is so

¹¹¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 37.

¹¹² Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3: 144.

terrible about the encroaching “Germanization” of Russian intellectuals to Dostoevsky is not just the influence of a secular and foreign ideology, but that this relationship ought to be reversed. A central component of Dostoevsky’s Slavophilism was that it was Russia that had to become a spiritual guide for the European continent, rather than Europe influencing Russia. As Dostoevsky wrote to his friend and editor Maikov, “Russia’s entire purpose is contained in Orthodoxy, in *the light from the East* that will flow to blinded humanity in the West, which has lost Christ.”¹¹³ In his speech, Stepan Trofimovich voices the same call for Russian intellectual “labor” grounded in native experience and belief that Dostoevsky believed was integral to the renewal of the Russian purpose.

Stepan Trofimovich expresses the same fear of being “Germanized” in his speech that Dostoevsky shows in his letters. The irony here is that Stepan Trofimovich is the main source of German and Europeanization within the novel, the “cornerstone” of foreign thought. His assertion that he has been “ringing this alarm” and calling the younger generation towards Russian sources of knowledge for thirty years is a complete misrepresentation of his teachings: he has been calling for exactly the opposite. The intellectual “labor” that Stepan Trofimovich drove his tutees towards was not a search for Russian truth, but a pursuit of European philosophical fantasies which would prove disastrous when unleashed upon his homeland. Once he begins to intimate the effects this Europeanization will have, he is pretending (or deceiving himself) that he has been calling for Russianization this entire time. In reality, it was not Stepan Trofimovich, but his author who would go on ringing this bell for Russian labor “until the bell rings for my funeral.”

¹¹³ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3: 281. (Italics in original.)

Bad Readers

In *Demons*, the fatal mistake of ideology—the attempt to make the ephemeral concrete—is represented by a misconception of allegory. Nearly the entire cast of *Demons* is obsessed with questions of authorship, allegory, and interpretation. The novel is chock full of references to other books, authors, philosophies, and poems, and there are many scenes in which characters write and plan tracts, confessions, books, encyclopedias, and journals. In one example of the novel’s overarching concern with questions of authorship and interpretation, the drunken Captain Lebyadkin recites one of his doggerel poems and then interprets it for his audience.¹¹⁴ The fact that Lebyadkin will not allow his audience to interpret his poem themselves points to the latent power of interpretation within this novel: allegory becomes weaponized when it is turned into dogma. The allegorical meaning that Lebyadkin gives to his text is not just one possible interpretation, but the single key which is needed to decode it. Dostoevsky implicitly critiques this model of reading throughout the novel, and attacks it even more directly in his letters and editorials.¹¹⁵ It is this form of mis-reading, more than any singular character, that is responsible for the chaos that engulfs the town of *Demons*.

The characters of the novel use allegory in a bastardized form. This form of interpretation becomes a guide to action rather than a path to understanding. In *Demons*, the kind of “allegory” most of the characters are concerned with is not the kind of nuanced and multi-layered allegory

¹¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 177.

¹¹⁵ For example, in one of his editorials he protested an article which interpreted a short story of his as an allegory portraying the exile of the socialist philosopher Chernyshevsky. Dostoevsky explained that he would never write such a simplistic form of allegory, and even considered it beneath him to refute such a stupid interpretation of his work: “This is dirty to such an extent that I decline to soil myself and to continue the explanation of the allegory.” Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:28.

we usually think of when discussing literature. Rather, Dostoevsky's characters believe that allegory can reveal a truth written in code. In this impoverished understanding, the allegory has a one-to-one relation with the thing it represents: it does not reveal truth poetically and metaphorically, but directly and fully. This form of allegory does not lead to a richer conception of its subject, but instead simplifies and cheapens it by suggesting that it merely needs to be decoded to be understood. This act of decoding reveals a singular meaning that is more important and "truthful" than the original text or object itself, and thus reverses the relationship between object and principle. The allegory erases or over-writes reality because it makes it secondary to the imagined principle behind it. This is essentially the logic that Stepan Trofimovich uses to arrive at his conclusion that art is realer than reality: the real is secondary to the ideal.

Dostoevsky portrays Stepan Trofimovich's acts of allegorical interpretation as fraught with political consequences. The misuse of allegory is a form of ideological thinking: in translating poetry into "facts," complexities are paved over, and it becomes easier to act.

Nearly everything Stepan Trofimovich says or does has an air of allegory about it. His character is so infused with the idea of allegory that when he once becomes enraged after a fight with his friend and patroness Varvara Petrovna and pounds the wall so hard the plaster falls off, our narrator feels compelled to note that "this occurred without a trace of allegory."¹¹⁶ Through his allegorizing and misreading, Stepan Trofimovich invents dangers where none exist (such as his status as a wanted dissident), and minimizes other real threats. For example, when Varvara Petrovna gets wind of the outrageous behavior of her son Stavrogin, Stepan Trofimovich

¹¹⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 14.

minimizes the dangerousness of his former student by comparing him to Shakespeare's "Prince Hal:"

Soon rather strange rumors began to reach Varvara Petrovna: the young man, somehow madly and suddenly, started leading a wild life. Not that he gambled or drank too much; there was only talk of some savage unbridledness, of some people being run over by horses, of some beastly behavior towards some lady of good society with whom he afterwards publicly insulted. . . . It was added, furthermore, that he was some sort of swashbuckler, that he picked on people and insulted them for the pleasure of it. Varvara Petrovna was worried and anguished. Stepan Trofimovich assured her that these were merely the first stormy impulses of an overabundant constitution, that the sea would grow calm, and that it all resembled Shakespeare's description of the youth Prince Harry, carousing with Falstaff, Poins, and Mistress Quickly.¹¹⁷

Stepan Trofimovich's characterization of Stavrogin as young "Prince Hal" who is merely "sowing his wild oats" is a dangerous misreading. By comparing Stavrogin to the youthful King Henry from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, he suggests that Stavrogin's transgressions are of a normal and passing nature, merely the release of excess energy that will eventually be channeled into more noble pursuits. Yet Stavrogin's "unbridledness" is no mere adolescent rebellion; he does not engage in typical juvenile misbehavior, such as drinking or gambling. His "wildness" is of a much more fundamental and perverse nature, and will not fade away with age. This early account of his exploits before his appearance in the novel instead suggests that he commits transgressions almost out of a sense of principle. Stavrogin abuses peasants for sheer amusement, runs over others with horses, and delights in humiliating a high-born lady after having some sort of affair (or perhaps raping her). A few lines after this passage, it is also revealed that Stavrogin has already killed an officer in a duel, and severely injured another. Despite these glaring indications

¹¹⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 43.

of Stavrogin's perverse nature, through his literary interpretation Stepan Trofimovich presents Stavrogin as little more than a troubled youth. As one critic notes, Stepan Trofimovich has a tendency to sanitize the most unseemly aspects of the novel through his allegorical interpretations; "the rumors of Stavrogin's life of debauchery and scandal are safely categorized by Stepan Trofimovich's interpretation of him in the light of a literary construct."¹¹⁸

Stepan Trofimovich is partly responsible for Stavrogin's "unbridledness," because his teaching failed to provide him with any sense of "soil" or principles. Despite Stepan Trofimovich's best attempts, there is no easy way to categorize Stavrogin's transgressions because they are entirely novel and "unheard of," which is why they seem so startling and perverse. Stavrogin is tied into his teacher's legacy of abandonment because his behavior, like his very character, has no paternity. Because Stavrogin's behavior is so incomprehensible, Stepan Trofimovich is even more eager to affix its meaning through allegory. However, as the novel descends further into the chaos unleashed by Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich, it will be nearly everyone who is striving to explain the unexplainable.

Stepan Trofimovich and his sons are particularly bad readers of the world due to their one-dimensional perspective. Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich inherit their father's tendency of turning facts into allegory and vice-versa, in order to satisfy their urge towards simplification. All of these characters exhibit a distaste for complexity typical of ideological thought. As one critic notes, "one of the symptoms of Stavrogin's disease, and by extension, the sickness of radical thought in Dostoevsky's estimation, is an inability to understand figurative speech as such: the

¹¹⁸ Russell S. Valentino, "The Word Made Flesh in Dostoevskii's *Possessed*," *Slavic Review* 56, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 44.

figure is never merely figurative; it always stands for a potential fact.”¹¹⁹ This symptom of ideological sickness is passed from Stepan Trofimovich onto the younger generation. His students, such as Shatov and Stavrogin, tend to treat all forms of artistic expression in this manner, the same method of obtuse allegorical interpretation that Dostoevsky so bitterly protested against in his public *Diary of a Writer*.¹²⁰

The flurry of writing and interpretation within the novel is motivated by the characters' attempts to explain the inexplicable, the “new ideas” and “potential facts” which they are being bombarded with, and the nature of their rapidly devolving world. When confronted with events which entirely defy expectation, the characters of the novel rush to come up with more and more explanations and interpretations, rather than re-considering their method of interpretation.

Although Stepan Trofimovich is one of the main sources for these new ideas, he fails to recognize them when they boomerang him in the face. At one point in the novel, his patroness Varvara Petrovna becomes angry at him for failing to explain the ideas of the new generation to her, thus making her look like a retrograde: “Stepan Trofimovich; you carefully concealed from me all the new ideas that are now known to everyone, and you were doing it solely out of jealousy, so as to have more power over me.”¹²¹ Like Stepan Trofimovich, Varvara Petrovna is another Europhile Russian who wants to stay current with radical politics. She is angry that he has hidden these “new ideas” from her, but in reality, he is just as confused and upset about these developments as she is.

¹¹⁹ Valentino, “Flesh,” 42.

¹²⁰ See footnote 115, this Chapter.

¹²¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 339.

These “new ideas” appear to Stepan Trofimovich only as muddled distortions of his liberal dream. It should be clarified that these “new ideas” are not new at all, but merely more direct expressions of the vision from in Stepan Trofimovich’s poem; they are materialist, atheistic, and socialist theories about the organization of society and government. At one point, Pyotr Stepanovich walks in on his father reading the socialist treatise in novel form, *What Is To Be Done?* a work that is representative of the “new ideas,” and whose author Nikolai Chernyshevsky has already appeared in *Demons* under various guises.¹²² The elder Verkhovensky’s reaction to this book sums up the horror and confusion of the liberal generation upon being confronted with the nihilist ideology: “I agree that the author’s basic idea is correct... but it’s so much more horrible for that! It’s our same idea, precisely ours; we were the first to plant it, to nurture it, to prepare it—and what new could they say on their own after us! But God, how it’s all perverted, distorted, mutilated!”¹²³

Chernyshevsky’s “basic idea” that Stepan Trofimovich recognizes is essentially the same principle from in his poem. Chernyshevsky believes that we must abandon the archaic values of religion in order to create a more just and egalitarian society based upon science, utility, and reason. Chernyshevsky’s work is mostly in accord with Stepan Trofimovich’s liberalism, but it drags mud all over his aesthetic ideals and aristocratic pretensions. Stepan Trofimovich may proclaim atheism and science, but when he sees these values threaten his hollow appreciation of art and beauty, he balks. This is another indication that Stepan Trofimovich’s politics are at heart

¹²² For example, the character of Virginsky parodies Chernyshevsky in certain ways, such as in his acceptance of his wife’s infidelity. Chernyshevsky apocryphally told his wife after she admitted her infidelities, “Up to now I have only loved you, but now I truly respect you.”

¹²³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 304.

self-undermining and hypocritical. The beliefs that he espouses, when developed, undermine everything that he considers valuable in the world.

Dostoevsky portrays the danger of ideas to infect and pervert minds, yet his novel also signals his conviction that “we have to fight texts with texts.”¹²⁴ Dostoevsky portrays the immense danger of untethered ideas when they are unleashed on the world, but his novel does not suggest that censorship of these ideas is either advisable or practicable. In fact, censorship may fan the flames of destructive thought even more, as the nihilist’s claims to secrecy and conspiracy only make them more attractive and powerful in the eyes of others, suggesting that the suppression of texts has a similar effect on their potency. Furthermore, Dostoevsky’s tangled model of infection shows that there is no real way to push any idea back into the Pandora’s box. Once ideas are set loose, they continue to spread and evolve, and cannot be destroyed by killing their propagators. Ideas cannot be defeated through force—Stepan Trofimovich’s shoddy allegories can only be fought with better models of interpretation.

¹²⁴ Anne Lounsberry, "Print Culture and Real Life in Dostoevsky's Demons," *Dostoevsky Studies* 11, no. 11 (2007): 36.

