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# Trauma and the Negation of Subjectivity in Dostoevsky's *Demons*: Stavrogin's Manifestation of the Post-Freudian Death Drive

Amongst all of Dostoevsky's colourful characters Nikolai Stavrogin, whom we encounter in *Demons*, stands out as one of the most enigmatic. Originally conceived of as 'the Prince' in Dostoevsky's notebooks, he is a character to whom the reader is denied direct access, with the closest permitted access being through the censored chapter "Stavrogin's Confession." Characterised by scholars by the 'mask' which his face is said to resemble, he is a character in whose implied inner world, thoughts and motivations remain veiled.[1] This is the case even when we take into consideration his 'confession' which is not directly disclosed in the text through Stavrogin's speech but rather presented—or embodied—within the narrative as a written document, prepared by Stavrogin, intended apparently for public distribution. The nature of this embedded 'confession' raises questions in itself of the purpose and the perceived truth-value of the document within the world of the novel, questions for which the text provides no conclusive answers. Additionally, the relation of "Stavrogin's Confession" to *Demons* in its textual entirely is a question which must be taken into consideration in any scholarship which seeks to utilise the fragment as an authoritative account, or as a valuable source of knowledge, on Stavrogin's role and significance within the text, having been excluded—by request of the editor but with Dostoevsky's approval—from the first published editions of the novel.

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[1] See Joseph Frank, "The Masks of Stavrogin," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), 660-691.

Engaging with previous scholarly attempts to 'read' the character of Stavrogin by means of psychoanalysis as well as contemporary discussions addressing the structure of modern subjectivity and its manifestations, this article aims to decipher something of Stavrogin—who, by representing a "particular point of view on the world and on oneself," also models a modern, self-conscious subject[2]—in regards to his role and his significance in the overall text of *Demons*. This aim will be achieved by examining the occurrences leading up to, and the event of, Stavrogin's suicide, making use of recent research into 'destructive plasticity' and the impact of psychical trauma in the field of psychoneurology; the findings of which are currently informing, impacting and polemicising contemporary concepts and theories of subjectivity within critical and literary theory as well as the physical sciences. Specifically, this article will consider the value of identifying Stavrogin as a character demonstrating the symptoms of what Catherine Malabou calls "the new wounded;" subjects who undergo a change in character, or a loss of subjectivity, as a result of experiencing a traumatic event.[3] Having grounded this examination in Malabou's concept of the 'new wounded' and Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the 'post-traumatic subject' which he expounds in relation to Malabou's concept, this article will argue that Stavrogin can be identified to model a post-traumatic subjectivity, whose behaviour and expressions (or lack thereof) can be identified as symptomatic manifestations of a post-Freudian 'death drive,' reconceptualised by Malabou as the phenomenon of destructive plasticity. Findings from this examination will be considered in regards to both Stavrogin's role within *Demons* and in regards to shifting contemporary psychological discourses on subjectivity.

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Hero, and the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero, in Dostoevsky's Art," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 47.

[3] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession and The Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner*, trans. S. S. Koteliansky and Virginia Woolf (Richmond: The Hogarth Press, 1922), 38; Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

## Establishing the subject: Positioning Stavrogin within *Demons* and existing scholarship

In the last line of *Demons* the doctors attending to Stavrogin's body disqualify madness as a possible cause his suicide, "absolutely and emphatically reject[ing] all idea of insanity" («совершенно и настойчиво отвергли помешательство»).[4] While Peter McGuire Wolf has identified that in Dostoevsky's novels "the reason for each suicide is as unique as the character himself," Stavrogin's suicide—especially when juxtaposed with the thoroughly premeditated, clearly motivated suicides and suicide attempts exemplified by such characters as Alexei Kirillov in *Demons*, and Hippolyte Terentyev in *The Idiot*—appears exceptional in that there is no overt causational root which can be seen to lead directly to his death.[5] While some scholars have identified a general sense of guilt to be the driving force behind Stavrogin's actions,[6] Stavrogin's assertion that he could "never, never shoot" himself («Никогда, никогда я не могу застрелиться») and the apparent lack of suicidal intention found in his letter, written and sent to Darya Pavlovna Shatova (Dasha) in the lead up to his suicide, complicates and problematises their argument which relies on a straightforward cause and effect, intention-driven narrative.[7] The 'cause' of Stavrogin's suicide remains elusive at best. Consequently, Stavrogin's suicide accords with Dostoevsky's description in *A Writers Diary* of a type of "strange and puzzling" suicide that seems to occur "mysteriously, for no apparent reason," arising from a "spiritual illness"; the "contemporary Russian malady" of

[4] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, 1936), 688; *Бесы: Роман в Трех Частях* (Moscow: Soglasie, 1996), 433.

