Contemporary Dostoevskian Literature: The Post-Postmodern Repositioning of Dostoevskian Ethics in Novels by David Foster Wallace, J. M. Coetzee and Atiq Rahimi

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<u>Preface – Three Serendipities</u>

This thesis begins with a quotation from Kurt Vonnegut Jnr's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It is a quotation that can be considered its symbolic origin as well as its paginal one. I read *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an undergraduate at the University of Manchester on a second-year American Literature module. I don't remember any of the other texts on the module, but I remember reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* and I remember coming to a line that told me everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*. I remember thinking how bold a claim I found it, and yet I also remember the incredible pathos that Vonnegut's weird little book managed to surprise me with, as all the best literature inevitably does. I'd heard of *Crime and Punishment*, as everyone has. Still, I wasn't sure how to even pronounce Dostoevsky's name at that point. Hadn't any idea why some people wrote it Dostoyevsky. The closest I'd got to Russian literature was the time I once squashed a bug with the family copy of *War and Peace*.

The next time I was in a bookshop, I found and bought the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* that I reference throughout this thesis, mostly because I thought the cover art was more intriguing than the Garnett or Margarshack editions. And, the first of three serendipities, about a week later I was asked to choose my third-year modules. The first module I chose was a course called 'The History of the Devil', solely for the two weeks it devoted to Ivan's feverish nightmare. It took me about two months to read *The Brothers Karamazov* for the first time, by the end of which I'd firmly concluded that Vonnegut was right.

As chance would have it, I'd read the obituary of David Foster Wallace in a newspaper in 2008, just before the start of my time at Manchester, and made a note of his so-called 'novel of a generation'. Over time it became the text I singled out as the 'first to read' after my undergraduate studies were concluded: it was far too big and too dense, I reasoned, to read whilst I was supposed to be doing other things. Imagine my smile as, having finally relieved my bookshelves of its over-1000-page weight, it dawned on me that there were, in fact, three Incandenza brothers in *Infinite Jest*, each of whom had something resembling a Karamazov prototype. Imagine my even wider smile as, towards the end of the novel, I found Wallace's reference to 'the good old *Brothers K.*'. This is the second serendipity. Had I read Wallace's novel when I wanted to, before I read Dostoevsky, perhaps the following thesis would be asking a different set of questions. Yet I found in the horror and the humour that constitutes *Infinite Jest* a reflection of the changing relation I was undergoing with *The Brothers Karamazov*. My focus was shifting from the first to the second half of Vonnegut's quote, from the claim that the novel revealed 'everything to be known about life' to the lament that 'it's

not enough any more'. I'd loved (and still love) *The Brothers Karamazov*, loved its pain, loved its torment, loved its depth. I'd loved the note of hope that it ended with. Had breathlessly muttered 'hurrah for Karamazov' as I turned over its final page. Yet it was a love that felt out of place, as I felt out of place, with the world around me. Why wasn't Dostoevsky enough anymore? Why wasn't I?

The third serendipity is my favourite. After my undergraduate studies were over, and after I'd read *Infinite Jest*, I took some time to volunteer overseas. On my volunteer programme, I met the woman who is now my wife. She lived in Toronto, Canada, so for the next few years I travelled intermittently across the Atlantic to visit her. On one of the earlier of these visits, I spent a day in downtown Toronto whilst she was at work. At this point in my life, I was undertaking a Masters at Manchester and was considering applications for a doctoral programme but was unsure of a thesis topic. I knew I wanted to involve Dostoevsky, but that (not being able to read Russian unproblematically) I had to find a way to relate Dostoevsky to literature in English.

This day in Toronto occurred in 2016, an unremarkable year in many ways but one that happily marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Crime and Punishment*. At the time, the University of Toronto had emerged as a potential destination for a PhD, combining one of the strongest Slavic Departments in the world with the hometown of my new-favourite person. As such, I thought it practical that I wander around the campus, get a feel for a place that I hoped would become a kind of second home. And, as part of these wanderings, I happened upon Toronto's Robarts Library. Disappointingly, day-visitors were not allowed to access all areas of Robarts, but on one of the visitor accessible sections there was, to my surprise and delight, an exhibition celebrating 150 years of arguably Dostoevsky's most famous novel.

