

**“Stavrogin’s Confession” – an Inquiry into Stavrogin’s Suicide and the Nihilistic Background:
Notes from my talk at the “Nihilism Conference” on Nihilism and the Russians**

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I begin with the words of Svetlana Alexievich’s for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize.

I ask myself what kind of book I want to write about war. I'd like to write a book about a person who doesn't shoot, who can't fire on another human being, who suffers at the very idea of war. Where is he? I haven't met him.

What happened to us when the empire collapsed? Previously, the world had been divided: there were executioners and victims – that was the GULAG; brothers and sisters – that was the war; the electorate – was part of technology and the contemporary world. Our world had also been divided into those who were imprisoned and those who imprisoned them; today there's a division between Slavophiles and Westernizers, "fascist-traitors" and patriots. And between those who can buy things and those who can't. The latter, I would say, was the cruelest of the ordeals to follow socialism, because not so long ago everyone had been equal. The "Red" man wasn't able to enter the kingdom of freedom he had dreamed of around his kitchen table. Russia was divvied up without him, and he was left with nothing. Humiliated and robbed. Aggressive and dangerous.

*Russian literature is interesting in that it is the only literature to tell the story of an experiment carried out on a huge country. I am often asked: why do you always write about tragedy? Because that's how we live. We live in different countries now, but "Red" people are everywhere. They come out of that same life, and have the same memories. (Svetlana Alexievich, *Second Hand Time* 1990–1997)*

1 - Epigraphs to The Possessed

*Upon my life, the tracks have vanished,
We've lost our way, what shall we do?
It must be the demon's leading us
This way and that around the fields.
How many are there? Where have they flown to?
Why do they sing so plaintively?
Are they burying some household goblin?
Is it some witch's wedding day?*

Pushkin, “Demons”

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 was drowned. Those tending the pigs, scared to death, bolted and told their story in city and fields. People went out to see what had happened and came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had been banished sitting there at Jesus' feet, decently 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. (Luke 8: 32 – 36 RSV)

“Stavrogin’s Confession” in *The Possessed* comes in the novel when the novel turns from the Menippean critique of the enigmatic relationship of violence to nihilism and the debates about the future of Russia related to the question of Stavrogin’s character and his effect and ‘affect’ on the other characters.

His “confession” to Tikhon, the reclusive and prophet- priest, is a turning point in Dostoevsky’s portrayals of suicides, real suicides, and the “intellectual suicides” that Dostoevsky is interested in for example, Ivan Karamazov and The Grand Inquisitor. From the time of his imprisonment in the penal colony in Siberia in *Notes from the House of the Dead* which are the notes left behind by an “author” who has committed suicide, Dostoevsky comes back to suicide many times in this novels.

The most detailed representation and ‘figuration’ (in artistic form) of the possibility of redemption that is in *The Possessed*. By figuration I mean it in Bakhtin’s sense that suicide and nihilism are “chronotopes’ of redemption in the novel that moves from the carnivalesque scenes in the novel to Dostoevsky’s more complete understanding of coming to terms with suicide as a “chronotope”.

Stavrogin’s Confession while a chapter in the book was always controversial about where it belonged in the organization. It was censored on the publication of the novel but later rejoined to the novel in the middle of the novel.

A terrible historical aspect of this as a separate publication in English is that S. S. Koteliansky translated it as a separate publication with the assistance of Virginia Woolf. Thinking about this and her life and her suicide has to be considered as part of the terrible story of suicide. Virginia Woolf whose Russian was marginal collaborated in the translation of Koteliansky’s English.

The use of psychoanalysis can perhaps explain some aspects of Stavrogin’s suicide and our own response to him and it as readers who ‘experience’ the event in the context of the political and utopian movement of “nihilism”. There are other acts of self-destruction in the novel too. These notes bear not only on suicide but on Dostoevsky’s own exploration in many characters, not only “Stavrogin”.

2 - A profile of Stavrogin's Confession seen from the standpoint of his desire to "begin again" the Ur-point of his internal nihilism.

Notes for a psychoanalytic approach to Stavrogin.