[5] Peter McGuire Wolf, *Dostoevsky's Conception of Man: Its Impact on Philosophical Anthropology*, (Baco Raton: Universal Publishers, 1997), 54.

[6] See for example Stephen M. O'Brien, *God and the Devil are Fighting: The Scandal of Evil in Dostoyevsky and Camus* (Ann Arbor: Proquest LLC, 2008), 218-219; Claudia Durst Johnson and Vernon Elso Johnson, *The Social Impact of the Novel: A Reference Guide*, (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 205.

[7] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 686; Бесы, 432.

"indifference [which has] corrupted all souls," and resulted in the loss of "higher meaning and significance."[8] Such 'corrupt souls,' according to Dostoevsky, "will shoot themselves precisely for what appears to be no reason at all."[9]

In his discussion of these 'reasonless' suicides Dostoevsky states "I am not going to undertake to explain all these suicides, and indeed I cannot explain them." Nevertheless, the ideas and positions represented in Dostoevsky's novels and through his characters—as anyone acquainted with Mikhail Bakhtin will be well aware—are not represented in a fully explained, finalised form; his novels do not attempt to provide explanations of the world, nor do they seeks to assert any one position or perspective on an issue as truth. Dostoevsky's characters are not "manifestations of reality" or "specific profiles assembled out of unambiguous and objective feature." Instead, Dostoevsky's 'hero' and the central characters of his novels function to reflect a "particular point of view on the world and on oneself," a position:

> enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality. What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself.[10]

Consequently, Stavrogin's position in *Demons* can be read as a means by which Dostoevsky could explore the position of a "corrupt soul," and the subjectivity of an individual for whom "higher meaning and significance" has been lost. In previous research which seeks to understand Stavrogin as reflecting a model of subjectivity by positing him as the analytical subject in a process of psychoanalysis, such as Richard Pope and Judy Turner's "Towards Understanding Stavrogin" and John Williams' "Stavrogin's Moti-

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[8] Dostoevsky, "A few words about young people," *Writer's Diary Volume 1: 1873-1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 737.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] Bakhtin, "The Hero in Dostoevsky's Art," 47.

vation: Love and Suicide," Stavrogin's destructive behaviour is identified to occur as an indirect result of his problematic relationship with his mother. I suggest that this approach to Stavrogin can provide a valuable starting point when, based in psychoanalytic theory, it identifies a subject's ambiguous relationship with 'the abject'—the abject being that which is for the subject both a source of horror and of fascination, of repulsion and of allure—as having its source in the process of the separation of the infant from its mother, as the "infant experiences horror at its dependence on the mother's body, and at the way its identity is consumed by that body, but it is also fascinated by it."[11] Given that Stavrogin's account of his time in Saint Petersburg, where "abandoned to vice," he pursued "rapture from the tormenting consciousness of the baseness" of his actions, certainly invokes an image of 'abject' pleasure, Stavrogin's troubled relationship with his mother could quite reasonably be invoked in order to offer an explanation for elements of his behaviour up to and including his Saint Petersburg period.[12]

Neither Williams', nor Pope and Turner's articles however address the concept of the abject, or consider its role in relation to Stavrogin. Of the two articles, only Williams' offers an explanation for Stavrogin's suicide, suggesting that:

> Stavrogin's suicide may be explained as arising from the warring libidinal and aggressive feelings towards his mother and the concomitant unconscious, self-destructive guilt it releases.[13]

Williams' explanation of Stavrogin does not, however, offer a reason for why an otherwise passionless Stavrogin, with negated autonomy and whose behaviour demonstrates a clear lack of either a "libindinal" or an "aggressive" drive, would suddenly be

[11] Phillip Cole, *The Myth of Evil: Demonizing The Enemy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)114.

[12] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 39, 43.

[13] John S. Williams, "Stavrogin's Motivation: Love and Suicide," *Psychoanalytic Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Summer, 1982), 262.

'driven' to suicide by his "warring" libido and aggression. Neither does Williams identify a cause for what Pope and Turner address as Stavrogin's "paradox," that there appear "two distinct aspects to his personality."[14] This distinct split or transformation is witnessed in the text between the "affectionately attentive" child Stavrogin (who «К Степану Трофимовичу относился с прежним нежным вниманием» upon returning home from the lyceum on vacation), who had a "vague sensation of that eternal, sacred yearning," («неопределенное ощущение той вековечной, священной тоски») and the indifferent, negated, post-Petersburg Stavrogin characterised by his detachment and as a "impostor" («самозванец») and a "very poor actor" («плохой ты актер»).[15] While Pope and Turner recognise that the Stavrogin described in *The Notebooks for The Possessed* appears to be a different Stavrogin to the Stavrogin of the novel, drawing upon Edward Wasiolek's observation that "these notes are in a large part a record of wrong Stavrogin, of trial upon trial of a different Prince. The passionless, frightening, self-contained, silent Stavrogin... is not to be found in these notes," Pope and Turner attribute the split to a "severe personality disorder often traceable at least in part to early childhood and the infant's relationship to the mother."[16] This account does not take into consideration the temporality of the transformation, where the "passionless" Stavrogin emerges in the text following his time in Petersburg in contrast to the Stavrogin "who was always so polite and respectful" («всегда столь вежливый и почтительный»).[17] Upon his return, the temporal aspect of Stavrogin's transformation is noted in the text through Varvara Petrovna's observation that "It's begun!" («Началось!»); what exactly had begun, however, is not entirely clear.[18]