The trajectory of circumstances that led me to be in that particular city on that particular day, drawn without any serious purpose to discover that particular exhibit… it doesn't bear thinking about. Part of the exhibit was devoted to contemporary adaptions of *Crime and Punishment*, which brought contemporary adaptions of other Dostoevsky novels (such as *Infinite Jest*) to my mind, bringing with it Vonnegut's 'not enough any more'. Needless to say, I walked away from Robarts that day with the bare bones and overriding theme of what would, during the next 5 years, develop into the 300 or so pages that follow this one.

The questions I ask have varied slightly, the sections of various literary and theoretical works I focus on have gradually changed, and even the title has not remained consistent. Yet the thread that runs through it, the one which demands to know whether Dostoevsky is enough anymore, and, if he is, what it means for him to be *enough*, has stayed the same. It cannot be said that this thesis is solely a literary study. It does not have a single focus. Not Dostoevsky, nor Wallace, J.M. Coetzee or Atiq Rahimi. It is not exclusively concerned with my main theoretical frameworks: the ethical

philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, nor the way such philosophy can be reappropriated as a literary theory or as a theory on modernism, postmodernism and whatever comes after. It was my intention to offer a contribution to all these fields, to find through the many interconnections and intertextualities that I offer forthwith a fresh or updated perspective on all such names and ideas. Like all scholars, my fervent hope is that the ideas I put forward here lay the groundwork for a series of further conversations and studies concerning one or more of the topics I investigate. Yet if it was demanded of me to articulate a binding theme, the thing that the thesis is about 'more than others', I would refer back to the implications of Vonnegut's quote. The thesis simply wants to know what it means to be a good person today. How, I want to know, can a comparison of all these different minds and ideas help answer that question, as it appears to me today and as it may appear to others down the line. It is a debate, as the song goes, as old as time. This is my small contribution to it.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Abstract

Acts of violence and outrage are central features of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels. These acts testify to the significant role of the ethical in academic and evaluative considerations of his works. Such considerations have often tended towards Christocentrism: from Vladimir Soloviev to Rowan Williams, Dostoevsky has consistently been studied in the light of his professed Russian Orthodox credence. However, Dostoevsky's influence, particularly his ethical influence, over authors and artists from the past 30 years stands as a challenge to the uncomplicated association between his ethics and his faith. Fiction both composed within and portraying a predominantly secular context which nevertheless acknowledges Dostoevskian ethics thus becomes the catalyst for a reassessment of those ethics as departing from an ontotheological basis.

This thesis undertakes precisely such a reassessment, using novels by David Foster Wallace, Atiq Rahimi and J.M. Coetzee as source material for contemporary Dostoevskian ethics. Using a theoretical framework constructed from a comparative reading of Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethical theory, cross-analysed with Bakhtin's seminal study of Dostoevsky's 'polyphonic' novel form, it reads Dostoevsky's ethical influence over contemporary literature as a consequence of the way polyphony represents a Levinasian sense of responsibility to all, for all, more than others. The thesis is split into four Parts. Part I argues for an equation between novelistic polyphony and the Levinasian theory of 'Saying', the pre-discursive inauguration of subjectivity through the illimitable responsibility of response to the Other's call. Part II traces the development of contemporary Dostoevskian literature from post-Nietzschean modernism, through postmodernism to the eventual resurgence of ethical questioning in a 'post-postmodern' context. Part III assesses how the Levinasian/Bakhtinian emphasis on pre-discursivity and the aesthetic demand for cognitive representation manifests as an irreconcilable tension between ethics and aesthetics in the contemporary works, a tension that can be traced back to Dostoevsky's own post-Siberian novels. Part IV, therefore, offers a close-reading of the contemporary works that further interrogates this tension, reading contemporary Dostoevskian literature as an expression of the epistemic humility that reveals Dostoevsky's ethical legacy.