- Loss of affect leads to dissociation of body and emotion.
- This can be described (Andre Green) as 'death narcissism' that is the overwhelming need to destroy the internal object of the 'foreclosed' self – a kind of self-resentment at the limits of knowing at all.
- The internal organization of destructiveness can no longer tolerate 'loss' or the orientation of emotion toward the internal world.
- This is a "permanent" state of suffering and exacts revenge on the world by reducing this permanent state to a state of confusion about suffering.
- This (and Stavrogin speaks about this) there is a zero state of feeling, unfeeling, no tensions exist, one ceases to exist for others.
- In Stavrogin's case he recalls his sexual terror of a time long ago and an event in his life that haunts him.
- This is not the same as melancholia or resignation to loss which is not 'suicidal' as such
- The 'loss of loss' however means that there is no investment or binding to what occurs in the psyche.
- The psyche is no longer able to tolerate (normal) masochism and now must *disavow* one's entire image of a former life that is arrested, frozen in time.
- One spares oneself and others (sacrifice is a dominant motif in Dostoevsky) of one's own incomplete emotions in the drive to self-destruction because . . .
- The unconscious sense of guilt and shame is no longer tolerable: one can no longer derive pleasure from pain or the pain of suffering (of the pleasure of pain)
- Self-mutilation is imagined or fleeting - transitory – *playing with* (!) withdrawal of the "investment" of life-narcissism (Freud: Eros) leads to the self-destruction of thought and the thought of thought, that is thinking about thinking. Death narcissism (Andre Green) evolves as if it were a 'natural' cause.
- It is "beyond" the tyranny of ethics, that is meaningful revolt against things as they are (nihilism = ab ovo go back to the beginning!
- This becomes a "negative hallucination" but a hallucination nevertheless and possibly the fear of being delusional.
- This is later developed by Sartre and also Camus and Simone Weill (and others) into a philosophical way to think about "nihilism" and violence. Simone Weill is thinking in this direction, but not psychoanalytically in her Dostoevskian essay on *The Iliad, Or a Poem of Force*, an essay that plunges us into the almost mystical nature of the ethnocide of a foundational poem in Western literature and culture.

Those people who inflict the blows which provoke this cry are prompted by different motives according to temperament or occasion. There are some people who get a positive pleasure from the cry; and many others simply do not hear it.

For it is a silent cry, which sounds only in the secret heart. These two states of mind are closer than they appear to be. The second is only a weaker mode of the first; its deafness is complacently cultivated because it is agreeable and it offers a positive satisfaction of its own. There are no other restraints upon our will than material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us. Any imaginary extension of these limits is seductive, so there is a seduction in whatever helps us to forget the reality of the obstacles. That is why upheavals like war and civil war are so intoxicating; they empty human lives of their reality and seem to turn people into puppets. That is also why slavery is so pleasant to the masters.

3 - The Novel

Stavrogin travels from home on a revolutionary pilgrimage. On his return to Russia he bears within him his “Menippean” confession to Tikhon; he cannot “master” his memories and “had become indifferent to them” which he claims expresses his “wish to disappear”. This, his last judgement, foreshortens time, and leaps over the temporal dimension by a Menippean theological-revolutionary Russian apocalypse. Stavrogin experiences his personal 'damnation' in Tikhon's chambers, damnation being the 'horror vacui' the fear of emptiness and the lasting image of “the tiny red spider” a demonic moment that is an enigmatic signifier of violence, sexual transgression, and religious emptiness: the horror vacui.

In Dostoevsky the Menippean is the most obvious example of the grounding of the representation of time-space – reality - in terms of the literary genre of satire and the ludicrous dream. Dostoevsky is one of the best examples of the Menippean that we have, but the chronotope can also have a motif where we see it occurring in a place where the artistic event allows the reader to imagine the activity of taking part in the act of seeing a place – the entire colonial Russian enterprise that leads to the guilt over the slavery of the Serfs and the origin of the Russian unfinished revolution and the Sovereign nature of revolutionary violence. But since the entire work – its totality – has to be put into the context of the chronotope it is slippery because in the chronotope essays in the novel Bakhtin seems to be also talking about the chronotopic quality of *whole genres*, in this case the carnivalesque would be the dimension of the comic genre almost a metachronotope. Genre for Bakhtin is not just a literary form but it can take that shape in life itself; genre is a more a way of thinking about the many ways we construct images of the person in time and place and how images of the person come back to us by being observed through others’ eyes in art and discourse.