[14] Richard Pope and Judy Turner, "Towards Understanding Stavrogin," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter, 1990), 544.

[15] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 38, 282; Бесы, 27, 173.

[16] Edward Wasiolek in Pope and Turner, "Towards Understanding Stavrogin," 546.

[17] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 45; Бесы, 31.

[18] *Ibid*.

Neither model of subjectivity posited by Williams', or by Pope and Turners' articles attempt or are able to offer an explanation for both Stavrogin's transformation and for his suicide. Additionally, neither seeks to identify the wider significance of Stavrogin's pursuance of abject pleasures, nor do they attempt to identify the role of the abject in Stavrogin's subject in the first place. The discrepancy between the Stavrogin set out in *The Notebooks* and the Stavrogin in the novel suggests that as a character, the enigmatic Stavrogin pushed against the boundaries within which Dostoevsky's characters normally arise, in regards to the position or point of view which they suggest on themselves and their world, their function within the text, and the subjectivity which they reflect, transforming into something quite other than was originally intended as he took form. The alignment between Stavrogin's suicide and the reasonless, "strange and puzzling" suicide of the corrupt soul characterised by the loss of higher meaning and significance suggests that what Stavrogin came to express in the novel was not entirely within the bounds of Dostoevsky's capacity—as indicated by Dostoevsky himself—to explain. While "in Dostoevsky's artistic universe, the... autonomous subject, whose reason has its 'double' in unreason, is reflected in every fictional character," anticipating the "new model of subjectivity... before [it emerged within] scientific discourse on the subject – in other words, before the advent of modern psychoanalysis and the philosophy of Being or language," this article suggests that Stavrogin reflects a subject whose reason not only has its 'double' in unreason—unreason (from Foucault's *déraison*) being "the negativity which is the condition of possibility of reason, constituting the 'groundless ground' of the self-determining subject," that is, the (Freudian or psychoanalytic) unconscious—but a post-traumatic subject for which conventional psychoanalysis cannot account.[19] As a result, Stavrogin, whose 'confession' reveals what was described by Dmitry Merezhkovsky as surpassing "the bounds of

[19] Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, "'Unreason' as a Constituent of Reason: The Structure of Modern Consciousness according to Dostoevsky's *The Double*" in *Philosophical Aspects of Dostoevsky's Works*, ed. Stefano Aloe (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2012), 434-5.

the possible in its conception of horror," provides Dostoevsky, on one hand, with the means for a literary exploration of the darkest reaches and limitations of a subject's psychology;[20] an exploration pushing in turn at the boundaries of literature's capacity for representing modern consciousness, looking beyond the realm of abject pleasure and repressed desire to that which is irreconcilable for the subject even within the domain of unreason, the 'groundless ground' of the unconscious. On the other hand, this article suggests that Stavrogin, as a textual experiment, also provided Dostoevsky with the means by which to investigate the consequences of, and consequently critique, nihilism.

## Post-traumatic subjectivity and the post-Freudian death drive

The contemporary push for an understanding of the subject—the *cogito*—which goes beyond Freudian psychoanalysis has stemmed in part from a need to understand and account for the impact of "abstract violence" upon the subject, that is, of trauma which cannot be reconciled with subject's concept of self, or accounted for by the unconscious drives which Freud identified behind all human behaviour. According to Freud, external shocks and traumas are 'sublated' into the subject; their impact upon the subject results from the manner in which the subject internalises the trauma, as a result, the traumatic effect arises out of the subject's own unconscious, having its base in, and being symptomatic of, an pre-existing unconscious reality or complex; the subject's 'unreason,' which contains the possibility of reason, of articulation, and of expression through its manifestation in behaviour. It is for this reason that, according to Freud, all trauma owes its effect on the subject to its belatedness, or afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*), as it is only once the trauma finds resonance in some "perverse masochism, in death-drive, in unconscious guilt-feeling, etc" that

[20] V. Komarovich, "Introduction to The Unpublished Chapter of the Possessed," in *Stavrogin's Confession and The Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner*, 127.

it becomes significant for the subject.[21] Consequently, for Freud, all neurotic symptoms and manifestations of traumatic impact are expressions, also, of a libidinal force or the result of the subject's psychical obedience to the pleasure principle, as could be considered the case in (the pre-traumatic) Stavrogin's pursuit of abject pleasures, or in the example of perversions and sexual fetishes.