Abbreviations

The following texts are referenced parenthetically in the thesis. I include here all writings by Dostoevsky, Bakhtin and Levinas to which I make reference, as well as to the four primary contemporary texts which I analyse. Because they are fully cited here, I have not included them in the bibliography.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Adolescent   *The Adolescent*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Everyman's Library, 2003)

BK   *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2004)

CP   *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2007)

Demons   *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2006)

Idiot   *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Everyman's Library, 2002)

NDH   *Notes From a Dead House*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2015)

NFU   *Notes From Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Everyman's Library, 2004)

QoA   *Dostoevsky's Occasional Writings*, trans. David Magarshak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997)

WD   *A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009)

Mikhail Bakhtin

AA   *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999)

DI   *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

PDP   *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

PTA   *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999)

<center>Emmanuel Levinas</center>

EI   *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2017)

EN   *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006)

LR   *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). 'Reality and Its Shadow' was translated by Alphonso Lingis.

OTB   *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016)

RTB   *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001)

TI   *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). *Twenty-eight Printing*

<center>J. M. Coetzee</center>

DBY   *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008)

MoP   *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Vintage, 2004)

<u>Atiq Rahimi</u>

CoD   *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, trans. Polly McLean (New York: Other Press, 2013)

<u>David Foster Wallace</u>

IJ   *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 2012)

CONTENTS

Introduction

> Rosewater said an interesting thing to Billy one time […]. He said that everything there was to be known about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoevsky. 'But that isn't *enough* any more,' said Rosewater.[1]

The impasse of interrogations into the ethics of contemporary works of literature which acknowledge Dostoevsky's influence is evidenced by this quotation from Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The sagacious military veteran Eliot Rosewater offers a panegyric on *The Brothers Karamazov* that effectively doubles as a eulogy. A death has occurred: by naming Dostoevsky, Rosewater affirms his absence. Reiterating the sentiments of his alluded namesake in *The Waste Land*, Eliot Rosewater illuminates the ghost of a literary tradition, visible yet intangible, comprehensible for what it once was but no longer is. A now irretrievable standard is set before Vonnegut's central character Billy Pilgrim and, when considering that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is (in its own obscure way) a condemnation of the 1945 Allied firebombing of Dresden, that standard is decisively posed as an ethical one.

The chronological language of Rosewater's summation introduces a definitive historical marking between an ethical understanding or approach as it *used to be* and as it has *since become*. It might be that T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be considered an exemplar of the historical awakening to a now-lost tradition in literary modernism, a growing understanding that the 'once living' values and mores of poets and philosophers from a bygone era are 'now dead', that their voices now sing only 'out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.'[2] The metafictional self-consciousness, narrative experimentalism and nonsequential plot of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (and, obviously, the date of its

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[1] Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (London: Vintage, 2000) p.73.
[2] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2001) pp.16, 18 (V. 'What the Thunder said', ll.328-9, l.384). Several of the critical essays included in this edition further explore the poem's value to the literary/artistic movement of modernism, particularly F.R. Leavis' 'The Significance of the Modern Waste Land' (pp.173-185), which hails it as 'a new start for English poetry' (p.185).

publication) therefore identify it as emerging from the American postmodern literature boom during what Brian McHale terms 'the long sixties', between 1954 and 1975.[3] If modernism is distinguished by an acute awareness of history, a supposedly common ambition of postmodernism is to be 'decisively torn away from its past', to occupy 'a privileged point "beyond" history.'[4] Rosewater's lament resonates concurrently with resolve: 'any more', viewed in isolation as a rallying cry for an unrestrained ahistoricism, could easily be substituted with 'no more'. If Rosewater is to be believed, Billy Pilgrim and others like him no longer have to rely on Dostoevsky to teach them that which is to be known about life, particularly about ethical life. If Dostoevsky is the apotheosis of an ethical tradition that was burnt to cinders in the firebombing of Dresden, he is likewise part of a tradition that culminated in the dropping of the bombs. In this respect, hearing Dostoevsky's ghost in *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes a joyful confirmation that he is buried in the ground.