Chapter Two: Infection

Pyotr Stepanovich and Nikolai Stavrogin

In the midst of a conspiratorial meeting he has organized, Pyotr Stepanovich advocates for a quick and brutal method of social reform. His comments reveal an ideological vision similar to his father's, while also expressing revulsion towards his romanticism and weakness. Pyotr Stepanovich cuts away the fat from Stepan Trofimovich's ideological dream, and leaves only the ideal of destruction:

Talking aside... I ask you which [method of social reform] is dearer to you: the slow way that consists in the writing of social novels and the bureaucratic predetermining of human destinies... or do you hold with a quick solution, whatever it may consist in, which will finally untie all hands and give mankind the freedom to organize socially by itself, and that in reality, not on paper?... I fully agree that babbling liberally and eloquently is extremely pleasant, while acting is a bit rough... Well, anyhow, I'm not a good speaker, and therefore I ask the whole honorable company not even to vote but to declare directly and simply, which is more fun for you; a snail's pace through the swamp, or full steam across it?¹²⁵

Stepan Trofimovich is a man of ideas and language, but his son Pyotr Stepanovich and his student Nikolai Stavrogin are men of action. The father writes a poem proclaiming the destruction of God and renewal of mankind, and his "sons" Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich seek to make this dream a reality. In his impromptu speech at the meeting, Pyotr Stepanovich reveals this ideological mission, rejecting his father's congenial blabber in favor of the roughness of action. The young nihilist throws aside the reasoned arguments, statistics, and ideals that the other radicals are so fond of, and asks them instead "not even to vote," but "which is more fun

¹²⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 408.

for you?” Pyotr Stepanovich is a master bully and manipulator, as evidenced by his swift rejection of voting in favor of coerced approval.

In *Demons*, utopian ideologies lead directly to violence and despotism. Dostoevsky shows the connection between utopian and apocalyptic visions through Stepan Trofimovich’s legacy. In his sons’ hands, Stepan Trofimovich’s utopian dream becomes the basis for a rejection of all moral principles and a guide to political violence. However, Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin are not just the natural consequences of Stepan Trofimovich’s ideology, but distorted reflections of the man himself. Pyotr Stepanovich and his father have contempt for one another, but they share the same dream of the human Tower of Babel replacing the Kingdom of God. Despite all the differences between father and son, we will see Pyotr Stepanovich fulfill the prophetic role outlined for him in his father’s poem. Nikolai Stavrogin also mirrors his former teacher through his influence on others. Like Stepan Trofimovich, Nikolai Stavrogin is a teacher of dangerous ideologies. Both nihilists are undeniably the “sons” of Stepan Trofimovich: Stavrogin further develops and spreads his ideological vision, while Pyotr Stepanovich *realizes* it.

Ideology becomes most dangerous when it transforms ideas into action. Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin represent the two elements necessary for ideological violence: the idea and the action. Stavrogin represents the metaphysical side of ideology—the idea—while Pyotr Stepanovich represents the material and political part—the action. While these characters only take on their full power and meaning in relation to one another, I will argue that it is Stavrogin rather than Pyotr Stepanovich who carries on Stepan Trofimovich’s mission of spreading dangerous ideas. Accordingly, Stavrogin is given more space in this chapter. Although

the power dynamics between these two characters shifts continuously throughout the novel, Stavrogin ought to be read as the “idol” of nihilist ideology, the inspiration and immoral authority who is both worshipped and exploited by Pyotr Stepanovich. If Stavrogin is the idol of nihilism, then Pyotr Stepanovich might be called its “architect:” he turns the ideology into a concrete plan which he enacts. The relationship between these two nihilists is opaque, and it is often hard to determine who is influencing or manipulating whom. While these characters exist in relation to one another, they must also be understood in their individuality. Therefore, I will begin by examining these characters more or less independently, beginning with Stavrogin, before addressing their complex and symbiotic relationship.

Stavrogin’s Masks

The spread of ideology is opaque. This is reflected in the two major propagators of ideological thought within the novel, Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin. Stepan Trofimovich’s ideas are only presented peripherally, and clearly have many sources outside the novel. As many critics have noted, Stavrogin appears as an enigmatic and even half-complete character within *Demons*.¹²⁶ In a sense, Dostoevsky places this character largely outside the text. Most of his acts (such as his multiple murders and rapes) occur before the events of the novel, and are reported second-hand or merely hinted at by himself and other characters. Furthermore, Stavrogin almost never expresses his own ideas in the novel; they are instead revealed by his former “students” Ivan Shatov and Kirillov. Despite Stavrogin’s peculiar absence from the novel, his role in it is undeniably central. Like his former teacher, Stavrogin exerts a great influence over the

¹²⁶ E.g., “[Stavrogin’s] mysterious attractiveness in conjunction with the unmotivated nature of most of his actions makes this ambiguous image even more strange.” Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev*, 93.

convictions of others; many of the beliefs and ideologies which are expressed in *Demons* can ultimately be traced back to Stavrogin.

Nikolai Stavrogin is linked to Stepan Trofimovich primarily through two traits: his status as a pretender and as a teacher. Stepan Trofimovich is merely a hypocrite, while Stavrogin masks his appearance in a more nefarious manner. From Stavrogin's introduction in the novel, it is evident that there is something false and mask-like about his appearance which conceals his true nature. This character is another example of Dostoevsky's persistently dualistic method: Stavrogin is presented as being handsome, charismatic, and eloquent, yet this attractiveness veils an inner demonism.

I was also struck by his face: his hair was somehow too black, his light eyes were somehow too calm and clear, his complexion was somehow too delicate and white, his color somehow too bright and clean, his teeth like pearls, his lips like coral—the very image of beauty, it would seem, and at the same time repulsive.... People said his face resembled a mask.¹²⁷

Stavrogin is a paradoxical character, a combination of the holy and demoniac. We can see this duality in the narrator's description, his face is the "image of beauty," yet at the same time "repulsive." Stavrogin's face is an early indication of his contradictory nature, as his attractiveness and beauty hides the frightening emptiness behind his "mask."

Stavrogin's physical appearance must be understood as only the most superficial of many masks that he wears throughout the novel. "The symbolism of the book requires Stavrogin always to inspire a deformed and distorted image of the Truth— but one that resembles what it imitates as closely and uncannily as Stavrogin's "mask" resembles healthy human beauty."¹²⁸ As

¹²⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 43.

¹²⁸ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 482.

Frank notes, Stavrogin uses these “masks,” which take the form of various forms of belief and ideology, to deceive others within the novel. Stavrogin’s role as an imposter and deceiver is recognized by other characters, such as the crippled and half-insane Marya Timofeevna Lebyadkin, whom Stavrogin half-mockingly takes as a wife to fulfill a drunken bet.¹²⁹ One night, Stavrogin comes to visit his wife in her decrepit apartment, and proposes that they escape together to spend the rest of their lives together in ascetic isolation in the mountains.¹³⁰ Marya Timofeevna intuitively senses the hollowness of his promises, and replies: “No, my dear, you’re a bad actor... Away, imposter!... Your knife doesn’t frighten me.”¹³¹ Marya Timofeevna sees Stavrogin’s offer as a lie hiding his true intentions, which are to murder her, as suggested by her mention of his knife.

Stavrogin’s masks are not only used to deceive others. When Marya Timofeevna unmasks Stavrogin, she does not just reveal motives which he has been trying to hide from her, but motives he is hiding from *himself*. Stavrogin’s disguises do not hide any true convictions, but only deeper layers of his identity which he is unable to accept. This is strongly suggested by the dynamics of Stavrogin’s interaction with Marya Timofeevna; he becomes frightened and enraged by her accusation, while she merely laughs at him unafraid. The encounter ends with Stavrogin running from his crippled wife, “she was triumphant.”¹³² Marya Timofeevna is representative of the common Russian people: unlike most of the characters within the novel, she holds to

¹²⁹ See Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 267.

¹³⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 276. It is worth noting that Stavrogin makes an identical offer to Darya Shatov at the end of the novel, suggesting his desperate attempt to find an easy method of salvation.

¹³¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 277-78.

¹³² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 277.

traditional beliefs and customs. Her attack on Stavrogin represents how the power of traditional religious values can “unmask” and chase out the force of ideology. Stavrogin’s panicked reaction at his unmasking suggests the emptiness behind his disguises. He may be a powerful, seductive character and a source of ideological thinking—but he has no convictions himself.

Experimental Nihilism

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky shows how the germs of ideology are often spread by those without convictions. Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin, who are the main sources of ideological thought in the novel, are not ideologues themselves. Both of them are “neither here nor there” men, rootless and uncertain in their beliefs. Stepan Trofimovich *expresses* his liberal ideology, but Dostoevsky makes it ambiguous whether he actually believes in it. Stavrogin expresses many ideologies, but he mocks and rejects them when they are repeated back to him.

Ideology cannot only be understood abstractly as a form of dogma, but also in terms of attitude. Someone becomes an ideologue when a dogmatic philosophy is combined with a dogmatic personal attitude. Pyotr Stepanovich is the only character who fits this definition of ideologue; most of the others display some level of detachment from their own ideas and beliefs. As Shatov says, “convictions and the man—it seems they’re two different things in many ways.”¹³³

Dostoevsky shows the disconnect between ideological ideas and attitudes through Stavrogin in particular. Stavrogin has many ideological ideas, but his personal stance towards these ideas is the opposite of ideological; he is not fully able to accept any of them. Stavrogin’s

¹³³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 584.

irresolution and lack of self-acceptance make him what I will call an “experimentalist.” Because Stavrogin is unable to settle into any particular identity or ideology, he keeps testing out new ones and abandoning them as they fail him.

Stavrogin’s “experimental” attitude stems from his inherent emptiness. Stavrogin’s panicked reaction at his unmasking by Timofeevna reveals that he is not able to accept his own murderous intentions. Speaking more broadly, Stavrogin is unable to accept any of the numerous beliefs which he has espoused to others before the action of the novel, or to live with his own hypothesis that there is no difference between good and evil. As his student (or disciple) Kirillov says of him, “if Stavrogin believes, then he does not believe that he believes. And if he does not believe, he does not believe that he does not believe.”¹³⁴ Stavrogin’s indifferent and experimental attitude towards his own ideas suggests something significant about his character and role within the novel: his violent and transgressive actions are borne not out of malice or conviction, but out of an attempt to test the boundaries of human morality. Dostoevsky describes Stavrogin’s experimental form of nihilism as belonging to “a special kind of people who have adopted and are exploring, the formula ‘the worse—the better.’”¹³⁵ Stavrogin has not *accepted* this formula, he has merely “adopted” it as a hypothesis and basis for further experimentation. In *Demons*, philosophic and moral issues “are examined in terms of rationalistic experiment” by the characters of the novel.¹³⁶ While Stepan Trofimovich introduces foreign and (ultimately) nihilistic ideas to his town, it is Stavrogin who provokes other characters to adopt these ideas as “experiments” of their own. In other words, Stavrogin does not only introduce others to

¹³⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 616.

¹³⁵ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:335.

¹³⁶ Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev*, 161.

dangerous ideas as his former teacher does, but moves them to act upon these ideas. Like his tutor, Stavrogin pushes others towards ideology while remaining uncertain himself. The form of ideological thinking spread by Stavrogin, like that of Stepan Trofimovich, must be understood as an intellectual disease.

The ideological disease is particularly dangerous because it is adaptable. When Shatov, a young Slavophile who comes under the influence of Stavrogin, accuses Stavrogin of infecting his thinking, he points out this amorphous nature of his intellectual “poison.” Shatov realizes that Stavrogin has been inspiring his former friend Kirillov with contradictory ideas: “At the very same time you were planting God and the motherland in my heart— at that very same time, perhaps even in those very same days, you were pouring poison into the heart of this unfortunate man, this maniac, Kirillov... Go and look at him now, he’s your creation.”¹³⁷ Shatov’s accusation reveals that Stavrogin has been advancing atheistic and religious ideas at the same time. While Stavrogin was “planting” the Slavophile ideology in Shatov, he was using the opposite approach with Kirillov, in whom he undermined religious belief and spoke of the necessity to replace God. The irony here is that in the case of Shatov, Stavrogin was actually promoting an ideology Dostoevsky more or less agreed with (Slavophilism). Yet no matter what ideas Stavrogin advocates, his positions are always dangerous. Stavrogin’s teachings are an example of the rhizomic nature of ideological thought. None of the ideas advanced by Stavrogin exist as “ideologies” in the abstract—rather they *become* ideologies through the dogmatic interpretations of his students.

¹³⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 248.

Every position advanced by Stavrogin is an effort to manipulate others *and himself* into belief, which is why I call him an experimentalist. The ideas spread by Stavrogin, even when they are seemingly in line with Dostoevsky's views (such as in the case of Shatov), can only inspire morally distorted outcomes because of their tainted source. If Stavrogin advances his views as mere, albeit deadly, hypotheses, this is not at all how they are treated by his followers. While Stavrogin's own views "had been open and inconclusive (his unwillingness to subscribe ultimately to any one view demonstrates the point), his word has been appropriated by various characters in the novel as final and correct."¹³⁸ The characters Stavrogin comes to influence, such as Kirillov and Shatov, not only accept his word as dogma, but almost as kind of gospel. Their treatment of Stavrogin suggests his connection with the supreme pretender—the Anti-Christ.