This is made all the more evident in the work of Jean Laplanche, recognised as a leading figure in the development of psychosexual theory, who argues that Freud's death drive is none other than another sexual drive:

> Freud's refusal to posit a *destrudo* as an alternative energy source for the death drive to the *libido* indicates that the distinction between life and death drives is internal to the field of sexuality. The death drive is not opposed to sexuality but is the return of the earlier conception of a fragmented and fragmenting sexual drive.[22]

Freud's conception of his death drive does not account for either irreconcilable trauma or an entirely destructive drive within the subject. This leads Malabou to assert "did not Freud ultimately concede the point himself? [For Freud] *there is no beyond of the pleasure principle*."[23] As a result, Malabou argues, conventional psychoanalytic theory and Freud's conception of the 'death drive' does not provide the means by which to address subjects whom, having survived trauma and their own consequent 'annihilation'—brought about by an experience with which they cannot reconcile with their subjectivity or sublate into their unconscious—come to embody a new form of post-traumatic subjectivity. Engaging with Malabou in his own discussion of the "post-traumatic subject," Žižek agrees that what Freud was unable to envisage was a subject who "survives its own death"; Freud "succumbs to the temptation

[21] Slavoj Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," *Filozofski* vestnik, vol. XXIX, no. 2 (2008), 11.

[22] John Fletcher, "Recent Developments in the General Theory of Primal Seducation," *New Formations: Jean Laplanche and the Theory of Seduction*, vol. 48, (2002-3) 13.

[23] Malabou, *The New Wounded*, 8.

of meaning: he is not ready to accept the direct destructive efficiency of external shocks – [that] they destroy the psyche of the victim (or, at least, wound it in an unredeemable way) without resonating in any inner traumatic truth."[24] By going beyond Freud, one can recognise the consequence of this destruction for the subject, as Žižek notes, "a new subject emerges which survives its own death, the death (erasure) or its symbolic identity."[25] The new "post-traumatic subject... lives death as a form of life – his life is death-drive embodied, a life deprived of erotic engagement," demonstrating a "lack of emotional engagement, profound indifference and detachment – it is a subject who is no longer 'in-the-world' in the Heideggerian sense of engaged embodied existence."[26]

While at the beginning of the twentieth century Freud acknowledged himself that "neither the war neuroses nor the traumatic neuroses of peace are as yet fully understood,"[27] Žižek asks whether it is now, following the new research into post-traumatic subjectivity, that

> our unique historical constellation enables us to discern all the consequences of the *cogito*? Walter Benjamin claimed that works of art often function like shots taken on a film for which the developer has not yet been discovered, so that one has to wait for a future to understand them properly. Is not something similar happening with *cogito*: today, we have at our disposal the developer to understand it properly.[28]

Is it now, following the development of such concepts as Malabou's 'new wounded,' that we can approach an understanding of individuals who remained unaccounted for in previous models of subjectivity, such as those offered by psychoanalysis and other modern philosophical and scientific discourses? Does Stavrogin

[24] Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," 11-12.

[25] *Ibid*., 12.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C.J.M. Hubback (London, Vienna: The International Psychoanalytic Press, 1922), 8.

[28] Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," 9.

reflect one such subject, showing that Dostoevsky, yet again, anticipated within his art a model of subjectivity which is only beginning to emerge now within psychoneurological discourse; that of a subject who suffers from a negation of subjectivity as a result of trauma? A trauma, that is, which cannot be integrated into the topography of the unconscious, as it is not reconcilable as an "unknown known"—the Freudian name for the unconscious—where external events are integrated with pre-existing "inner traumatic truth," a trauma which is rather, in Žižek's words, "an unknown unknown... the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way."[29]

## Stavrogin as the post-traumatic, negated subject

Prior to his suicide, in a letter to Dasha, Stavrogin claims that "from me nothing has come but negation, with no greatness of soul, no force. Even negation has not come from me" («из меня вылилось одно отрицание, без всякого великодушия и безо всякой силы. Даже отрицания не вылилось»).[30] This account which Stavrogin gives of himself presents a stark contrast to both the child Stavrogin and the later Saint Petersburg episode Stavrogin, whose pursuit of abject pleasures and "unusually disgraceful, utterly degrading, dastardly, and above all, ridiculous situations" which Stavrogin asserts to have "always roused in me, side by side with extreme anger, an incredible delight" demonstrates, if not a positive life force, some sort of "force" or drive all the same.[31] Through the other characters the reader is given accounts of a previous, altogether different Stavrogin who is full of ideas, potency and drive, a Stavrogin that Pyotr Stephanovitch both projects through his words in an attempt to affirm his image of Stavrogin as truth, and clings to, asserting that "the Pope shall be for the west, and you [Stavrogin] shall be for us, you shall be for us!... You

[29] *Ibid.*, 10.