To bury Dostoevsky is to summon his ghost; to summon his ghost is to affirm his death. It is indeed common for theorists of the postmodern to run up against this chronological paradox: Linda Hutcheon, for one, speculates on how postmodernism, for all its emphasis on departure and discontinuity, 'can probably not be considered a new paradigm' because of the way 'it works within the very systems it attempts to subvert.' 'Discontinuity' is in fact one of the words Hutcheon offers as intrinsically definitive of postmodernism, along with 'disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization'. Such words, she notes, through the 'negativized rhetoric' inherent in their 'disavowing prefixes' automatically 'incorporate that which they aim to contest—as does […] the term postmodernism itself.'[5] Meanwhile, Frederic Jameson's eminent critique of

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[3] Brian McHale, 'The Long Sixties' in McHale & Len Platt (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp.83-172. McHale and Platt's 'General Introduction' to this work (pp.1-14) analyses the ever-present difficulty in distinguishing literary and artistic modernism from postmodernism. This study, for the purposes of tracing an historical path from Dostoevsky to the contemporary novels to be discussed, will expand upon such a distinction below. For a brief yet detailed elucidation of the particular postmodern techniques of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, see A.N.A.A. Jweid *et al*., 'Postmodern Narrative in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*', *Journal of Foreign Languages, Cultures and Civilizations* 3.1 (2015) 72-78.
[4] McHale and Platt, 'General Introduction', p.2.
[5] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2004) p.4, 3. Part of the conflict within the term 'postmodernism', Hutcheon writes in her sister study on the *politics* of postmodernism, is 'the conflation of cultural notion of postmodernism (and its inherent relation to modernism) and postmodernity as the designation of a social and philosophical period'. In this sense, postmodernism becomes the set of 'cultural practices' by

postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' introduces the postmodern era as one 'that has forgotten how to think historically.'[6] Jameson's Marxist study aligns the commercialisation of art with the 'distinctly autoreferential' tendency of theorisations of the postmodern: the 'frenzy whereby virtually anything in the present is appealed to for testimony as to the latter's uniqueness and radical difference from earlier moments of human time' results in a 'schizophrenic present', a present whose sense of history both accepts and rejects its causal connectedness to its past.[7] Following the same line of thinking exemplified by Vonnegut's Rosewater, Jameson likewise speculates that this schizophrenic present, which is rooted in an evolution (but not an abandonment) of capitalism that commodified newness itself to the point of fetishisation, must simultaneously project the 'return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives, [the] return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos'.[8] The implication, therefore, that postmodernism styles itself as a break from that which it cannot help recall mirrors the ethical impasse of contemporary Dostoevskian literature.

There are, therefore, competing interpretations that can be inferred from the way certain novels of the recent past invoke Dostoevsky. To identify Dostoevsky as a literary forebear, especially with regards to literary ethics, is to identify the continued significance of the ethical tradition he represents. Yet that tradition, based within the historical context of Dostoevsky's life and the complicated relationship of his works to Eurocentric philosophy, is the primary subject of modernist lamentations, and the primary target of postmodern disavowal. The contemporary texts thus seek to revive Dostoevsky's significance within a context that, in an ethical sense, cannot support him. This impasse forms the basis of my study. In order to understand how contemporary Dostoevskian texts reposition Dostoevsky's literary ethics, I will seek a way to read those ethics that does not rely on their entrenchment within a now-repudiated ethical tradition.

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and through which the philosophical or social conditions of postmodernity are articulated, reinforced and, crucially, challenged. See Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2002) p.23.

[6] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) p.ix.

[7] Ibid., p.xii.

[8] Ibid.