As many have noted, Stavrogin's very name suggests his dualistic holy and demonic nature: "stavro" being the the Greek word for cross, and "rog" Russian for horn.¹³⁹ Through his connection with the Anti-Christ, Stavrogin is portrayed as the "idol" of nihilism.¹⁴⁰ Kirillov, Shatov, and Pyotr Stepanovich all treat Stavrogin as a kind of holy figure throughout the novel. As critics have noted, "when one sums up all the aspects of the novel connected, on various levels, with Stavrogin, there emerges a significant, Gospel-like scheme of disciples awaiting revelations and sacrifices."¹⁴¹ Far from than encouraging this treatment, Stavrogin is confused

¹³⁸ Danow, "Stavrogin's Teachings," 213.

¹³⁹ E.g., Elif Batuman, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 265.

¹⁴⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 419.

¹⁴¹ Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev*, 96.

and annoyed at being held up as a nihilist idol. At one point Stavrogin angrily expresses his resentment to Kirillov;

“I’m beginning not to understand anything!” Stavrogin said spitefully. “Why does everyone expect something of me that they don’t expect of others? Why should I take what no one else takes, and invite burdens on myself that no one else can bear?”

“I thought you yourself were seeking a burden?”

“I’m seeking a burden?”

“Yes.”

“Is it so noticeable?”

“Yes.”¹⁴²

Stavrogin Mutilates the Text

Stavrogin appeared as an enigma not only to other characters and himself, but also to his author. As noted earlier, Dostoevsky originally conceived of *Demons* as a polemical denunciation of the nihilist generation; this story was to center around the murder of a Russian University student by the infamous nihilist Sergei Nechaev. In this “pamphlet” version of the story, the character of Stavrogin was meant to take on a secondary role as a kind of sidekick to the main nihilist (the character who developed into Pyotr Stepanovich). However, as Dostoevsky continued his work on the novel in the spring of 1870, the character of Stavrogin began to take on a more prominent role. As Joseph Frank explains, “by April 1870, Dostoevsky had developed the Prince-Stavrogin, hitherto an accessory to the main conflict of generations theme, to the point

¹⁴² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 289.

where he had become the hero and taken the book away from both Granovsky and Nechaev [the early models for Stepan Trofimovich and his son, respectively].”¹⁴³

Just as Nikolai Stavrogin’s startling appearance in town disrupts its inhabitants, his evolving role in the novel disrupted his author’s plans. By February of 1871, Dostoevsky was worried that he had taken on more than he could handle. “The idea enticed me, and I’ve come to love it awfully much, but will I be able to manage it, won’t I fuck up the whole novel— that’s the problem!”¹⁴⁴ Problems surrounding the character of Stavrogin interfered with Dostoevsky’s plans for *Demons* not just once but twice. These disruptions can be used to explain some of the more incongruous aspects of the novel which have tormented readers and critics, such as Stavrogin’s opaque role within the novel, and the the conclusion featuring Stepan Trofimovich.

This explosion of Stavrogin’s character was one of the most important developments of the novel, transforming it in Dostoevsky’s eyes from the political “pamphlet” he first conceived of into the complex, tragic inter-generational web that it became. In a letter from that spring, Dostoevsky describes Stavrogin’s growing prominence within his scheme: “Even though the whole incident [the murder] forms one of the main events of my novel, it is nonetheless only an accessory and a setting for the actions of another character, who really could be called the main character.... This other character [Stavrogin] is also a sinister character, also a villain. But he seems to me a tragic character.”¹⁴⁵ Dostoevsky’s letter describes a crucial moment of reversal for

¹⁴³ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 409. While I occasionally make reference to the historic models for Dostoevsky’s characters when it seems relevant, I have not contrived to make this an aspect of my analysis. This is because I have found that the attempt to trace models in Dostoevsky quickly becomes an encyclopedic rather than illuminating endeavor. As Robin Feuer Miller slyly noted, most aspects of Dostoevsky’s fiction “if it has any sources at all, is most likely to have at least two sources, if not more.” *Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey*, 88.

¹⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:324.

¹⁴⁵ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 411.

his novel. Pyotr Stepanovich's murderous plot, which had originally been the focus of the novel, while still a "main event" of the plot, was now becoming an "accessory" to the character of Stavrogin.

Dostoevsky's comment that Stavrogin appears to him as a "tragic" character marks another important development. While *Demons* is in many regards a tragic novel, it is also one of the most satirical among his works. Peculiarly, amidst all this satire, Stavrogin is portrayed without a note of humor. Some of the scenes involving Stavrogin would be comic if they were delivered to us by another character. But with Stavrogin, even seemingly juvenile pranks take on a sinister meaning—they reflect his "experimental" rejection of morality. For example, shortly after arriving in town Stavrogin commits two scandalous acts—he pulls the nose of one local gentlemen, and then bites the ear of a colonel.¹⁴⁶ While these transgressions seem minor compared to some of the other crimes in the novel, the narrator emphasizes that they are "so unheard of, so utterly unlike anything else... with no pretext whatsoever."¹⁴⁷ Like the more serious sins Stavrogin commits, these acts are without precedent or paternity, and represent a person who takes a "diabolical delight in their own perdition, the fascinating urge to bend over the abyss and to peep into it."¹⁴⁸

Stavrogin's transgressions are not funny because they are genuinely frightening—even in the case of the ear-biting incident, it is clear that Stavrogin could just as easily have bitten the man's ear off as let him go. "Another moment and the poor man would, of course, have died of

¹⁴⁶ See Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 45 and 50.

¹⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 45.

¹⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:40.

fright; but the monster had mercy on him and let him go.”¹⁴⁹ Stavrogin announces his arrival in the novel with a series of these “pranks,” and his depravity only escalates from there. Stavrogin’s trajectory in the novel is a long fall into perdition, and for this reason Dostoevsky portrays him as a tragic rather than satiric figure.

Dostoevsky’s conception of the nihilist as a “tragic” type is indicative of his relation to this ideology. He understood that the destructive ideology of the nihilists was largely motivated by a desire for reform, and an understandable revulsion at current social conditions. Radicalism and dissent were positions familiar to Dostoevsky—he was “an old Nechaevist” himself.¹⁵⁰ Stavrogin is described as a “sinister character,” and a “villain” in Dostoevsky’s letter, but in his mind the nihilists were not necessarily evil. Because these young extremists were motivated by a desire for social reform, their ideological fantasies ought to be pitied and condemned in equal measure. This perspective is reflected in Dostoevsky’s treatment of Pyotr Stepanovich and Nikolai Stavrogin. While these characters perpetrate evil acts, they are better understood as being extremely misguided rather than purely evil.

This nuanced perception of the nihilists is one of the reasons Dostoevsky was unable to complete this novel as the “pamphlet” he had originally outlined. Writing to his editor Katkov during the spring of 1870, Dostoevsky describes the immense trouble the re-organization of the novel gave him. “All year I only tore up and made alterations. I blackened so many mounds of paper that I even lost my system of references for what I had written. I had modified the plan no less than ten times, and completely rewrote the first part each time.”¹⁵¹ Dostoevsky continued to

¹⁴⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ See Introduction, page 13.

¹⁵¹ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 410.

be plagued by uncertainties and revisions as the novel was being published serially through 1871 and '72, and many of which were connected to the character of Stavrogin.

If alterations to Stavrogin's character interfered with Dostoevsky's novel early in its composition, he faced an even greater disruption after completing it, when the crucial final chapter featuring Stavrogin was rejected for publication. This act of censorship "forced Dostoevsky to mutilate the original symmetry of his plan."¹⁵² Instead of having the novel conclude with the exposition of Stavrogin's character and his suicide, Dostoevsky had to change it to focus on the fate of the father, Stepan Trofimovich. The conclusion of the novel is jarring to many readers, because while the focus on Stepan Trofimovich seems logical as starting-point for the novel, its second half is centered around his sons. Furthermore, the deletion of the final chapter left many aspects of Stavrogin's character unresolved within the novel.¹⁵³ Dostoevsky's initial plan more clearly traces the spread of radical ideology, starting with the father and ending with the sons. The revised conclusion somewhat obscures his original intentions for the novel by presenting the spread of ideological thought in a seemingly circular pattern (beginning and ending with Stepan Trofimovich). Before the final chapters were published in 1922, many readers were puzzled by Stavrogin's mysterious absence from the end of the novel and his

¹⁵² Frank, "Masks", 686.

¹⁵³ For example, one important detail revealed in the censored chapter was that Stavrogin actually hallucinated demons, and was sometimes unable to perceive the line between reality and his own fantasies. Stavrogin's hallucinations are hinted at in various points throughout the novel. E.g., in one scene, Stavrogin encounters Fedka on a bridge and the convict makes him a murderous proposition. Later that night, Stavrogin tells Darya Pavlovna; "I keep seeing ghosts now. Yesterday, on the bridge, one little demon offered to put a knife in Lebyadkin and Marya Timofeevna for me..." Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 293. Stavrogin mistakes Fedka for one of his hallucinations. With the final chapter removed, this element of Stavrogin's demonism was left unresolved.

seemingly unexplained suicide. While Dostoevsky's novel is deliberately opaque, his difficulties with censorship made the novel even more enigmatic than he originally intended.

Stavrogin and Stepan Trofimovich: An Allegorical Legacy

Peculiarly, in a novel that is so concerned with politics and ideology, the two characters who have the greatest influence on the rest of the cast—Stavrogin and Stepan Trofimovich—have almost no coherent ideology themselves. The latter is on a quest for a new set of beliefs and ideals which will animate him and unite the world which is collapsing around them. Stavrogin has a more detached relationship to this search for new ideals—he acts more as a scientist testing out his hypotheses. Despite their important differences of approach, both these characters have forsaken tradition and religion without replacing them with new values. Stepan Trofimovich's conception of the values with which to replace religious faith are devoid of content—they are only aesthetic ideals and romantic sentiments. Stavrogin is not in search of founding ideals for a new world order, but is testing for himself whether the categories of “good” and “evil” really exist. These characters' rejection of the existing order is not dangerous because they are destroying something inherently good—Dostoevsky recognized the oppressive elements of Russian society, and was not so naive as to believe that the status quo was an ideal. Rather, these characters are dangerous because they tear down the old world without having any conception of what to replace it with. Furthermore, they have no appreciation for what is already good in the world, throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Their tearing down of existing values proves disastrous not only for themselves, but also for all the other characters they influence.

We can see the undermining effects of Stepan Trofimovich's teachings in Stavrogin, who is unlike his teacher in so many ways, but shares his inability to perceive physical reality as such. Stavrogin's inherited obsession with allegorical interpretation is shown in one conversation with Kirillov. In their dialogue, Kirillov emphasizes the inherent goodness and simplicity of the natural world. He asks Stavrogin, "have you seen a leaf, a leaf from a tree? ...I saw one recently... When I was ten years old, I'd close my eyes on purpose, in winter, and imagine a leaf — green, bright, with veins, and the sun shining. I'd open my eyes and not believe it, because it was so good..."¹⁵⁴

Kirillov's statement about the leaf is one of the only examples in the novel of a character expressing a non-intellectual, non-allegorical perspective. Kirillov senses the goodness of the natural world in the leaf, and thus the inherent goodness of the God who created it. Kirillov reveals a side of himself which is simple, pure and spiritual—something that Stavrogin is entirely unable to understand. Stavrogin's response to Kirillov's ode to the leaf is revealing of his ideological approach: "what's that, an allegory?"¹⁵⁵ Stavrogin's allegorical understanding of reality is representative of ideological thinking because it treats the phenomenon as being secondary to the principle. In other words, rather than seeing Kirillov's action as having a possible allegorical meaning, Stavrogin looks for the allegorical *principle* that motivated his action. Later in the conversation when Kirillov mentions that he stopped his clock during a sleepless night, Stavrogin responds, "as an emblem that time should stop?"¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 237.

¹⁵⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 237.

¹⁵⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 238.

Stavrogin reveals his apocalyptic view in this question, referencing the passage from the Book of Revelations that says that there “should be time no longer” after the eschaton.¹⁵⁷ Kirillov has no answer to this question, for there is no hidden meaning in his action. Stavrogin’s vision is so occluded by his search for principles that it is impossible for him not to see a deeper level of meaning in Kirillov’s simple act. Similarly to his tutor, although in a much more pointed fashion, Stavrogin is always searching for allegorical meanings where there are none to be found. In escaping from the confines of allegory and theory, Kirillov is finally able to perceive the holy. Stavrogin’s ideological perspective is blind to the realm of the holy, and thus for Dostoevsky, wholly blind to life itself.

Warped Mirrors

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky literalizes his view that Russian liberalism is more often “retrograde” than progressive.¹⁵⁸ Through his tutoring, Stepan Trofimovich helps create a man who can be read as either his precedent or contemporary. However, Stepan Trofimovich cannot only be understood as the “author” of Stavrogin; the relationship between the two is much more complex than just that of teacher and student. As in much of Dostoevsky’s fiction, a number of characters in *Demons* can be said to represent the distorted double of one another, and I would argue that this is the case with Stavrogin and Stepan Trofimovich.

¹⁵⁷ Rev. 10:6 KJV.

¹⁵⁸Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:27.