[30] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 686; Бесы, 433.

[31] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 43.

are just the man that's needed. It's just such a man as you that I need. I know no one but you. You are the leader," («папа будет на западе, а у нас, у нас будете вы!... Вы именно таков, какого надо. Мне, мне именно такого надо как вы. Я никого, кроме вас не знаю. Вы предводитель») a proclamation which causes Stavrogin to pull away in dismay.[32] Upon Stavrogin's return from abroad he remains predominantly silent, rejecting the image and the role of ideological figurehead which the others attempt to project onto him; while he does engage in conversation, he contributes no monologues to the text as do many of the other main characters, and outside of the chapter "Stavrogin's Confession," his only extended dialogue occurs at the end of the novel following the futile attempt at intercourse between him and Liza. Stavrogin's split or transformation receives perhaps its most overt recognition in the novel in the account of Stavrogin's conversation with Tikhon during which he is described as speaking "with such strange frankness, never seen in him before, with such a simplicity, quite unnatural to him, that it seemed as if suddenly and unexpectedly his former self had completely disappeared."[33]

This complete 'disappearance' of Stavrogin's "former self" and the emergence of the indifferent, passionless character who is not only negated, but who negates that which is around him—negating for instance Liza's attempt at a love affair, Pyotr Stephanovitch's desire for Shigalovism, then for a political upheaval as well as setting up a Stavrogin "legend," and even negating the symbolic quality of language, reducing Pyotr Pavlovitch Gaganov's metaphorical meaning to a literal one—accords with Žižek's description of the post-traumatic subject:

> In the new form of subjectivity (autistic, indifferent, without affective engagement), the old personality is not "sublated" or replaced by a compensatory formation, but thoroughly destroyed – destruction itself acquires a form, becomes a (relatively stable) "form of life" – what we get is not simply the absence of form, but the form of (the) absence

[32] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 426; Бесы, 258.

[33] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 29.

> (of the erasure of the previous personality, which is not replaced by a new one). More precisely, the new form is not a form of life, but, rather, a form of death – not an expression of the Freudian death drive, but, more directly, the *death of drive*.[34]

Stavrogin is shown in the novel not only to have emerged as a radically different subject, but one which negates all that is around him and the images that others attempt to project onto him, and as such, despite his negation, retains the final word on his own subjectivity. He embodies the loss of "higher meaning" and of "significance" by which Dostoevsky characterised the 'corrupt souls' suffering from the Russian "spiritual illness" of "indifference." For a post-traumatic subject to emerge however, one must be able to identify a trauma, an event which disrupts meaning and narration for the subject. In other words, the subject's normative process of producing meaning and engaging with the world must be interrupted as a consequence of the unexpectedness of the traumatic event which finds no cohesion with, or which cannot be integrated into, the subject's position and perspective on the world and itself.

This trauma for Stavrogin is identifiable in the unexpected response of Matryosha to Stavrogin after he has 'seduced' her. Matryosha, having entered into what her mother called a "delirium" following the assault, "raved of 'horrors'" and whispers of having "killed God;" her reaction to the event leaves Stavrogin at first bewildered and later in a state of ambivalent emotional turmoil during which the girl's gestures and expressions appear to him "unendurable." [35] Their unendurability comes, I argue, as a result of Stavrogin's awareness of the destruction and ruin which he has caused in the little girl's world. Matryosha's gestures themselves signify a traumatised subjectivity for which Stavrogin understands himself to be solely responsible, and thereby the image of Matryosha's fractured selfhood serves to confront Stavrogin with his own depravity in which he perceives an irreconcilable, abject evil. It is interesting to note that Matryosha, whose trauma manifests in

[34] Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," 15.

[35] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 54-5.