Methodology

The approach I pursue throughout this thesis treats novels from the recent past framed explicitly, if subtly, as rejuvenations of Dostoevskian archetypes. The four contemporary texts that this study will analyse are David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Atiq Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky* (2011) and two novels by J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). By giving focus to such novels, which I will categorise as 'contemporary Dostoevskian literature', I will attempt to renew an understanding of Dostoevskian ethics for an era that has undergone the claim that the Russian is not 'enough any more'.[9] Such works, by evoking Dostoevsky as the foundation for their ethical outlook, augur for a consideration of his ethical relevance in spite of the supposed demise in significance of the past he represents. If Dostoevsky is emblematic of an ethical tradition no longer relevant, yet remains relevant, it raises the question: what exactly is it in Dostoevsky that is still *enough*? What can he still teach us about life? This thesis can be thought of, in the first instance, as a response to this line of questioning.

My approach therefore relies on a dual conception of history, emblematised by the idea of Dostoevsky's ghost as both absence and presence. On the one hand, I seek to put forward an historical narrative that claims the values and principles of Dostoevsky's fiction, rooted in the context of their creation, present an ideological conception of ethics, an ethics tied in with the absolute and universalising tendencies of ontotheology.[10] This conception represents the security of ethical dictates based in a pre-established and unquestionable knowledge of the distinction between

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[9] Below I will offer a brief definition of 'contemporary Dostoevskian literature' as it is understood in this thesis, and an introduction to the four texts that works to situate them within this definition.

[10] I use the term 'ontotheology' throughout this thesis in the sense developed most prominently by Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, the term represented the conflation of ontology and theology in metaphysical thought: both, stemmed from the universal applicability of logic, premised on the 'essential constitution of metaphysics [as] based on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest.' The phenomenological tradition Heidegger came to represent established itself as a break from ontotheology. The two ethical theorists I treat throughout, Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas, both grew out of this phenomenological tradition. See Heidegger, 'The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics' in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) pp.42-74 (p.61).

right and wrong. By following the dictates of either a divine authority or the absolute surety of Reason, the subject is confirmed within a tradition that asserts itself as universally applicable. The contemporary texts, published in the aftermath of the postmodern disavowal of ontotheological absolutes, therefore represent a context in which Dostoevsky's ethical relevance is negated. This is a narrative that, as I will elaborate, is embedded within the way the contemporary authors treat their predecessor both within and beyond their Dostoevskian texts, especially with regards to two comparable reviews of Joseph Frank's *The Miraculous Years*, the fourth of his esteemed five-volume biography of Dostoevsky, written by Wallace and Coetzee around the same time as their respective publications of *Master* and *Infinite Jest*. These reviews, as will be assessed later in this Introduction, more directly articulate this aspect of how Dostoevsky is treated in the contemporary texts, the ways in which each text offers its own subtle reiteration of Rosewater's accusation.[11]

On the other hand, as with Rosewater's 'negativized rhetoric', the very invocation of Dostoevsky made by the texts connotes Dostoevsky's ethical significance for the contemporary era, even as that significance is denounced. The polarity between Dostoevskian ethics not being 'enough any more' for the contemporary texts and their continued invocation of him proposes a second interpretation of Dostoevsky, one which challenges and threatens to supplant the first. And it is this contrast, which is rooted in the very concept of contemporary Dostoevskian literature, that provides the justification for this thesis and the motivation for its method. As the thesis progresses, I will attempt to outline two competing historical narratives with regards to the contemporary treatment of Dostoevskian ethics. The first will trace a teleology from the surety of ontotheological absolutes to a growing suspicion and scepticism of them, and then to their disavowal by the era of the contemporary works. To do this, I align Dostoevsky's own post-Siberian convictions, as expressed in

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[11] That Coetzee and Wallace write reviews of *The Miraculous Years* which explicitly question the relevance of Dostoevskian ethics for the contemporary era, and yet still compose contemporary Dostoevskian texts, more pointedly reiterates the impasse of contemporary Dostoevskian ethics. Their comparable reviews extend what is inherent in their (and Rahimi's) literary texts: the simultaneous renunciation and endorsement of Dostoevsky as an ethical forbear. Wallace's and Coetzee's reviews therefore more markedly emphasise the antagonistic simultaneity of all three writers: there are, in effect, two versions of Wallace/Coetzee/Rahimi. One dismisses Dostoevskian ethics as anachronistic, and thus creates the demand that they be repositioned for the contemporary era. The other then pursues that repositioning within the literary work itself.