As scholars have noted, historically, Stavrogin's "nihilism" is not just the product of Stepan Trofimovich's aesthetic romanticism, but it's "approximate coeval."¹⁵⁹ In this view, the character of Stavrogin represents a negative type of Byronic romanticism associated with his teacher's era of the early 1800's; although Stavrogin is from the 1860's, he reflects a "type" from the 1840's. As Joseph Frank notes, "up to the age of sixteen, Nikolay Stavrogin was the pupil of Stepan Trofimovich, who had been entrusted with his education; and this plot structure makes a Liberal Idealist of the 1840's the spiritual progenitor of a Byronic type associated with the 1820s and 1830s."¹⁶⁰ It has also been noted that Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin appear as members of the same generation because they can be read as brothers in the structure of the novel: "Stepan Trofimovich became like a son to Mrs. Stavrogin, Nikolai's mother. If Stepan Trofimovich is the son of Mrs. Stavrogin, then he is not the parent/tutor of Nikolai but his brother."¹⁶¹

However, in considering the intellectual relationship between Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin, many scholars have put far too much emphasis on the "eras" which these characters supposedly represent.¹⁶² I believe that to look at Stavrogin as being *only* the intellectual precedent or "brother" of his teacher is to consider the ideas expressed within the novel in an overly temporal manner. In other words, Dostoevsky presents ideology as developing in time, not as *frozen* in time. The rhizomic pattern of inheritance between various characters is central to this

¹⁵⁹ R. M. Davison, *Dostoevsky's the Devils: A Critical Companion*, ed. William J. Leatherbarrow (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 123.

¹⁶⁰ Frank, *Miraculous Years*, 478.

¹⁶¹ Davison, *Dostoevsky's the Devils*, 123.

¹⁶² In particular, I believe that Joseph Frank's treatment of this novel in *The Miraculous Years*, while extremely well researched and illuminating, tends to undervalue *Demons* because he treats the incongruous relationship between Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin as being a more of mistake made due to editorial pressures and time constraints, rather than as an intentional artistic development.

novel, and as Deleuze writes, this model rejects a purely “generative” approach.¹⁶³ The roots of Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich’s nihilism are numerous and twisted, and do not stem from their “father” alone. Stepan Trofimovich is not the origin of these idea-demons at all—he lacks the intellect to create anything original. His ideas are themselves derived from other books, and European philosophies. While one could provide a general list of the sources for Stepan Trofimovich’s liberalism, I don’t think such an effort would be particularly enlightening. Stepan Trofimovich is presented not as a careful student of European philosophy, but as a careless dilettante. The ideas he expounds, similarly to his legacy, are characterized less by their actual content than by what they lack: earnestness, a connection to one’s homeland, and any appreciation for the holy. Stavrogin comes to embody this rootless and empty nature of Stepan Trofimovich’s liberal ideology. Stavrogin is presented as being incapable of having genuine feelings—every position he adopts is a mere experiment. While he makes a strange attempt at atonement in the censored chapter “At Tikhon’s,” he is prevented from achieving it by a perverse desire for self-exposure and a lack of genuine remorse.

In the suppressed chapter, Stavrogin visits a Russian Orthodox Monk and “holy fool,” identified only as Tikhon. Stavrogin hands Tikhon a printed copy of his “confession” which he claims is “intended for distribution.”¹⁶⁴ In this confession, which includes some of the most haunting passages in Dostoevsky’s fiction, Stavrogin lists a number of his sins: childhood thefts, compulsive acts of masturbation, the murder of two innocents in duels, the rape and presumed murder of an undisclosed woman, and the murder of another person by poisoning. Out of all

¹⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12. (See Introduction, page 21.)

¹⁶⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 690.

these crimes, the only one that haunts Stavrogin is his rape of a ten year old girl who later commits suicide. Stavrogin claims that he can forget this girl and only torments himself with her memory deliberately, because he is “in perfect control of my will.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, Stavrogin presents both the act of rape and his memory of it as merely another one of his “experiments.” The text of his “confession,” however, suggests otherwise. Stavrogin cannot forget the image of his victim shaking her tiny fist at him in outrage after his crime:

I saw Matryosha [the girl], wasted and with feverish eyes, exactly the same as when she had stood on my threshold, and, shaking her head, had raised her 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, only blaming herself! ... This I cannot bear.¹⁶⁶

Despite all of Stavrogin’s experimental attempts at placing himself outside the bounds of morality, his confession makes it clear that even for a nihilist such as himself, some things remain impermissible. Stavrogin’s crime against this ten-year-old represents the worst kind of sin to Dostoevsky, the destruction of an innocent.¹⁶⁷ The only sin which Stavrogin is unable to forgive himself, the assault of a child, is the same sin which Christ suggests is beyond forgiveness in the Gospel of Luke: “It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.”¹⁶⁸ In modern psychological terms, we would call Stavrogin a psychopath; he is able to perpetrate almost any act of cruelty without remorse. However, this “almost” is crucial for Dostoevsky. Despite his

¹⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 704.

¹⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 703-4.

¹⁶⁷ This is the same kind of sin that Ivan Karamazov struggles to understand in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

¹⁶⁸ 17:2 KJV

lack of guilt, Dostoevsky does not allow Stavrogin to escape his sins—he is tormented by the image of Matryosha, and eventually hangs himself. It is significant that even a monster like Stavrogin cannot entirely escape the boundaries of Christian morality: “no matter what Stavrogin may *think* he believes, he cannot entirely suppress the *feeling* for the difference between good and evil; and this irrepressible instinct erupts from his subconscious— almost always the guardian of morality for Dostoevsky.”¹⁶⁹ With Matryosha’s death, one of Stavrogin’s experiments finally produces a response in him. He feels a glimmer of morality, and this causes him to kill himself.

Dostoevsky’s ethics are deeply rooted in the Gospels, so it makes sense that the out of all the sinners and criminals in his novels, the only ones who are not given a chance of redemption are those who harm children.¹⁷⁰ However, Dostoevsky’s treatment of child abusers in his novels cannot be merely explained by Christian views alone. Dostoevsky raises the issue of child rape and abuse not only in *Demons*, but in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* as well. Dostoevsky’s interest in this issue was often considered strange and perverse, and the final chapter of *Demons* was censored for this reason. During Dostoevsky’s lifetime, “no criticism was more widespread than the charge that he dealt only with the “abnormal,” the “unhinged,” and the “psychopathic.”¹⁷¹ However, far from being prurient, I would argue that Dostoevsky’s focus on issues such as rape and abuse reflect his fundamental empathy and integrity as an artist.

¹⁶⁹ Frank, “Masks,” 684.

¹⁷⁰ Svidrigailov, in *Crime and Punishment*, also rapes a girl who commits suicide afterwards, and later hangs himself.

¹⁷¹ Frank, *Mantle of the Prophet*, 140.

Dostoevsky forces his reader to confront realities we tend to turn a blind eye towards—the suffering of others.

In his fiction, Dostoevsky showed that people others might describe as “psychopathic” and “unhinged,” such as murderers, suicides, radicals, and holy fools, expose dilemmas which are fundamental rather than tertiary to their society. The nihilists of *Demons* are a primary example of this tendency; they reflect the developing ideas and crises of their era, and are distorted yet illuminating reflections. Dostoevsky was not just being boastful when he wrote that his method of “ideal realism” had “prophesied facts.”¹⁷² More accurately, Dostoevsky *anticipated* facts, and potential future realities. This is certainly true of *Demons*, in which Dostoevsky anticipated that the actions of an unhinged group of ideologues could soon become the mainstream for Russian politics.

“Ever-Ready Words”

Similarly to Stavrogin, Pyotr Stepanovich is presented as a deceiver whose physical appearance and glibness masks a darker reality. While Stavrogin represent the metaphysical elements of nihilism, Pyotr stands in for the political and material side of this ideology. Unlike his companion, Pyotr Stepanovich has little interest in ideas. While he does advance destructive ideologies, he has little interest in the content of these ideas and uses them only to manipulate others. Similarly to Stavrogin and his father, Pyotr Stepanovich is characterized by his contradictions—he appears healthy looking and somewhat attractive, yet simultaneously repulsive and diseased.

¹⁷² Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:114. (See Introduction, page 2.)

No one would call him bad looking, but no one likes his face... The expression of his face is as if sickly, but it only seems so. He has a sort of dry crease on his cheeks and around his cheekbones, which makes him look as if he were recovering from a grave illness. And yet he is perfectly healthy and strong, and has never even been ill.... Nothing, it seems, can out him out of his countenance; in any circumstances and in any society, he remains the same... His thoughts are calm, despite his hurried look, distinct and final—and that is especially noticeable. His enunciation is remarkably clear; his words spill out like big, uniform grains, always choice and always ready to be at your service. You like it at first, but later it will become repulsive, and precisely because of this all too clear enunciation, this string of ever ready words.¹⁷³

Dostoevsky's description of Pyotr Stepanovich as being "sickly" signifies more than his appearance—Pyotr Stepanovich has one of the most acute cases of ideological infection within the novel. His appearance "as if he were recovering from a grave illness," is a typical deception. Pyotr Stepanovich, far from being on a path to recovery, remains infected with the ideological disease throughout the entire novel. The fact that he appears "recovering," and presents himself as a glib and charming young man who has everyone's best interests in mind is what makes him so dangerous. If Pyotr Stepanovich seems in any way recovered from his ideological disease, this is only a sign that his infection has become fully synthesized with his character. In medical terms, we might consider him to be a "silent carrier" of his infection—someone who is able to spread his disease even more widely because he can hide his own symptoms. Stavrogin's "experimentalism" at least reflects some attempt to heal himself by testing the limits of his infection. For Pyotr Stepanovich, the ideological infection is so deeply imbued with his character that it is impossible to pull him apart from it.

¹⁷³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 179-80.

Similarly to his physical appearance, Pyotr Stepanovich's speech disguises his dangerous nature. Like his father, Pyotr Stepanovich is a man with an attraction to language; he is "never at a loss for words." While Stepan Trofimovich's words always come out rushed and muddled, the language of his son is persuasive and deliberate—*especially* when it seems the opposite. The difference between Stepan Trofimovich's manner of speech and his son's is indicative of the distinct ideological stages of the generations of fathers and sons—the former theorize while the latter act. Varvara Petrovna makes this distinction between generational speech styles when she says to her friend, "You're terribly fond of exclaiming, Stepan Trofimovich. It's not at all the fashion nowadays. They talk crudely but plainly."¹⁷⁴ Pyotr Stepanovich exemplifies the nihilistic form of speech—rejecting custom and manners, he is always curt and not hesitant to offend or unsettle his audience. While he adapts his message to the individual, his "crude" and "plain" style remains the same. As Pyotr Stepanovich admits after offending the provincial governor, "I always have the same manners."¹⁷⁵ His "crude" manner of speech masks his manipulateness by convincing others that he is obtuse. Pyotr Stepanovich is responsible for goading others into acts of arson, brutality, suicide, and murder. He is a figure familiar to the modern political landscape, both a con-artist and terrorist. Pyotr Stepanovich is a terrorist in the truest sense: he treats violence, chaos, and destruction as political goals unto themselves. However, he orchestrates his crimes so effectively that he may even trick the reader—his true importance within the scheme of the novel is hard to fully appreciate upon a first reading.

¹⁷⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 337.

¹⁷⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 349.

Hustling and Bullying: Pyotr Stepanovich's Manipulations

Pyotr Stepanovich is responsible for most of the acts of violence and destruction within the novel, which is why I call him the “architect” of nihilism. Like an architect, Pyotr Stepanovich develops a plan which depends on the labor of many others to be enacted. Pyotr Stepanovich manipulates other characters into causing chaos primarily through two rhetorical strategies. We can call these strategies “bullying” and “hustling.” The former strategy is seen in the opening passage from this chapter, and the latter is represented by Pyotr Trofimovich’s aforementioned “crude speech”—his technique of glibness and playing dumb. In the most typical example of the hustle, the hustler pretends to be incompetent at a game until a large bet is placed, at which point she trounces her opponent. Pyotr Stepanovich similarly hustles the townspeople by pretending that he is stupid and naive. However, at his most effective, he plays the game even more slyly than the gambler does, never revealing his abilities. And Pyotr Stepanovich is not playing for his own gain, but for everyone else’s destruction.

Pyotr Stepanovich’s dual methods of rhetorical manipulation are most visible in his treatment of the Governor of the province, Andrei Antonovich Von Lembke, and his wife Yulia Mikhailovna. Governor Von Lembke is somewhat similar to Stepan Trofimovich, in that he is also a liberal of the 40’s generation who seeks to calm the growing nihilist frenzy. He is afraid of the nihilists and radicals, but as an old liberal he also empathizes with their idealism. His wife has an even more sympathetic attitude towards the radical generation than he does, and spends a great deal of time “studying” their doctrines. Because of her uncertainty and fear of being labelled regressive, Pyotr Stepanovich is able to hold great influence over Yulia Mikhailovna without her even knowing it. “The poor woman suddenly found herself the plaything of the most

various influences, at the same time imagining herself to be original.”¹⁷⁶ He helps her organize the provincial literary “fete,” while ensuring that it will culminate in disaster.