4 - The foreground and Background to revolutionary Nihilism.ⁱ

In Balzac’s novel *Old Goriot* (1834) and Stendhal’s *Red and the Black* (1830) the main characters speak a kind of anarchistic revolutionary rhetoric not unlike the writer of Schiller’s letters to a young man. They speak like Jean Paul Marat or even Napoleon about the crimes of the bourgeoisie who have created the code of the jungle of cities and in the emerging hell-holes of industrial Europe that includes European Russia.

Both revolutionary and opportunistic characters represent a psychological and social type that existed throughout the 19th century. The question: how must one sacrifice oneself in order to challenge the newly coming into existence of organized society. The state was criminal we know that; the society that supported the state was criminal and the bourgeoisie were the result of the fall of the ancient regime. So they are criminal? The surplus of resentment in the 'liver' of the UGM is rendered into a comic-grotesque realization that the spite and self-abasement that he projects is a self-analysis of the pitiful pitilessness of the life of a man without qualities, a 'man of the 19th century'.

In the 1840s various socialisms competed with bourgeois parties and parliamentary democracies all over Europe for the power to represent the new classes and "the people". The name of the people ruled in the abstract but did not govern in practice. The state disappeared into the scientific dreams of a planned society or enlightenment driven constitutions. In the 1860s in Russia various "Marxist", "anarchist", or populist responses to movements that had already emerged in the 1840s, when romantic forms of revolution were revived the thought of Rousseau, Schiller, Proudhon, Mill, Kant and Humboldt – some were agitators and all were radical democrats. The "individual" against society and the masses emerged on the stage of history. The authentic hero fought against "the herd of independent minds" of the non-aligned intelligentsia, perhaps foreshadowed by the narrator in *Notes from the House of the Dead* whose enigmatic 'doubleness' is both a protective shield and an invitation to anarchist thinking in how the prisoners react to their prison with accommodation, obedience and fitting in to the system.

In the anxiety provoked by the messianic moods of the 1860s popular journalism sensationalized these movements and gave the name of "nihilists" to the intellectual rebels, much as today's leftists or eccentrics are labeled as hippies (old), freaks (old), punks (old), terrorists (old). Dostoevsky was fascinated by these types, which to him were an answer to the high-minded revolutionary ascetics like Jean Paul Marat or aesthetic erotomaniacs like the Marquis De Sade both of whom Dostoevsky would have known about. Dostoevsky wanted to produce a new type of revolutionary in his novels, which would be an example to the generation that had missed the revolutionary boat in France. The old ideals corrupted the natural spirit of Russian Jacobinism, which he was himself as a young man part of and attracted to and could never fully leave, although his turn to the "People of Russia" as a utopian hope for the future.

It was this problem of finding a new *type of person* – a Stavrogin and Madame Bovary of the barricades - which forced him to use his novels as a new kind of writing. Violence and nihilism were part of his life, but he was acutely aware that the Czar's police was throwing political revolutionaries, priests, intellectuals and teachers into prison or would be forced into exile, as he himself was.

He became fascinated by what he could call "intellectual suicide" – martyrdom to one's mistress the social conscience. What was the answer? French or English style parliamentary

moderation? Peasant socialism? Spiritual regeneration from below? The “Young Russia” movement was connected in the popular imagination to attempts on the life of the Czar; to university unrest and even closing of the lectures. Peasant uprisings were common (one had killed his father) and attempts at separation and autonomy for regions in the vast Russian empire were called for. Satirical novelists and political novels had a field day. Censorship existed. The novelist who could translate all of this idealism into a day to day belief in the goodness of man, the possibility of the future did not exist until Dostoevsky. With one problem: Dostoevsky’s characters take every possible view to contradict themselves!