his fiction and non-fictional writings, with the philosophy of his near contemporary, Friedrich

Nietzsche. Yet instead of undertaking a sustained analysis of Nietzsche's theories, I intend to use

Nietzsche to stand as a watershed moment in 19th-century thought marking the turn away from

ontotheology.[12]

     This usage therefore permits a demarcation of ontotheological security, characteristically

'pre-Nietzschean' values, and the erosion of that security, which can be designated 'post-

Nietzschean'.[13] The second narrative thus traverses the first and works to undermine it. Prompted by

the evidential significance of Dostoevsky to the contemporary works, it seeks to understand why

Dostoevskian ethics are still 'enough' for a set of texts composed at the teleological culmination of

the first narrative. As gestured towards by the title of the thesis, my method involves tracing a pre-

to-post-Nietzschean ethical teleology which demands that an understanding of Dostoevskian ethics

be repositioned so that those ethics retain their contemporary relevance, and an assessment of how

the contemporary texts achieve such repositioning. This method can thereby be used to counter the

association of Dostoevsky's ethics and his professed Orthodox faith, a prototypically pre-Nietzschean

conception of ethics that the contemporary Dostoevskian texts challenge by their very existence.

The end of this Introduction will touch upon how such association remains a prevailing critical

interpretation of Dostoevsky, one this thesis hopes to contest.

     In order to establish these competing narratives, I construct a theoretical framework from

the ethical and narrative writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas. My choice of these two

theorists for a comparative reading was prompted by several factors. To begin with, both are readily

identifiable with Dostoevsky's writings. Bakhtin's high-profile study of Dostoevsky's 'poetics' is

foundational for Dostoevsky scholarship, and the overlap between *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

and Bakhtin's early ethical philosophy serves as a starting point for the reassessment of Dostoevsky's

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[12] This use of Nietzsche, as I will go on to explain, is given precedence by the contemporary writers themselves: both Wallace and Coetzee allude to Nietzsche in their reviews of *The Miraculous Years*, whilst *Diary of a Bad Year* makes a specific reference to Nietzsche in this sense.

[13] I take the term 'post-Nietzschean' from Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013) p.36. As I explain below, her use of the term is compatible with mine throughout this thesis.

ethics that I undertake in this thesis, especially in chapters 1 and 2. Meanwhile, Levinas's acknowledgement of Dostoevsky's influence, especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to his ethical theory is prominent enough to warrant sustained investigation. Complementing this is the fact that Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethical theory developed along similar lines of thought, as noted by several of the scholars discussed in Part I of this thesis. By using their comparable ethics, and the correspondence between Bakhtin's ethics and his reading of Dostoevsky's narrative, I intend to proffer a Levinasian reading of the polyphonic narrative form. Furthermore, the commensurate theories of Bakhtin and Levinas support my intention to assess Dostoevsky's post-Nietzschean ethical significance, as it plays out in the contemporary repositioning of his ethics. Bakhtin and Levinas both give testimony to Dostoevsky's ethical influence, yet both are critiquing an ethical tradition that reached its apotheosis in Kantian deontological imperatives. They are, therefore, distinctly post-Nietzschean ethical theorists, and so their invocation of Dostoevsky runs parallel with the invocation made by Wallace, Coetzee and Rahimi. As such, they offer an integral theoretical foundation for the aims of this thesis.