Pyotr Stepanovich pushes Yulia Mikhailovna towards liberalism because it suits his terrorist purposes; in helping her plan the progressive literary soiree, he includes unhinged radicals in the program he knows will rile the audience into a frenzy. At the same time, he pushes Governor Von Lembke towards a more reactionary stance. Pyotr Stepanovich shares Stavrogin’s quality of advancing conflicting ideologies, although he does so to manipulate others rather than himself. The events surrounding the “riot” of the Shpigulin factory workers are a perfect example of Pyotr Stepanovich using his manipulative strategies on dual fronts. In this episode, a number of workers seek an audience with Governor Von Lembke because they are being denied their wages. It is clear that the worker’s request does not represent any kind of revolt, but on the contrary, demonstrates their naive belief in the fairness of the Governor. However, Pyotr Stepanovich works carefully behind the scenes to agitate the workers and hustle the Governor into treating the episode as a “riot.” Immediately before the confrontation between the Governor’s forces and the Shpigulin men, a bundle of radical tracts are found at the factory, presumably left there by Pyotr Stepanovich.¹⁷⁷ The workers immediately hand these tracts over to the police unread, revealing their mistrust of radicalism, yet the episode still unsettles the Governor.

While the Governor is still worrying himself over these tracts, Pyotr Stepanovich pays him a visit to antagonize him even further. In their exchange, we can see Pyotr Stepanovich using

¹⁷⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 344.

¹⁷⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 346.

his bullying rhetoric, in which he shuts down rational considerations and attempts to shame his opponent into accepting his position.

“You’re too soft, Andrei Antonovich; you write novels. What’s needed here are the old methods.”

“What do you mean, the old methods, what sort of advice is that? The factory has been cleaned up; I gave orders, it was cleaned up.”

“Yet there’s rioting among the workers. They all ought to be whipped, and there’s an end to it.”

“Rioting? Nonsense, I gave orders and it was cleaned up.”

“Eh, what a soft man you are, Andrei Antonovich!”¹⁷⁸

Notice that Pyotr never attempts to back up his claims, but instead bullies his listener into accepting them as indisputable through mockery. When the Governor claims that there is no riot, Pyotr Stepanovich does not argue with him, but merely accuses him of being “soft.” Pitted against the Governor’s “soft” liberalism, Pyotr Stepanovich’s method of bullying proves to be more effective than reasoned arguments or facts. A few days later, the Governor sees the phantom Pyotr Stepanovich wielded against him. When the workers humbly petition the Governor at the square in front of his house, Von Lembke instead sees a chaotic riot. As our narrator remarks, “the riot was as evident to [Von Lembke] as the kubitkas had been earlier to Stepan Trofimovich.”¹⁷⁹ The kubitka referenced here is a type of wagon used to deport disgraced noblemen and political exiles. The narrator is suggesting the phantom riot is as real to the Governor as the specter of exile was for Stepan Trofimovich. Like his idol Stavrogin, Pyotr Stepanovich is able to drive others into an ideologically motivated mis-reading of the world.

¹⁷⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 350.

¹⁷⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 44.

Pyotr Stepanovich: From Social Justice to Apocalypse

One of the most frightening aspects of Pyotr Stepanovich's character is that he is not an exaggeration of some of the most extreme radicals from Dostoevsky's era. Like most of the cast of *Demons*, Dostoevsky uses this character to synthesize a number of traits that he saw as inherent to his ideological "type." As Dostoevsky proudly declares in his letter describing his form of "ideal realism," his synthesis of the nihilist "type" came much closer to the truth of Russian nihilism than any factual account alone could provide.

The character of Pyotr Stepanovich Verhovensky was based on the real-life Russian nihilist Sergei Nechaev, who was a darling of Bakunin and other leftist Russian exiles.¹⁸⁰ The historical record suggests that Nechaev was very much a man like Pyotr Verhovensky, amoral and uninterested in ideas, yet ideologically rabid: "[Nechaev] himself was a man without clear ideas or a breadth of view, yet he made up for his lack in intellectual stature by fanatical zeal and the reckless pursuit of his chosen aims."¹⁸¹ The resemblance between Pyotr Stepanovich and Nechaev is striking. However, in his letters Dostoevsky explained that he only knew of Nechaev from the newspapers, "and even if I did know [more], I wouldn't copy."¹⁸² While Dostoevsky also made extensive use of Nechaev's terrorist-revolutionary pamphlet *The Catechism of a Revolutionary*, he was not interested in Sergei Nechaev specifically, but in the "type" that he represented. As he explained, "My imagination may differ to the greatest extent from what actually happened, and my Pyotr Verhovensky may not resemble Nechaev at all; but I think that

¹⁸⁰ Philip Pomper, *Sergei Nechaev* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 46.

¹⁸¹ Michael Prawdin, *The Unmentionable Nechaev: A Key to Bolshevism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), 39.

¹⁸² Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3: 275.

in my stunned mind there has been created by my imagination the type that corresponds to that villainy.”¹⁸³ Nechaev represents a type who was beyond his time, a vanguard of destruction to come. Through his analysis of this radical, Dostoevsky anticipated many of the characteristics of 20th century extremist movements. As Besançon writes, “Dostoevsky had glimpsed the general outlines of the ‘cult of personality.’”¹⁸⁴

The “type” corresponding to this murder would become the character of Pyotr Stepanovich, a man capable of murdering for an ideal. Through this character, Dostoevsky suggests the opposing impulses which motivate ideological extremists—a desire for social justice and for societal destruction. These contradictory ends link the utopian liberal ideology of Stepan Trofimovich to the apocalyptic vision of his sons. Pyotr Stepanovich demonstrates that the enactment of a utopian vision means destroying life as it currently exists. As critics of *Demons* have noted, “images of utopia typically derive not just from a thirst for social justice, but also from a hunger for the end of time as we have known it; for the time when (as the Book of Revelations promises) ‘there shall be time no longer.’”¹⁸⁵

While it is easy to see Pyotr Stepanovich’s apocalyptic motivations, it is much harder to recognize him as having a “thirst for social justice.” Although this quality is less pronounced than his capacity for destruction, Pyotr Stepanovich does have faint humanitarian impulses. Pyotr Stepanovich is not motivated by self-interest. None of his crimes are stirred by personal gain, but rather by a desire to enact his destructive ideology. Unlike Stavrogin, he derives no satisfaction from harming others, and generally refrains from violence himself (with the small exception of

¹⁸³ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3: 275.

¹⁸⁴ Besançon, *Gulag*, 138.

¹⁸⁵ Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 1.

one murder). What then are the justifications for his destructive ideology? The answer to this question is what ties Pyotr Stepanovich into the tragic theme of *Demons*.

Pyotr Stepanovich is completely committed to his mission of destruction, as opposed to Stavrogin who is searching for belief and resolution. As he declares himself, Pyotr Stepanovich has little penchant for theorizing, or even justifying anything. However, Dostoevsky suggests that the basic justification for Pyotr Stepanovich's terrorism is the desire to create a better world. Like his father, and the young Dostoevsky himself, this terrorist is motivated by a desire for social reform. Dostoevsky suggests the humanitarian motivation for violence in one conversation between the two nihilists in which Pyotr Stepanovich says: "Listen, I myself saw a six year old child leading his drunken mother home, and she was swearing at him in foul language. You think I'm glad of that? When it's in our hands, we may even cure it... if need be we'll drive them into the desert for forty years... But one or two generations of depravity are necessary now."¹⁸⁶

In a broad way, this passage points to how "rationalistic evil is born of rationalistic good."¹⁸⁷ Two generations of "depravity" and suffering are necessary to change the corrupted state of human society. However, it would be ridiculous to use this passage to prove that Pyotr Stepanovich is actually a humanitarian, or fundamentally motivated by a desire for "rationalistic good." While Pyotr Stepanovich makes oblique reference to the humanitarian justifications for destruction here, he does not fully accept them himself. He sees a child suffering, and in some inchoate way, he feels this is wrong and needs to be fixed. However, Dostoevsky does not portray this glimmer of human feeling as driving his terrorism. Pyotr Stepanovich is not arguing

¹⁸⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 420.

¹⁸⁷ Kostalevsky, *Dostoevsky and Soloviev*, 161.

that the ends justify the means, but rather that destruction is an inherent good in itself. His lack of concern about the consequences of violence reveal this. After wringing humanity through decades of desert existence and “depravity,” Pyotr Stepanovich only says that his regime “may” cure some suffering. This argument (although Pyotr Stepanovich’s “arguments” are more accurately assaults on both reason and decency) cannot be understood as a “rationalistic” defense of terrorism.

While Pyotr Stepanovich is no humanitarian led astray, it is also wrong to describe him as “evil incarnate,” as some critics have done.¹⁸⁸ Pyotr Stepanovich is better described as lost than evil. Dostoevsky portrays him as being entirely without a moral compass—almost more barren than Stavrogin, who at least shows an unwillingness to live with his depravity. The lines “you think I’m glad of that?” is truly the *only* expression of morality that Pyotr Stepanovich makes in the entire novel.

This passage also shows Pyotr Stepanovich fulfilling the role outlined for him by his father—a man who believes he is God. Pyotr Stepanovich’s comment about driving the people into the desert for forty years is an obvious reference to the exodus of the Jews in the Old Testament. In Pyotr Stepanovich’s ideological blueprint, he is the god-like figure who must drive humanity into suffering so they can begin to reform themselves. In a perverse manner, he shares his author’s conviction that suffering is the basis for all progress. However, while Dostoevsky believes suffering can only lead to spiritual redemption for the individual, the nihilist conceives of it as the way to redeem all of human society.

¹⁸⁸ E.g., Daniel R. Brower, *Training the Nihilists: Education and Radicalism in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1975), 32.

The Architect and the Idol: Exploitation and Worship

The twisted relationship between Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin emphasizes their roles as the architect and inspiration for nihilist chaos. Similarly to Kirillov and Ivan Shatov, Pyotr Stepanovich views Stavrogin as an object of worship. His treatment of Stavrogin as an “idol,” represents another development of his father’s ideological dream. Like his father, Pyotr Stepanovich makes an empty reverence for beauty into an ideology.

Do you know that you are beautiful! The most precious thing is that you sometimes don’t know it.... I love beauty. I am a nihilist, but I love beauty. Do nihilists not love beauty? They just don’t love idols, but I love an idol! You are my idol!... It’s nothing for you to sacrifice life, your own or someone else’s. You are precisely what is needed. I, I need precisely such a man as you... you are a leader, you are a sun, I am your worm.”

He suddenly kissed his hand. A chill ran down Stavrogin’s spine and he jerked his hand away in fright.¹⁸⁹

Like Stepan Trofimovich’s aesthetic ideals, Stavrogin’s beauty is a hollow idol. Unlike his father, Pyotr Stepanovich does not worship the beauty of art, but the hideous beauty of destruction represented in Stavrogin. Stavrogin is no “sun,” but an abyss. Even he is frightened by Pyotr Stepanovich’s ideological hysteria, jerking his hand away in fright. Pyotr Stepanovich’s words reveal his dualistic designs on his companion—he worships him as an “idol,” while also saying he is “precisely what is needed.” Pyotr Stepanovich both exploits and is awed by Stavrogin’s satanic power. As Joseph Frank notes “when Peter [Pyotr] passionately tells Stavrogin, ‘You are my idol!’ this last word should be taken in its full, blasphemous sense.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 419.

¹⁹⁰ Frank, “Masks”, 683.

Pyotr Stepanovich intends to act as a kind of god, as indicated by his disregard for human life and intentions to “drive humanity into the desert for forty years.”¹⁹¹ However, he recognizes that he somehow lacks the authority for his mission. Pyotr Stepanovich needs his “idol,” Stavrogin-as-Anti-Christ, to validate his mission of destruction. However, while he is treated as an object of worship by Pyotr Stepanovich and others, Stavrogin denies this authority himself. Stavrogin’s reaction to Pyotr Stepanovich’s worship echoes the irritation he expresses to Kirillov at this treatment. “But what the devil do you need me for, finally!... Is there some mystery in it, or what? What sort of talisman have you got me for?”¹⁹² Stavrogin recognizes that he is inherently empty, a “neither here nor there” man just like his teacher. His experimental approach results in failure when Stavrogin realizes that he can neither live outside of God nor accept Him. Stavrogin is confused and disturbed by his treatment as a “talisman.” He understands that his experimental approach cannot be the foundation for anything; it is a dead end he cannot escape from, that results in his own suicide. In the following chapter, we will see how two of Stavrogin’s students developed variants of his ideological “teachings,” and reached dead-ends of their own.

Through their inheritance from Stepan Trofimovich, Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich suggest that ideological extremism festers in the absence of authority. Dostoevsky’s liberal teacher shows the consequences of being an authority figure who undermines authority itself. In his treatment of the sons of Stepan Trofimovich, Dostoevsky anticipated the forms of political violence that come with a decline in authority. For Dostoevsky, this “authority” was explicitly

¹⁹¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 420.

¹⁹² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 416.

religious. However, many secular political writers have come to a similar conclusion; the decline of moral, political, and religious authorities has opened space for extremist movements throughout the world.¹⁹³ While political “scientists” have come to this thesis mostly by examining the murderous regimes of the 20th century, Dostoevsky arrived at the same conclusion through his literary method of “ideal realism.”