The many voices in his characters spoke about and knew about:

- Seeing the history of Russia as in some sense a prophetic mission for Europe
- Intellectuals looking for a total and immediate solution to the guilt of watching serfdom
- A mystical nationalism fired by the mystique of the Russian people
- The fervent and guilty agonies of the intellectual elite who would try to lead the people through their own revolutionary impersonality of abstract causes
- The proliferation of theories of revolution and sacrifice to the cause

In the 1870s the desperation of these many Underground Men and Women turned to terroristic tactics, ascetic ways of life, severe revolutionary discipline, joining with clandestine organizations, writing publications and manifestos urging action. A “creative desire is a destructive desire” wrote one of these (Bakunin) using Schiller and Hegel to turn express how to think about turning society upside down so it would see itself in the utopian mirror of revolution. The power to think leads to the power to rebel. To question the existence of God leads only to abolish Him. But if God abdicates so does justice, reason and morality or so goes the answer to the rebel’s nihilists. However if religion is founded on the desire to sacrifice oneself for a higher cause, and the State is founded on religion then, for the rebellious, both must be abolished. To deify “humanity” is to assume that divinity resides in an idea of the human, and ideas are suspect. The miracle of happiness is itself an illusion. No one promises us happiness Freud writes and so does “The Grand Inquisitor”.

Against this background the underground man, a chronotope for the characters in *The Possessed* were living out their desperate search for an answer to resentment toward any authority: whether to shatter one’s belief in authority, reform authority, or “deny it in principle”. Alexander Herzen, one of Dostoevsky’s early influences, wrote:

. . . the masses want to stay the hand that impudently snatches from them the bread they have earned – the is their fundamental desire. They are indifferent to individual freedom, to the freedom of speech; the masses love authority. They are still dazzled by the arrogant glitter of power; the sight of someone who stands apart affronts them. By equality they understand equality of oppression; afraid of monopolies and privileges, they look askance at talent and allow no one not to

do what they do. The masses want a social government that would govern for them, and not like this existing one against them. To govern for themselves doesn't enter their heads . . . The submission of the individual to society, to the people, to humanity, to the Idea, is merely a continuation of human sacrifice, of the immolation of the lamb to pacify God, of the crucifixion of the innocent for the sake of the guilty. All religions have based morality on obedience that is to say on voluntary slavery. That is why they have always been more pernicious than any political organization. For the latter makes use of violence, the former – of the corruption of the will . . .

Any wonder with this position that the underground Man would have been confused, would have raged against anyone who looked like the men of 1830 he or she belonged to “society”. The problem is whether in his rage for goodness, his rage to remain innocent of all power he does or would do exactly the very thing he would have denied.

The problem of ‘revolutionary violence’ becomes the problem of accommodation to authority itself, the authority of the revolution with no end in sight.

However, this does not explain the art of the story, “nihilism as a chronotope” it’s many voices and the ethical implications of the story for the readers who would see the story, as a conversation with other comic satirical tales (*Skaz*) like Gogol’s stories that had such an influence on Dostoevsky. The “Bakhtinian” aspect of the story will be part of the discussion.

The short story “Bobok” and the “Dream of a Ridiculous Man” shows Dostoevsky playing with the serious side of many-voices of the dead that come to us when we least expect them. Dream, reverie, borderline playing with collusion with death – all this comes to exist in the double-voiced reverie and double-voiced comedy of death in life, life in death and Dostoevsky’s gambling all the time with how power and violence and complicity, accommodation and collaboration with ‘reason’ masked as history torment him and his characters.

Dostoevsky anticipates Adorno’s critique of Kant’s theory of moral progress, or progress as morality as

. . . the highest purpose of nature . . . has set for mankind . . . [which] must be that of establishing a society under which freedom under external laws would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words of establishing a perfectly just civil constitution. For only through the solution and fulfillment of this task can nature accomplish its other intentions with our species. [Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose].ⁱⁱ

The synthesis of progress with ‘humanity’ and progress with “the force of law” and the “Critique of Violence”ⁱⁱⁱ [sovereign law, myth, law-preserving violence and “divine violence” becomes the laws of that state of emergency that can be resolved in sanctioned and non sanctioned bloodletting violence].