Contemporary Dostoevskian Literature

For the purposes of this study, 'contemporary Dostoevskian literature' refers to works that, in narrative or plot structure, either implicitly or explicitly (or both) reference either Dostoevsky's life or one (or more) of his novels. The proviso, however, is that such referencing is not a straightforward retelling of a Dostoevsky novel or biographical account of his life. In accordance with the transition from Dostoevsky to the recent past already mentioned, contemporary Dostoevskian literature, in this regard, must both recall and distance itself from Dostoevsky's life and work. It must be able to receive Dostoevsky yet demonstrably evidence within the context of that reception alterations from Dostoevsky's own context. Thus, a work such as Vladimir Bortko's television adaption of *The Idiot* for the Russian network Russian-1 would not qualify for this study's definition

of Dostoevskian literature or art: though produced in 2003, the series seeks to recreate the setting, style and context of Dostoevsky's novel from the late 1860s. On the other hand, the connotation of Vasily Perov's prominent 1872 portrait of Dostoevsky made by the second season opening episode of HBO's *True Detective* series is an effective expression of the notion of Dostoevskian literature/art suggested here.[14] However, as there is no other overt reference to Dostoevsky throughout the rest of the series (i.e., no correlations in plot, character or dialogue), the tenacity of the link between the show and Dostoevsky becomes questionable.

Other works, particularly film works, offer clearer examples of Dostoevskian art from the last few decades. For example, the plots of four of Woody Allen's later films, *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989), *Match Point* (2005), *Cassandra's Dream* (2007) and *Irrational Man* (2015), all centre on the depiction of a murder and the psychological consequences for the murderer: obvious allusions to *Crime and Punishment*.[15] Lav Diaz's 2013 film *Norte: The End of History* goes as far as to make its murderer a law student and its victims an elderly pawnbroker and her sister. Richard Ayoade's *The Double*, also from 2013, takes both its title and the central element of its plot from Dostoevsky's early novella. All these films (and others like them) however are not mere adaptions of Dostoevsky works but attempts to reconsider Dostoevsky's value to the context of their production. The 'extension' or 'updating', as Olga Stuchebrukhov writes of Allen, of Dostoevsky's 'existential concerns for the postmodern age' in these films is precisely what classifies them as Dostoevskian for the purposes of this study.[16]

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[14] 'The Western Book of the Dead', *True Detective (Season 2)*, HBO, 21 June 2015. One of the series' central characters, Ray Velcoro, is shown sitting at a bar at various intervals between the 47th and 55th minute of the episode. His facial hair, the colour of his coat, the lack of background lighting and (at one moment) his interlocking fingers are all strongly suggestive of Perov's portrait, yet the setting and dialogue of the scene, and the backstory of the character, situate the evocation in a context at a far remove from Dostoevsky's own era.

[15] For a comparative analysis of Allen and Dostoevsky, see Zachary T. Ingle, '"A full meal with a vitamin pill and extra wheatgerm": Woody Allen, Dostoevsky, and Existential Morality' in Klara Slezak & D.E. Wynter (eds.), *Referentiality and the Films of Woody Allen* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp.119-136.

[16] Olga Stuchebrukhov, '"Crimes without Any Punishment at All": Dostoevsky and Woody Allen in Light of Bakhtinian Theory', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 40.2 (2012) 142-154 (143). Stuchebrukhov is here summarising Ronald Le Blanc's "Deconstructing Dostoevsky: God, Guilt, and Morality in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanours*', *Film and Philosophy Special Issue* (2000) 84-101.

The necessity of scrutinising the technicalities of film creation limits this study from extending its analysis of the Dostoevskian in contemporary film works. In purely written works, however, one could still point out the way Sergio de la Pava's *A Naked Singularity* (self-published in 2008, commercially republished in 2012) rewrites *Crime and Punishment*, or the updating of Dostoevsky's works provided by Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2017) or R. F. Georgy's *Notes from the Café* (2014). Like the Allen, Diaz and Ayoade films, these novels engage in a dialogue with their counterparts to the extent that they perform a 21st-century reassessment of Dostoevskian values and principles. They too can therefore be counted as Dostoevskian literature, consonant with the Rahimi, Coetzee and Wallace novels to be considered.

The Novels to be Considered[17]

The texts chosen for my analysis of contemporary Dostoevskian literature cover nearly 25 years, from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the millennium's second decade. It is my hope that this timeframe exemplifies the origins and development of the sociocultural period marking the progression away from the postmodern art and literature, and its concomitant poststructural theory, that McHale categorises within his 'long sixties'. In Part II, I will examine this period of departure from the 'long sixties' using the term 'post-postmodernism'.