her perception of herself as having killed God, also reflects the modern subject who emerges in the post-religious era. Foreshadowing Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead... And we have killed him," Matryosha's claim points to a negation of any religious metanarratives by which pre-modern subjects could make sense of otherwise meaningless intrusions of violence and trauma.[36] According to Žižek, modern, post-traumatic subjectivity depends in part upon a "'disenchanted' post-religious" sensibility and the position of the subject within an era during which "abstract violence" is "much more directly experienced as meaningless intrusions of the real."[37] Nietzsche, following the assertion that God is dead, asks "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"[38] In contrast to Kirillov, who embodies this desire for greatness, Stavrogin sees that this is only greatness for those who have lost their reason; "Kirillov, in the greatness of his soul, could not compromise with an idea, and shot himself; but I see, of course, that he was great-souled because he had lost his reason. I can never lose my reason" («Великодушный Кириллов не вынес идеи и -- застрелился; но ведь я вижу, что он был великодушен, потому что не в здравом рассудке. Я никогда не могу потерять рассудок»).[39] Because he could never "lose [his] reason"—or from another perspective, because he could not maintain his belief and commitment to a modern, nihilist idea in the face of the destruction and trauma which he sees it to have unexpectedly caused—Stavrogin asserts that "I am afraid of showing greatness of soul. I know that it will be another sham again—the last deception in an endless series of deceptions. What good is there in deceiving oneself?" («боюсь показать великодушие. Я знаю, что это будет еще обман, — последний обман в бесконечном ряду обманов. Что же пользы себя обмануть, чтобы только сыграть в велико-

[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York and Toronto: Random House, 1974), 181.

[37] Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," 11.

[38] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

[39] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 686; Бесы, 432.

душие?»).[40] A conclusion which he came to having seen the impact of 'killing God,' and by inference, of the negation of moral and spiritual values, upon Matryosha, a negation for which he had not accounted, which struck him as entirely unexpected and out of keeping with his previous worldview, and for which he sees himself responsible. A negation which in retrospect showed him what he perceives to be the "endless series of deceptions," the "sham[s]" which he had previously not only believed in, but which he had recruited others to in the form of a political and ideological cause.

Having done all in his power to push the bounds of moral and ideological nihilism to the limits, Stavrogin becomes a vessel for Dostoevsky to explore the impact upon the human subject of what Dostoevsky conceived of as the worst possible crime. A crime permitted—and which accordingly remains unpunished by authorities in text—in a nihilist world where higher meaning and significance, and therefore a higher moral law, has been negated. According to the memoirs of Zinaida Trubetskaya, Dostoevsky had expressed that "the most fearful crime is to rape a child," "to take somebody's life is a terrible sin, but to take away one's faith in the beauty of life, is an even more terrible crime." It was with this "most dreadful crime, the most fearful sin" that he "assigned to" or "punished" Stavrogin.[41] In this manner, Stavrogin becomes not only the source of trauma for another, but the victim of the trauma which arises in the form of the unexpected consequences of his actions. Rather than the representing a "legend" and taking on the role of figurehead of a modern, nihilist ideological era—the significance which the others attribute to Stavrogin's position, and indeed the position Stavrogin may have seen himself in prior Matryosha's death—Stavrogin is punished with the consciousness of the impact of his crime. A consciousness or awareness causing an

[40] Dostoevsky, *The Possessed,* 686; Бесы, 432.

[41] See the accounts given in *The Dostoevsky Archive: Firsthand Accounts of the Novelist from Contemporaries' Memoirs and Rare Periodicals*, ed. Peter Sekirin (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishers, 1997), 47; and *Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov*, ed. Harold Bloom, (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004) 211; which draw upon the recollections of Zinaida Trubetskaya, *Journal of Russian Literature*, No. 3 (1973), 117.

unexpected rupture to the higher meaning and significance which had been built around him, resulting in break in his narrative capacity and ability to understand himself as he had in light of the traumatic intrusion which shattered his "deceptions" of greatness.

Having been faced with an image of himself as the autonomous source of trauma for another—having sought his own perverse sexual gratification at the expense of a child's innocence, her faith in God, and her faith in the goodness and beauty of life—seeing himself as an embodiment of an abject evil which lies even beyond the bounds of the pleasure principle or the Freudian death drive—that is, beyond the bounds of reconciliation, outside of the "unknown known," surpassing "the bounds of the possible in its conception of horror," a trauma taking the form of an intrusion of the "unknown unknown" or the "unthinkable"—Stavrogin's subjectivity is shattered, giving way to the new form of the negated subject. This erasure of subjectivity or identity, according to Malabou, is posited as the means by which the brain may facilitate such a shock; by erasing that which cannot be reconciled in a process of 'destructive plasticity':

> a diseased identity deserts its former reference points—which it no longer recognizes as its own—and fixates upon the undecipherable touchstones of an 'other world." Might there be a type of plasticity that, under the effects of a wound, creates a certain form of being by effacing a previously existing identity? Might there be, in the brain, a destructive plasticity—the dark double of the positive and constructive plasticity that moulds neuronal connections? Might such a plasticity make form through the annihilation of form?[42]

The alternative position offered by Malabou from which to approach the traumatised subject allows a reading of Stavrogin that explains not only his transformation, but also his suicide. In the previous scholarly attempts discussed in this article psychoanalysis was not shown to be able to account for both events. In

[42] Malabou, *The New Wounded*, xv.