This is perfect fodder for the Bakhtin-mill of the chronotope of the comic grotesque that becomes dialogical when it emerges from the sense that there is an audience ie readership that is incorporated into the satire-parody as the 'third force'- the addressees. This Satire as discourse shows the process of doubleness and dream like representations that mark Dostoevsky's art as in Bakhtin's terms "verbal-ideological-essayistic" discourse as the foundation of the novel as a form of life.

Put simply, without a theory of 'domination' which works and anything that delegitimizes domination or its 'other' and that too is a nihilistic moment when one experiences the catastrophic fears of dispossession of ones own self. Dostoevsky in *The Possessed* discovers that guilt in Stavrogin is about the dispossession of the person and the "nihilistic" origins of beginning over again many times in life, the Threshold that one crosses again and again.

Finally to bring this to a conclusion that could ring true to "Stavrogin's Confession" and the wildly unruly nature of this novel, and its critique and terror before ideas of "progress" which is in the obsessive dialogues if the characters, and the Menippean nature of the malediction toward politics in the novel's travesty of the political; the curse which weighs over Stavrogin, who cannot begin his life all over again, because he has committed a "moral injury" he carries with him throughout his life: Stavrogin's humiliation, insult and injury, is not "abject" but looks for an ethic that, in Bakhtin's words, would counter the "alibi of being" that Dostoevsky encountered in his characters.^{iv} Psychoanalytically speaking we would say that this is a "screen memory", but aesthetically and ethically it is an "alibi of being" and for Dostoevsky it was a crisis of "authorship" about how to portray his understanding of moral injury:

It is impossible to prove one's alibi in the event of being. Nothing answerable, serious, and significant can exist where that alibi becomes a presupposition for creation and utterance. Special answerability is indispensable . . . one cannot create directly in God's world. This specialization of answerability, however, can be founded only upon a deep trust in the highest level of authority that blesses a culture – upon trust, that is in fact that there is another – the highest other – who answers for my own answerability, and trust in the fact that I do not act in an axiological void. Outside this trust, only empty pretensions are possible.^v

Stavrogin is hoisted, then, on his own petard of nihilism and the "alibi of being" where nothing in his life can organize his own being.

ⁱ Here I explain this through Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence": Sovereign violence; mythic violence; law-preserving violence; revolutionary violence of the general strike and finally the location of the will to self-creation and nihilism. Put another way why we are afraid of revolution.

ⁱⁱ For Adorno Progress is a form of reification: while human beings have been able to escape the blind compulsion of nature only by means of rationality, by means of the thought which dominates nature, and would sink back into barbarism if they were to renounce this rationality, it is equally true that the process of the

progressive rationalization of the world has also represented a process of progressive reification - just as the reification of the world, the petrification of the world as an objectivity which is alien to human beings. See: *An Introduction to Dialectics*, Polity Press, 2017.

^{iv} My reference to “abject” is to the use of “abject” by Julia Kristeva, who uses the term psychoanalytically to explain, for example, Céline, deeply mistaken in my view. Céline and Dostoevsky stand in terror and horror before suffering, not “abjectly”. See my essay on Céline, “Memory of Death and Death of Memory, in *Understanding Céline*, edited with an Introduction by James Flynn, Seattle: Genitron Press, 1984.

^v Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability, Early Philosophical Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, 206. The thoughts here have been amplified through a discussion about Bakhtin’s idea of “transgredience” a difficult Bakhtinian concept that means to step outside of one’s own being and to live in “outsidedness” and “situatedness” that lives outside of my consciousness, but which I am apart from and a-part-of once my axiological liability is acknowledged for the others in my lifeworld. The feeling of “consummation” of the other person is an aesthetic act for Bakhtin, an “event” in German perhaps an *Ereignis*. I am grateful to Andrew Bingham for ongoing discussions about Bakhtin. There will be more!