Towards the end of his life, Isaiah Berlin delivered a moving address titled *A Message to The 21st Century*, explaining what the violence of his own century had taught him. In his speech, Berlin warns the younger generation against “idealists” and ideologues like Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin:

If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems... then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise... The search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion. And then to destruction, blood—eggs are broken, but the omelette is not in sight, there is only an infinite number of eggs, human lives, ready for the breaking. And in the end the passionate idealists forget the omelette, and just go on breaking eggs.¹⁹⁴

Berlin’s message is essentially the same as Dostoevsky’s: beware of utopianism. Pyotr Stepanovich’s is exactly the “idealist” whom Berlin describes as having long lost his original ideal, abandoning it for the ideal of destruction and blood. As Dostoevsky’s terrorist says, “some day” we *may* cure a child’s suffering, but for now there can be only “depravity.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ E.g., Manus I. Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10. “This book advances the basic idea that the origins of political extremism are to be found in the contraction of authority space.”

¹⁹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “A Message to the 21st Century,” *New York Review of Books* 61, no. 16 (October 23, 2014): 33.

¹⁹⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 420.

Berlin spent much of his life elaborating how ideologies premised on visions of a future utopia killed millions. It is a mark of Dostoevsky's unique abilities that he was able to come to the same conclusion through his fictionalized treatment of one murder trial, well before the ideological blood bath of the 20th century.

Chapter Three: Death

Ivan Shatov and Kirillov

As the action of *Demons* progresses, the citizens of the town are taken over by anomie. This is the expression Émile Durkheim popularized in his study *On Suicide* to describe the result of the “undermining of the beliefs” which govern a society.¹⁹⁶ Like Dostoevsky, Durkheim uses the language of infection to describe the collapse of belief: anomie “only takes place when society is passing through some *unhealthy* crisis.”¹⁹⁷ With the breakdown of shared belief and values, “a spirit of anxiety and discontent is latent, and appetites which are only superficially contained soon break out.”¹⁹⁸

A number of scandals break out towards the middle of the novel: a traveling merchant selling Bibles has pornographic photos slipped into her wares, a young woman is taken away from her husband by a group of radical aristocratic ladies, the glass of an icon is smashed in a local church and a live mouse put inside.¹⁹⁹ All of these incidents, while varying in their outrageousness, indicate a breakdown of moral, religious, and communal bonds. This decay of the social body is particularly conveyed by one scene in which a young man is found dead in his hotel room, having shot himself in the heart. Upon hearing about the suicide, a number of the townspeople come to gawk at his corpse. On her way to the hotel, one young woman remarks

¹⁹⁶ Émile Durkheim, *On Suicide*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 275.

¹⁹⁷ Durkheim, *On Suicide*, 275. (My italics.)

¹⁹⁸ Durkheim, *On Suicide*, 275.

¹⁹⁹ See Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 321, 320, and 324, respectively.

that “everything has become so boring there’s no need to be punctilious about entertainment, so long as it’s diverting.”²⁰⁰ For this young woman, there is little difference between a night out at the theater and the spectacle of a suicide—“so long as it’s diverting.”

Milling around the hotel room of the suicide, there is a decidedly festive mood among the spectators—jokes are made, and the crowd begins to eat the leftover food from the dead teenager’s table and drink his remaining champagne. “Our people all stared with greedy curiosity. Generally, in every misfortune of one’s neighbor there is always something that gladdens your eye,” our narrator cynically remarks at the scene.²⁰¹ Another young woman in the hotel room asks, “Why have we got so many people hanging or shooting themselves—as if we’d jumped off our roots, as if the floor had slipped out from under everyone’s feet?”²⁰²

In the characters of Ivan Shatov and Kirillov, Dostoevsky presents two striking examples of the consequences of having “jumped off our roots.” Both Shatov and Kirillov reveal the consequences of “rootless” ideological thought. Within the novel, Stepan Trofimovich first proposes the ideology of destruction. Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin develop this theory and put it into action. It is Shatov and Kirillov who show the deadly consequences of the theory. The fates of Shatov and Kirillov prove that the ideology of destruction leads not to a renewal of mankind, but to its absolute degradation. To understand how these characters represent the consequences of nihilistic ideology, it is helpful to recur to Dostoevsky’s treatment of allegory within the novel. As described in the previous two chapters, through his portrayal of Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin’s allegorical obsessions, Dostoevsky strongly rejects obtuse and

²⁰⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 326

²⁰¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 327

²⁰² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 327.

over-determined forms of interpretation. Therefore, in describing these two characters as the “consequences” of nihilism I do not intend to portray them as being merely predictable outcomes of an equation. As Dostoevsky believed, we cannot treat characters only as signifiers of a larger phenomenon, as this would destroy their essence. In this chapter, I will address Shatov and Kirillov as unique characters with their own specific forms of ideology, before exploring their significance to the broader ideological disease.

Shatov’s Sickness

Ivan Shatov is a former student of Stepan Trofimovich’s, but he is properly the victim of Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin rather than his old teacher. Shatov comes under the pernicious influence of these two nihilists, yet he makes an effort to resist them once he understands their danger. Shatov is one of only characters in the novel, besides Stepan Trofimovich, who shows an ability to break free from the stranglehold of ideological thought. Through the evolution of his Slavophilic views, and more importantly, through his rejection of his former teacher Stavrogin, Shatov demonstrates that it is possible to fight off an ideological infection.

Shatov expresses a number of Slavophilic beliefs in the novel, and many of his views come remarkably close to Dostoevsky’s own. However, he should not be read as standing in for his author, but as another example of Dostoevsky’s ability to ventriloquize and critique ideas he often agreed with in principle. Like Dostoevsky, Shatov believes that Russia’s national purpose is wrapped up in Russian Orthodoxy, and blends nationalistic and religious principles in his thinking. Also similarly to his creator, Shatov protests the attempts of science to determine moral rules, saying, “reason has never been able to define evil and good, or even to separate evil from

good... on the contrary it has always confused them, shamefully and pitifully.”²⁰³ The Christian beliefs of both Shatov and Dostoevsky seem just as much propelled by a fear that faith may be impossible as they are by faith itself.²⁰⁴ Shatov does not exactly believe in God, but strives for belief because he thinks it is necessary. Instead of proclaiming his faith, Shatov says ““I... I will believe in God.”²⁰⁵

If Ivan Shatov mirrors Dostoevsky’s own views, there is also an undeniably tainted element in this character’s views, and this is indicated by their source—Stavrogin. Through Shatov, Dostoevsky shows how even nominally positive beliefs can be undermined by ideological thinking, or as another critic put it, “the sickness of radical thought.”²⁰⁶ Ivan Shatov, like a number of other characters in the novel, accepts Stavrogin’s word as a kind of gospel. As examined in the previous chapter, Stavrogin advances his ideas as hypotheses, in an attempt to goad himself into belief. Shatov takes one of Stavrogin’s hypotheses (a form of Slavophilism), and comes to accept it as his own creed. Shatov is not fully his own man, but a kind of petrified disciple of Stavrogin’s teaching before he manages to break free; he becomes trapped in one form of belief which his teacher once expounded but long since abandoned. Ivan Shatov’s mimicry of Stavrogin is reflected in one exchange between these two characters:

‘Not one nation’ he [Shatov] began, *as if reciting line by line*, and at the same time looking menacingly at Stavrogin, ‘not one nation has ever set itself up on the

²⁰³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 251.

²⁰⁴ Besançon identifies this fear of the impossibility of faith as crucial to the Slavophile worldview. He expresses this fear in political rather than spiritual terms, but the significance is the same— “Slavophilism was not the product of straightforward nationalism... It was fed by the uneasy feeling prevalent in Europe, which it observed and projected on the Russian screen... the point of departure for Slavophilism was not the love of one’s country, but the fear that one may not be able to love it” Besançon, *The Rise*, 70.

²⁰⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 253.

²⁰⁶ Valentino, “Flesh,” 42.

principles of science and reason... Socialism by its very essence must be atheism, because it has precisely declared, from the very first line, that it is an atheistic order, and intends to set itself up on the principles of science and reason exclusively... The aim of all movements of nations, of every nation and in every period of existence, is solely the seeking for God, its own God.’²⁰⁷

The narrator’s remark that this speech sounds like a recitation points to its tainted source, and Shatov makes this even clearer in his concluding words—“these are all your own words, Stavrogin... I haven’t changed anything, not a word.”²⁰⁸

While Shatov’s first remarks are essentially a synthesis of Dostoevsky’s critique of socialism (it is understandable as an ideal, but always an insufficient foundation for nations and communities), his later remarks about the “aim of all nations” shows the pernicious influence of ideology. As noted in the introduction, one of the hallmarks of ideological thinking is that it is fundamentally transgressive, and confuses the boundaries between ideas and beliefs. Ideology takes beliefs, which cannot be “proven” through reason, and tries to turn them into empirical theories and universal rules. This is exactly what Shatov does to Dostoevsky’s Slavophile beliefs—he takes a personal, and inherently irrational belief and attempts to turn it into a universal principle. Rather than saying that it is *Russia’s* specific mission to develop a uniquely Russian form of faith, Shatov declares that this is the purpose of “every nation” at all times.

Through his attempts to transform belief into empirical truth, Shatov reveals his ideological infection. His ideological form of thought does not only lead to an overly-deterministic, and hence unreal world-view, but also causes him to become obsessed with paradoxes. Shatov becomes trapped in closed circuits of reasoning from which he cannot escape.

²⁰⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 250. (My italics.)

²⁰⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 251.

Both Shatov and Kirillov become trapped in paradoxical notions of belief as their thinking is tainted by the nihilists. For Shatov, this paradox is his recognition of the necessity of religious faith, yet his inability to have faith himself. Shatov's dilemma stems from his ideological confusion between the roles of reason and belief. Faith presents itself as a paradox to Shatov because he approaches it from the wrong direction: he treats faith through the perspective of reason. Instead of viewing faith as a set guiding beliefs, Shatov looks at it as an empirical necessity for nations and societies. Because of his empirical approach—faith is the element *necessary* for survival—Shatov finds it harder to accept faith as being *real* for himself.

Ivan Shatov begins to break free from his ideological sickness when his wife gives birth. As is typical in Dostoevsky's fiction, this character does not renounce his old views explicitly, but indicates his openness to a new way of life by recognizing something he could not previously.²⁰⁹ Dostoevsky highlights this moment of spiritual recognition by setting it against the atheistic proclamations of the midwife. Suddenly Shatov is able to see a beauty he had been previously blind to:

'This is a great joy... The mystery of the appearance of a new being, a great mystery and an inexplicable one, Arina Prokhorovna [the midwife], and what a pity you don't understand it! ... There were two, and suddenly there's a third human being, a new spirit, whole, finished, such as doesn't come from human hands...'

'A nice lot of drivel! It's simply the further development of the organism, there's nothing to it, no mystery,' Arina Prokhorovna was guffawing sincerely and merrily.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Perhaps most famously, we see this tendency of Dostoevsky's in the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*.

²¹⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 593.

The delivery of his wife's child is a moment of revelation for Shatov which brings him closer to God. Unlike Arina Prokhorovna, he understands that the miracle of life cannot be explained by biology alone. The new being brought into existence “doesn't come from human hands” for him, it comes from God. The midwife's atheistic view blinds her to the beauty and significance of human life. In her lines, Dostoevsky further ties atheist values to cold and immoral consequences—rather than respecting the sanctity of human life, she says that “unnecessary people shouldn't be born.”²¹¹ She does not see human life as a gift from God, but as a societal burden. Shatov, on the other hand, recognizes each new life as a miracle.

Shatov's recognition of the sanctity of life is further indicated by the fact that his wife Marya Ignatievna is not giving birth to his child. Marya Ignatievna is likely pregnant with Stavrogin's child, which Shatov is aware of.²¹² His religious proclamation is all the more meaningful because it made in the face of his wife's infidelity. Shatov's comments on the holiness of life do not just reflect the emotional outpourings of a new father, but are a recognition of a fundamental reality: our lives are not just our own, but belong to God. As children of God, we also all belong to and are responsible for one another. In his fatherhood, Shatov does not recognize merely a personal responsibility, but a *universal* one. By accepting a child that is not his own, Shatov transcends the biological-material perspective of the mid-wife to discover a radical form of faith-based love. This is the kind of love expressed by the Apostle Paul in Corinthians 13:4—“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not

²¹¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 593.

²¹² We can deduce that Ivan Shatov knows the child cannot be his because his wife has been separated from him for more than a year when she returns pregnant. There are indications of an affair between Stavrogin and Marya Ignatievna earlier in the novel, and Marya Ignatievna revealingly curses Stavrogin for her labor pains: “Nikolai Stavrogin is a scoundrel!” Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 594.

proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

This radical form of Christian love allows Shatov to accept his wife and child rather than scorning them. Through religious faith, Shatov is able to accept something that the atheistic Stepan Trofimovich could not: a child of uncertain paternity. The consequences of Shatov’s revelation indicates the complexity of Dostoevsky’s Christian values, and the problems with viewing his beliefs through modern eyes. Dostoevsky’s Christian beliefs cannot be merely understood as ‘conservative,’ because they cause him to call for love and acceptance of those typically condemned by religious and cultural conservatives, such as criminals, radicals, and unfaithful spouses.²¹³ Similarly, in his moment of Christian revelation, Shatov recognizes the imperative to love those condemned by others. For Dostoevsky, Shatov’s return to faith is both a return to sanity and morality.