Williams' article, which suggests that Stavrogin's suicide was the result of "warring libidinal and aggressive feelings" developed in childhood, the dramatic transformation in Stavrogin remains unacknowledged an unaccounted for. In Pope and Turner's article, while Stavrogin's "split" personality is acknowledged, it is suggested to have arisen from a "severe personality disorder often traceable at least in part to early childhood and the infant's relationship to the mother," once again offering no explanation for the temporality of the transformation, nor the sudden and unexpected, "strange and puzzling" suicide, only offering to explanation his "alienation and antisocial behavior" as a consequence lack of "selfless charitable love" from his mother, which "cripples and wounds" him," as "without love there can only be chaos and evil."[43]

By moving beyond Freudian psychoanalysis, this article has offered an explanation of Stavrogin's negation, his 'transformation,' into a character who takes on not an "absence of form" as a result of this negation, but the "form of absence" and who represents or reflects the "death of drive" and the loss of higher meaning and significance. The 'death' and loss which occurs in both Stavrogin's and Matryosha's cases eventuates in suicide, however while both suicides follow from a traumatic negation of subjectivity, Stavrogin, unlike Matryosha, is not only the negated but the autonomous negator. Consequently Stavrogin sees there is no high enough retribution for his crime or punishment that can restore to him a unified subjectivity, Stavrogin "seek[s] boundless suffering" in order to restore order, sense and significance to his world, believing only then "that vision will disappear," seeking as such to replace his existent suffering, inflicted upon him by his awareness of his own state of abject subjectivity, with an autonomously afflicted suffering which fits with a reconcilable personal narrative. Evidently his attempts at self-retribution fail, as ultimately Stavrogin resorts to his own destruction.[44] He makes no assertions about the ideological significance of his suicide, denying even that he has

[43] Pope and Turner, "Towards Understanding Stavrogin," 553.

[44] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 80.

the ability to shoot himself; his death is not proclamation, not an attempt to assert an ideology, rather his death takes the form of an absence of higher significance, as such his death could be read to frame or reflect in the novel an image of nihilist ideology, the consequence of a loss of meaning.

## Stavrogin's 'confession': seeking truth in the resistance to speech

Having drawn heavily upon the embedded text of Stavrogin's 'confession'—presented by Stavrogin in the novel to the monk Tikhon as a "document" providing his first-hand account of his Saint Petersburg episode and of his assault of Matryosha—it is important to take into account the relation of the fragment to the complete text of *Demons* from which it was originally excluded. When first published in the journal *Russkii Vestnik*, the 'confession' was excluded, or censored, initially at the editor's request. While the request was voluntarily agreed to and accepted by Dostoevsky, it is significant to note that "the omission of the chapter... from the novel did not arise from the artist's decision, but from an external cause."[45] The external cause for the exclusion of the chapter in which Dostoevsky develops his "motif of a cruelly insulted little girl, [which is] is evidently one of Dostoevsky's long-standing and enduring ideas," points one to recognise that the 'motif' or the ideas related in the chapter carried enough of what was considered potentially detrimental or enough of a (destructive) cultural significance for it to warrant excluding or suppressing.[46] The suppression of the chapter therefore occurred initially not as a result of an aesthetic or artistic decision on the part of Dostoevsky himself but as a result of the cultural authorities' concern over its impact.

[45] Komarovich, "Introduction to The Unpublished Chapter of the Possessed," 131.

[46] *Ibid*.

While one can discuss *Demons* only in reference to what was present in the initial editions of the novel, as has been noted by Brooks, the cohesive whole "can sometimes be clearly seen only if we are aware of the unwritten novel whose outlines can be discerned in the history of the written one."[47] Traces of the censored chapter, its motifs and the echoes of the realization of a destructive and traumatic occurrence are undeniable throughout the novel, whether they are acknowledged or not. It is interesting therefore to note here both Freud's and Lacan's[48] observations regarding the uncovering of truth or knowledge by means of psychoanalytic techniques, as what is in part being considered here the value of such approaches which consider the possibility of, and significance of not, reconciling that which is absent or repressed with the whole. According to Freud, fragments which arise belatedly or which are only recalled at a later date in a narration, having been previously forgotten or repressed, generally hold more significance or truth than those fragments which are easily remembered.

[47] Frank, "The Masks of Stavrogin," 660.