Shatov’s Murder

While Shatov is able to free himself from ideological thought, he is not able to escape from the ideologues themselves: he is murdered by Pyotr Stepanovich and a group of conspirators. Shatov is not killed because he poses any threat to the group, but rather because this

²¹³ As many critics have noted, Dostoevsky’s peculiar form of Christianity makes him hard to pin down politically. In his editorials we find him expressing his anti-semitism one week, and calling for universal education of women the next. Particularly in *Demons*, we can see how Dostoevsky’s Christian principles resist categorization as being simply reactionary or progressive. For example, “In scenes involving Stavrogin... and Matryosha, Dostoevsky repeatedly inscribes a gesture of fist-raising that signal a link between feminist and Christian protest.” Nina Pelikan Straus, “Every Woman Loves a Nihilist: Stavrogin and Women in Dostoevsky's 'The Possessed,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 276, JSTOR.

act of murder is crucial to Pyotr Stepanovich's ideological mission. Pyotr Stepanovich believes that by making his group complicit in a crime, he can cement his power over them. Furthermore, this murder is a first step in Pyotr Stepanovich's plan to push his group over the brink of morality and into further acts of destruction. In his thinking, once they have killed they will become capable of further atrocities.

Ivan Shatov's murder is motivated and achieved through the force of nihilistic ideology. As noted in the previous chapter, Pyotr Stepanovich rhetorically bullies the members of his group into accepting acts of violence which they are inherently opposed to. While Pyotr Stepanovich may not be able to fully quash the moral feelings of his co-conspirators, his use of ideological force is effective in making them go along with his plan. As the narrator comments at the murder-scene, "full efficiency—though not, I think, cold-bloodedness, was preserved only by Pyotr Stepanovich."²¹⁴ In other words, while the terrorist leader may not be able to change his followers nature—he cannot turn them into cold-blooded killers—he can affect their actions, making them "efficient" tools of his machine. It is crucial for his plan that everyone in the group take part in the murder. In the fateful scene, Shatov is seized by the three of the five conspirators, and Pyotr Stepanovich shoots him point-blank in the forehead. The group is then forced by their leader to tie down Shatov's body with stones and dump him in a pond. The reaction of the murderers after this act reveals an animal terror at having been manipulated into an act they cannot accept:

Virginsky cried ruefully at the top of his voice:
 'This is not it, this is not it! No, this is not it at all!'
 ...Lyamshin did not let him finish: suddenly, and with all his might, he clasped
 him and squeezed him from behind with some sort of incredible shriek...

²¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 603.

Lyamshin cried out not with a human but some sort of animal voice. Squeezing Virginsky from behind harder and harder with his arms, in a convulsive fit, he went on shrieking without stop or pause, his eyes goggling at them all, and his mouth opened exceedingly wide.²¹⁵

The frenzied, animalistic behavior of the murderers after their crime paints a image of humans in a state of de-evolution. Virginsky's cry conveys his horror at the animal violence he has been drawn into. Virginsky, like the other members of this group, did not join forces with Pyotr Stepanovich to commit an act of murder. Virginsky was pulled into this conspiratorial circle because of his desire to effect social reform in Russia. However, through his clever manipulations, Pyotr Stepanovich has turned this group of idealists into a band of killers. The senseless murder of Ivan Shatov is indicative of the all-destructive power of ideological thought, and of the violent consequences of utopian fantasies.

Kirillov's Monomania

Kirillov is another honest man brought down by the toxic force of ideology. Like Shatov, Kirillov is trapped in a paradoxical notion of faith instigated by Stavrogin's ideological influence. However, unlike his companion, Kirillov is unable to escape from this ideological trap and develops his distorted thinking to its deadly conclusion. Kirillov's fate demonstrates a unique feature in Dostoevsky's fiction that we might call "intellectual eschatology:" the ability to take a given idea and develop it until it reaches a logical, but often startling, conclusion.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 605.

²¹⁶ It is important to note that Dostoevsky does not trace ideas to their *singular* logical conclusions, but to a *possible* logical conclusion. Harkening back to the discussion of Rhizome-structure in the introduction, Dostoevsky does not portray any idea as having a single terminus, but many possible routes of development.

Kirillov's ideological madness can be traced to a subtle, but fundamental religious confusion. As Irina Paperno claims in her monograph *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia*, "in Kirillov, Dostoevsky demonstrated that a change in word order had the most important consequences: the difference was a matter of life and death."²¹⁷ Paperno's statement is striking, but somewhat misleading. Kirillov's suicide ultimately stems from a replacement of the "God-man" with the "man-God." However, this word change reflects much more than just a linguistic confusion. Like Pyotr Stepanovich and Stepan Trofimovich, Kirillov believes that the role of God must be usurped by man.

While Kirillov has much in common with the nihilistic ideology expressed by these other characters, his ideas must also be understood in their specificity. Kirillov's particular ideological obsession is a form of monomania. As he says of himself, "I cannot think something else, I think one thing all my life. God has tormented me all my life."²¹⁸ Kirillov is an example of the kind of person whom Dostoevsky describes in his *Diary* as being crushed by an idea like "an enormous stone."²¹⁹ Kirillov's idea was not developed by himself alone, but transmitted to him by others (Stavrogin in particular). Kirillov's intellectual sickness, similar to the notion of ideology advanced by Besançon, must be understood as a kind of parasite sucking the life away from its host. As Pyotr Stepanovich remarks about him, "it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you."²²⁰ Kirillov is not the author of his ideological obsession, but another victim of the disease.

²¹⁷ Paperno, *Suicide*, 147.

²¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 116.

²¹⁹ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:336. (See Introduction, 20.)

²²⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 558.

Kirillov takes the idea of God's exile from human life originally introduced by Stepan Trofimovich and develops it in his own direction. Kirillov takes this idea far more seriously and literally than either Pyotr Stepanovich or his father. For Kirillov, this idea leads to a personal religious mission (in a perverse sense), rather than becoming a romantic ideal, as Stepan Trofimovich treats it, or a guide to political action, as it is in Pyotr Stepanovich's hands. Like his (de)mentors, Kirillov is an atheist of sorts: he does not believe in the existence of God, but believes that God *must* exist to restore meaning to human life. In Kirillov's twisted logic, if God does not exist, then it is his duty to become God.

Like the vision articulated in Stepan Trofimovich's allegorical poem, Kirillov does not imagine a world without God, but a future where man has *become* God. As is typical of Dostoevsky's "atheists," Kirillov is actually incapable of imagining a world without God; his rejection of the Christian God leads him to seek for another. The resemblances between Kirillov's and Stepan Trofimovich's ideological fantasies are conveyed when Kirillov explains his philosophy to the narrator:

'Man now is not yet the right man. There will be a new man, happy and proud. He for whom it will make no difference whether he lives or does not live, he will be the new man.... God is [now] the pain and 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... Then history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God to...'

'To the gorilla?' [narrator]

'...to the physical changing of man and earth. Man will be God and will change physically.'²²¹

²²¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 115.

Like Stepan Trofimovich, Kirillov dreams of a “new man” who will create a new world. Kirillov’s understanding of human life and history is fundamentally nihilistic: civilization can only progress through destruction. In Kirillov’s mind, the ground is already set for this destruction. Human faith in God has crumbled, but we are still held back from assuming our new role as gods by our fear of the unknown. Kirillov expresses this fear of jumping into the unknown and assuming this new role as the fear of death. For him, God is only “pain and fear.”²²² Kirillov thinks that humans no longer truly believe in God, but only hold onto him as a kind of superstition which we are too afraid to abandon.

The narrator’s sly comment, “to the gorilla?” unmask the reality of Kirillov and Stepan Trofimovich’s fantasy: the destruction of God will not create a man who is new, better, and a God himself—it will instead result in the regression of humanity. The narrator’s remark reflects Dostoevsky’s view that if man is not a spiritual animal, then he is doomed to become a mere animal. Consider the barbarity of Shatov’s murder and the ensuing behavior of the murderers—one of them is described as screaming “like an animal.” This murder plot was not only inspired by the ideological fantasy expressed by Stepan Trofimovich and Kirillov, it is the *realization* of this dream. In the act of murder, the conspirators assume a power that belongs only to God: the power over human life. Their usurpation of this power does not result in them becoming Gods themselves, as Stepan Trofimovich imagines in his poem, but in their transformation back into animals, “gorillas” in the words of our narrator. In trying to usurp the role of God through his suicide, Kirillov will meet a similarly degrading fate.

²²² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 117.

Kirillov's Suicide

Kirillov's ideology leads him to the conclusion that he must kill himself. Kirillov formulates his suicidal ideology in a number of ways, including the one cited above—God has ceased to exist, so man must kill himself to overcome the fear of death and become the new God. Kirillov approaches his theological paradox from an atheistic perspective—beginning with the assumption that God has ceased to exist—as opposed to Shatov who thinks that God must exist but has trouble finding faith himself. Despite this distinction, the ideological and religious obsessions of these two characters have much in common. Both Shatov and Kirillov believe that God is necessary for human life but struggle to accept His existence. As Kirillov says shortly before his death, “God is necessary, and therefore must exist... But I know that he does not and cannot exist... Don't you understand that a man with these two thoughts cannot go on living?”²²³ However, Shatov shows that a man with these two thoughts *can* overcome his madness and go on living. Through Kirillov, Dostoevsky presents suicide as a potential, and even likely outcome of ideological thinking, but not as inevitable.

Kirillov's suicide is especially tragic because it was preventable. Shatov is right when he says to his friend: “Kirillov! If... if you could renounce your terrible fantasies and your atheistic ravings... oh, what a man you'd be, Kirillov!”²²⁴ In fact, rather than being an indication that he is completely lost and depraved, Kirillov's monomania suggests a fractured relationship with God. As Pyotr Stepanovich says to Kirillov, “I think you believe maybe even more than any priest.”²²⁵ The idea that those who are suffering from madness have a special relation to divine mystery is

²²³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 615.

²²⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 571.

²²⁵ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 618.

visible in a number of Dostoevsky's novels (such as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*), and is emphasized in the suppressed chapter from *Demons*. During Stavrogin's confession scene the monk Tikhon cites a passage from the Book of Revelations that encapsulates the differences between Stavrogin and his disciple Kirillov:

Tikhon recited, recalling it word for word: "And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked..."
 "Enough..." Stavrogin cut him short. "It's for the middling sort, the indifferent ones, right?"²²⁶

This verse suggests that Stavrogin should be read as the "lukewarm" element—he is undeniably cruel and indifferent to others, and incapable of accepting either belief or atheism. Because of his lack of belief of any kind (for as Dostoevsky understood, even a commitment to atheism is a form of belief), Stavrogin is distant from God. Yet Tikhon's recitation also suggests that Stavrogin has a unique relationship to God, in his own dangerous way. Stavrogin may be a demon, yet a demon is also a fallen angel—something that was previously holy, and can be made holy again. Kirillov and Shatov are both "hot," furious in their pursuit of belief, ever uncertain, yet always earnest. This is what separates Shatov and Kirillov from their former teachers, Stavrogin and Stepan Trofimovich. Shatov and Kirillov may be infected with ideology, but they are still fundamentally honest, and true to themselves. If his thinking had developed in another direction, Kirillov could have easily been a monk or a holy man. However, through his

²²⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 689.

introduction to Stavrogin's intellectual poison and with the help of Pyotr Stepanovich's manipulative hand, Kirillov's profound religiosity leads to ideological madness and suicide rather than salvation. Kirillov's madness is strangely reflective of his fundamental earnestness—he can never be settled in his belief or fully accept his ideological fantasies, as Pyotr Stepanovich does.

In November of 1856, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about his friend Herman Melville in his journal, and this entry may also be the most succinct description of Kirillov:

I think, [he] will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists -- and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before -- in wondering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.²²⁷

Nathaniel Hawthorne detects the same greatness in his friend that Shatov recognizes in Kirillov. Like Melville, Shatov can never resolve his questions of belief. Even while being driven by ideological frenzy in his final moments, Kirillov does not say that he fully accepted his non-belief, but rather that “it is my *duty* to believe that I do not believe.”²²⁸ Like Melville, Kirillov is almost a foreigner to the physical world; he lives instead in the metaphysical, wandering across intellectual “deserts” of faith and doubt. Kirillov's awkward and ungrammatical speech reflects this earthly detachment. As he says, grammar “makes not difference to me,” he is only interested

²²⁷ Multiverse, "Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne," [melville.org](http://www.melville.org), last modified July 25, 2000, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.melville.org/hawthorne.htm>.

²²⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 619. (My italics.)

in the ideas behind the words.²²⁹ Kirillov shares the vacillating uncertainties of his idol Stavrogin, but unlike Kirillov, Stavrogin is neither honest nor courageous. As grotesque as it is, Kirillov's suicide is motivated by his honesty and courage—he is too honest not to take his ideology to its conclusion, and courageous enough to enact it.

Kirillov's end however, is anything but honorable and courageous. Kirillov's suicide is portrayed by Dostoevsky as a tragic act of spiritual desperation, both a crime against life and a grotesque reversion of human to the animal. Although Kirillov imagines himself as a kind of second Christ, a martyr who will enable a renewal of mankind, he is instead used by Pyotr Stepanovich to cover up Shatov's murder. Thus the influence of nihilistic ideology reduces the sacred to the pathetic. Dostoevsky puts the pathetic nature of Kirillov's suicide in sharp contrast to the noble and glorified treatment suicide often receives in romantic literature. Before his death, Kirillov does not bid fond farewell to the "eternal heavens," as the eponymous hero of *The Sufferings of Young Werther* does.²³⁰ Rather, Kirillov chooses to scorn and disgrace human life in his final moments. Pyotr Stepanovich dictates a suicide note to Kirillov, which he agrees to write down verbatim. Kirillov does not mind Pyotr Stepanovich voicing his last words so long as he is able to express his disgust at life in his letter: he insists on being allowed to draw "a face at the top with its tongue sticking out."²³¹

²²⁹ Kirillov says this during a conversation with the narrator: "And tell me, if I may ask, why do you speak Russian not quite correctly? Can it be you forgot in your five years abroad?" "Do I, really, incorrectly? I don't know. No, not because of abroad. I've spoken this way all my life, it makes not difference to me." Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 116.

²³⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, trans. Stanley Corngold (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 94.

²³¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 620.

Five years after writing Kirillov's death scene, Dostoevsky dealt with this question of suicide as a spiritual revolt once again. In his public *Diary*, he considered the case of a "the daughter of a well-known Russian emigrant" who had killed herself with chloroform.²³² What Dostoevsky did not reveal in his *Diary* was that this young woman was the daughter of Alexander Herzen. This particular suicide was especially ominous for Dostoevsky because of her parentage—the daughter of an atheistic intellectual and emigrant.²³³ Dostoevsky writes that in her suicide note, she asked to be only buried after she was verifiably dead as it is not "chic" to be buried alive. This young woman's spiteful and ironic use of the word "chic" mirrors Kirillov's face with a tongue sticking out; both are pathetic forms of protest against life. As Dostoevsky writes:

In this nasty, vulgar "chic," to my way of thinking, there sounds almost a protest, perhaps indignation, anger—but against what? ...Against the simplicity of the visible, against the meaninglessness of life? Was she one of those well known-judges and deniers of life who are indignant against the "absurdity" of man's appearance on earth, the nonsensical casualness of this appearance? ...Here we seem to be dealing with a soul which revolted.²³⁴

While Dostoevsky finds this woman's mentality as represented by her final words "vulgar," he refuses to condemn her as being "vulgar" herself. He writes that it is clear that she has not killed herself for a "vulgar" purpose—"a material, visible, external cause."²³⁵ Like Kirillov, this young

²³² Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*, 1: 469.

²³³ As Paperno writes in her monograph, "Dostoevsky clearly took these circumstances as a clue to this case: Liza Herzen was the victim of atheism, a disease contracted at birth." *Suicide*, 179.

²³⁴ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:470.

²³⁵ Dostoevsky, *Diary*, 1:470.

woman committed suicide out of an inability to reconcile her ideals with reality; she was another example of the violent consequences of utopianism.

Conclusion

Dostoevsky's novel is far too attuned to the complexities and paradoxes of life to have a moral or a thesis, and the fates of Ivan Shatov and Kirillov indicate this. While both characters reflect the fatally flawed ideology of nihilism, they cannot be treated in a purely theoretical manner. However, it seems to me that the action of *Demons* is guided by two related convictions of Dostoevsky's: the first was his belief in the futility of censorship, and the second was his commitment to non-violence. Both of these beliefs reveal Dostoevsky's fundamental opposition to the use of force. As one critic noted, the failure to censor or contain ideas within the novel suggests the author's conviction that ideas must be fought with ideas, and both Dostoevsky's fiction and editorial writing demonstrate a firm commitment to non-violence.²³⁶ These convictions were informed by Dostoevsky's personal realization through years of imprisonment and brutality—force could never be a positive tool for change.

While Dostoevsky indicates his own convictions in *Demons*, his novel does not turn these beliefs into a theory or rule. Indeed, to do so would be to transgress the distinction between belief and idea—the primary sin of ideological thinking. Dostoevsky's resistance to theorizing is connected to the tragic perspective of *Demons*. While Dostoevsky strongly believes in the principle of non-violence, he does not portray it as necessarily working in practice. Ivan Shatov fights ideas with ideas, and wins his intellectual freedom, but this does not save him from being

²³⁶ Lounsberry, "Print Culture," 36.

murdered. His death illustrates how the violence of nihilistic ideology destroys the foundations of social and political life. Violence destroys the respect for dialogue and difference upon which communal life is based. It destroys the very space in which these entities can exist, and renders peaceful action impotent. You can successfully argue against me, but then I will kill you—this is the end of dialogue, and for Dostoevsky, the beginning of the end of civilization.

Conclusion

Demons tells many stories, almost too many for the lay reader. It is a multiple-murder mystery, a philosophical work, a psychological exploration, a Christian and a political novel, an anticipatory treatment of extremism, a reactionary response to violence, a satire and a tragedy. Responding to a letter from the conservative magazine editor Strakhov, in which he had accused Dostoevsky of trying to tackle too many issues at once, Dostoevsky despaired of being able to properly manage the massive task he had taken on in *Demons*. “With me a multitude of separate novels and stories is compressed into one all at once, so that there’s neither measure nor harmony.... But there’s something even worse than that... I undertake to express an artistic idea that is beyond me.”²³⁷

What Dostoevsky’s novel sacrifices in terms of “measure” and “harmony” is made up for in verisimilitude and enduring relevance. Dostoevsky may have tried to express an idea that was “beyond” him, yet he saw the outlines of this idea—the danger and latent power of extremist ideologies—long before most others. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky recognized the link between utopian and apocalyptic fantasies, and denounced the forms of idealism that he correctly predicted would lead to mass murder.

Even today, many students and intellectuals throughout the world still defend the principles of Communism, as if one can endorse an ideology while disavowing all of its consequences. As an undergraduate, I have sat through countless lectures where Marxist theory

²³⁷ Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters*, 3:353.

has been used to interpret everything from literature to psychology. It has always seemed strange to me that the academics who are so enraptured by these theories seem to have such little regard for the whole-sale slaughter they have lead to. From the perspective of the 21st Century, any full-throated defense of Communist and Marxist principles ought to be considered shameful. The fact that the so many Western intellectuals continue to cling to theories that have had such disastrous effects on our world speaks to the enduring disconnect that Dostoevsky identified between the intelligentsia and reality.

The realities of life under Communism is almost perfectly described by the characters of *Demons* some five decades before it become a reality in Russia. While Dostoevsky makes only oblique reference to Communism in this novel, the basic principles of this developing ideology are made visible in the theories of the character Shigalyov. This is the radical who develops his theory of “Shigalyovism,” which concludes that the goal of unlimited freedom and equality can only result in unlimited despotism. Pyotr Stepanovich is particularly enamored of Shigalyovism, and bemusedly explains it to Stavrogin in on scene:

He’s got spying, He’s got each member of society watching the others and obliged to inform. Each belongs to all, and all to each. They’re all slaves and equal in their slavery. Slander and murder in extreme cases, but above all—equality... First the level of education, science, and talents is lowered... Higher abilities cannot fail to be despots and have always corrupted rather than been of use; they are to be banished or executed. Cicero’s tongue is cut off, Copernicus’s eyes are put out, Shakespeare is stoned.²³⁸

Communism claims to free humans from the yoke of exploitation, yet as Shiglayov anticipates, it can only make them “equal in their slavery.” Just as Shigalyov’s theory demands,

²³⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 417.

Soviet Russia did murder and exile tens of thousands of those with “higher abilities,” and killed tens of millions more without these distinctions. The utopia dreamed up by Marx and Lenin could only be achieved through force; equality through mass murder. As Isaiah Berlin explains, “Lenin believed this after reading *Das Kapital*, and consistently taught that if a just, peaceful, happy, free, virtuous society could be created by the means he advocated, then the end justified any methods that needed to be used, literally any.”²³⁹ Utopians, idealists, and extremists all tend to believe that their ideal ends justify any means.

Yet as the violent agendas of extremist movements have shown, the “end” never seems to arrive, destruction is only followed by more of the same. In subscribing to utopian visions and theories, we sacrifice our very humanity to ideals that ultimately prove elusive. Pyotr Stepanovich murdered Shatov for the deluded principles of “Shigalyovism,” premised on violence and destruction. Although Dostoevsky portrays Pyotr Stepanovich as having little interest in ideas, he is an early example of the kind of ideologue Isaiah Berlin describes as being able to “kill and maim with a tranquil conscience under the influence of the words and writings” of utopian theories.²⁴⁰ Most of the fatalities of *Demons*, such as the murders of Marya Timofeevna, Captain Lebyadkin, and Ivan Shatov, as well as the suicides of Stavrogin and Kirillov, can be read as futile sacrifices made before the altar of utopian ideology.

As Dostoevsky portrays it, ideological thinking is a trap, yet this trap is not inescapable. How does Dostoevsky suggest that we free ourselves from the force of ideology and unreal thought? What separates the hopeful cases from the “damned” in the novel, those who seem to

²³⁹ Berlin, “Message,” 33.

²⁴⁰ Berlin, “Message,” 33.

have no possibility of redemption? The characters of the novel seem to fall into these two categories, with Stepan Trofimovich, Ivan Shatov, and even Kirillov falling into the former “hopeful” box. Pyotr Stepanovich and Stavrogin clearly belong to the latter group of the damned. But what is the fundamental difference between the two? What is the key to salvation for Dostoevsky, and how does one escape from the confines of ideological sickness? These are the questions that vex me the most at the end of *Demons*, yet I am not sure that they can be fully answered. While Dostoevsky’s novel can help us think through the problems of extremist ideology, to attempt to derive a political theory from this novel would be to turn it into a work of ideology itself.

The question of salvation is most directly raised by the radically different fates of Stepan Trofimovich and Nikolai Stavrogin. While Stavrogin dies an unredeemed sinner, Dostoevsky leaves the question of Stepan Trofimovich’s redemption open. In his final chapter, Stepan Trofimovich renounces his aristocratic atheism and goes on a search for the real Russia of the peasant world. He dies in the bed of a peasant woman after being read the Luke passage from the epigraph and the novel, and being castigated in his final moments by Varvara Petrovna.

While Trofimovich indicates that he is open to a spiritual re-birth in his final moments, there is also an undeniable ambiguity there. In his final words, Stepan does not proclaim God, but rather “the Great Thought,” a phrase which is suggestive of European philosophy rather than religious belief.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 664.

In an essay on Nikolai Stavrogin, Joseph Frank articulates the difference between Stepan Trofimovich and Stavrogin that he believes allows the former to reach a form of salvation that Stavrogin is denied:

Whatever the material basis of his existence, he has never exploited it cynically or basely; and he has always been aware that he is unworthy of the great ideals that he proclaims and reveres. Stepan Trofimovich, in other words, has never allowed his conscience to become dulled or blunted; and this, for Dostoevsky, is the key to salvation.²⁴²

Joseph Frank dedicated his life to the study of Dostoevsky, and his comments on the author are always worthy of consideration. However, I believe he is only half-right here. Would a man whose conscience has never become dulled or blunted sell away his loyal serf to the army, or abandon his only son? Stepan Trofimovich's hypocrisy means that his conscience functions only intermittently, in those rare moments when he has an awareness of the consequences of his actions.

Robin Feuer Miller came closer to the truth in identifying the crucial distinction between Stepan Trofimovich and his nihilistic students when she wrote, "Stavrogin, with deadly vanity, had wanted to hand out his printed confession to the multitudes. Stepan Trofimovich, in contrast, seems ready to put his own story aside and attempt to immerse himself in the living stream of something much larger, the world where all are responsible for all."²⁴³

The key to Trofimovich's redemption is perhaps not the ability to renounce any particular belief, but his ability to renounce his own vanity. From his years of imprisonment, Dostoevsky

²⁴² Frank, "Masks," 666.

²⁴³ Miller, *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*, 100.

knew quite well the genuine remorse felt by those who had committed unforgivable crimes, and felt that no one who was able to renounce their sins and begin a new life was beyond salvation. The fate of Stepan Trofimovich indicates that for Dostoevsky, to be saved one must be able to recognize one's own wretchedness. It is a sense of honesty and earnestness, particularly about oneself, that allows Ivan Shatov and Stepan Trofimovich to break free from their ideological diseases. Humility is the opponent of ideology, for extremism is always premised on vanity and certainty.

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