[48] While it is only possible within the limitations of this article to briefly note the value which Lacan affords literature in regards to its ability to function as "a source of knowledge from whom the analyst can and must learn," with the usual relationship between psychoanalysis and literature being one in which "psychoanalysis is... in receipt from literature, albeit taking within its own jurisdiction a less psychobiographical idea of repression," it is worthwhile to note the key role of this literary "repression" in providing insight, or a key, which can lead to the deciphering of a textual whole (See Suzanne Dow, "Lacan with Beckett," *Nottingham French Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2014), 1-18; Lacan in Dow, "Lacan with Beckett," 3). This "less psychobiographical idea" of the repressed fragment as it exists within literature, a 'repression' referred to elsewhere as the "repressed nucleus," which can appear in both literature and in a subject's discourse, appears "as rendered material in the text in the form a literally concrete bundles... [a] nucleus which itself is also a story... [with] the phenomenon of resistance [being] located precisely at this point" (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1 Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 22). According to Lacan, "one encounters greater and greater resistance the closer the subject comes" to this nucleus, this "repressed center," the uncovering of which could allow the subject or the text to progress towards truth by means of a "synthesis" of the repressed nucleus into the textual whole (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, 22-23).

This is because any truth that the ego cannot reconcile easily with itself, which nonetheless *is* a truth for the subject, is potentially disruptive and is therefore 'repressed' by the conscious mind, precisely because of its consequent ability to threaten the ego's coherent perception of itself and the world.[49] It has been noted that one of Dostoevsky's aesthetic principles operates in a similar manner; in many of his novels, the "action in its early stages advances by motives concealed from the reader," the significance of various elements of the text and of the 'action' represented in the text undergoes a "belated exposition;" that which is most significant or which underlies the action is only exposed at a later date, with this 'exposition' revealing the novel's concealed 'truth.'[50]

While this is not to say that the "belated exposition" of the chapter "Stavrogin's Confession" following its initial suppressio — which occurred initially as a result of the novel's extra-textual cultural context — was a result of the transposition of one of Dostoevsky's aesthetic or narrative principles upon the publishing industry, this coincidence and Freud's observations on the emergence of repressed or suppressed fragments nonetheless lend a potentially insightful position from which to consider the significance of "Stavrogin's Confession" in relation to *Demons* in its textual entirety within its cultural context. Taking into account Peter Brooks' discussion of the 'confessional' literary form and specifically his observation that a "speech-act of confession is dubious guide to the truth, which must rather be sought in the resistance to such speech," as while "the need to confess speaks of guilt, certainly, but it does not speak the guilt, [and] does not locate that psychic configuration that needs discovery and healing," one can seek the "guilt" or the "truth" of the 'confession' in *Demons* as being that which encountered resistance, or which was censored,

[49] See for instance Freud's clinical analysis of 'Dora' in which he made use of dream analysis, 'unlocking' the significance of Dora's dreams by means of dream fragments which were only recalled after the initial retelling of the dream by the patient. "Fragment of an Analysis (Dora)" in *The Psychology of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

[50] Komarovich, "Introduction to The Unpublished Chapter of the Possessed," 138.

looking not so much at what was confessed by Stavrogin, but what emerges through his position in the text as a character reflecting a post-traumatic subject.[51] This position can be used to uncover and identify the "disease" of the identity, in Malabou's words, or the "psychic configuration that needs discovery," in Brooks,' that is, the true 'guilt' represented in the text which holds a wider cultural significance within the context in which it was suppressed. In short, perhaps the resistance or suppression of "Stavrogin's Confession" actually serves to points towards its significance, and a concealed truth which it contains, suppressed because of its disruptive potential.

In the chapter "Stavrogin's Confession," Tikhon, after he has read Stavrogin's confession 'document' responds in part by noting, in regards to Stavrogin's 'crime,' that:

> as for the crime itself, many people sin like that, but they live in peace and quiet with their conscience, even considering it to be the inevitable delinquency of youth. There are old men, too, who sin in the same way—yes, lightly and indulgently. The world is full of these horrors. But you [Stavrogin] have felt the whole depth to a degree which is extremely rare.[52]

Tikhon goes on to predict that "the ugliness of [the confession] will kill it," that while there are "picturesque" crimes, the implication of which being that there are certain crimes which do not confront people with the horror of their own existences, "'there are crimes shameful, disgraceful, past all horror, they are, so to say, almost too inelegant...' Tikhon did not finish."[53] What can be implied from Tikhon's observations, or what the position which Tikhon represents in the text reveals, is an image of a society which will not, or cannot, face or admit even to themselves the horror or the atrocity which resides concealed within some of its subjects; sub-

[51] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guild in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 117.

[52] Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession*, 73.

[53] *Ibid.*, 79.

jects who titillate themselves with "picturesque" crimes, lacking the capacity for self-consciousness and for feeling "the whole depth" of their "malady," unable to recognise "inelegant" crimes which could potentially disrupt their cohesive self-perceptions. Crimes which would be fully permitted and perceived to be without consequence within a society whose subjects subscribe to nihilist values. As such, identifying Stavrogin as a subject who is irreparably traumatised by his own nihilistic experiments allows us to understand him as a character through whom Dostoevsky is able to carry out what is perhaps his most forceful critique of nihilism.

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