The texts are global in scope. *Infinite Jest* is based in a fictionalised USA; *Diary* and *Master* are written by a South African writer and are based in Australia and pre-Soviet Russia respectively; *A Curse on Dostoevsky* is set in Kabul. However, each text betrays its own complicated relationship with the Eurocentric ontotheological tradition that is central to the historical timeframe of this thesis. As a former-colony-turned-global-superpower, the USA of *Infinite Jest* in itself expresses this complicated relationship, aggravated by its fictional colonisation of Mexico and Canada. Meanwhile, both South Africa and Australia are implicated in colonial and postcolonial scholarship, whilst

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[17] A short synopsis of each text is provided in the appendix.

Rahimi's Kabul is filtered through his personal exile from Afghanistan to France. Rahimi received higher education in France, and *A Curse on Dostoevsky* was originally written in French. It is my hope, therefore, that by choosing a global range of texts which can nevertheless be associated with a Western literary tradition I lay the foundation for further commentary on the global reach of the Eurocentric ontotheological tradition and its aftermath. Further work could feasibly interrogate how the specific geo-cultural context of each novel simultaneously confirms and challenges that tradition.[18]

A Curse on Dostoevsky

Atiq Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky* announces a threefold recognition of its Dostoevskian predecessor by the conclusion of its opening sentence: 'The moment Rassoul lifts the ax to bring it down on the old woman's head, the thought of *Crime and Punishment* flashes into his mind' (*CoD* 1). Though the title immediately establishes the novel's intertextual dialogue with Dostoevsky, the opening sentence too reveals that both the narrator and the protagonist are aware of how *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s inaugural plot action is a reiteration of Raskolnikov's murder. The novel's pronounced acknowledgement of *Crime and Punishment* extends into a near mirror-imaging of some of its central characters. The protagonist Rassoul's name reads as a Persianate form of Raskolnikov, and this is a trait that carries over to his sister Donia, his love interest Sophia, his cousin and closest friend Razmodin (who, like Razumikhin, stands as the novel's 'voice of reason'), his victim Nana Alia, and the authority figure Commandant Parwaiz, who suspects Rassoul to be Alia's murderer. Aside from the murder, other plot points from *Crime and Punishment* are repeated: Raskolnikov's occasional unprompted acts of charity are echoed by Rassoul (*CoD* 17) despite their comparable

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[18] There is a notable omission of authors who identify as women from the list of contemporary Dostoevskian novels that this thesis will analyse. This is not a deliberate exclusion: aside from Batuman's *The Idiot* (whose Dostoevskian references are more obscure and less consequential that Coetzee, Wallace or Rahimi), I personally have not come across a novel from the past 30 years by a non-male author that accords with the above clarification of Dostoevskian literature. However, I recognise that the exclusively male focus of the thesis sets limitations on my findings, and I would encourage further research into the particularities of contemporary Dostoevskian ethics and gender studies. For more on Dostoevsky's own construction of the feminine, see Nina Pelikan Straus, *Dostoevsky and the Woman Question: Rereadings at the End of a Century* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 1994).

destitution, and Rassoul is too prompted to single out his victim after overhearing 'two militiamen talking about Nana Alia' (*CoD* 144). Even the narratorial style, weaving third-person omniscience with the protagonist's inner monologue, can be sourced in Dostoevsky's novel. Throughout *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, both Rassoul and the narrator show an acute awareness that the events described have the potential to lapse into 'an absurd pastiche of *Crime and Punishment*' (*CoD* 144).

Yet in the manner of Dostoevskian literature, Rahimi's work simultaneously distances itself from *Crime and Punishment*, emphasising that the values of Dostoevsky's novel 'only made sense within the context of his society, his religion' (*CoD* 211). *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s setting during an unspecified year in the early 1990s in the midst of the Afghan civil war (during the interregnum between the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Taliban) marks a self-evident geographical/cultural difference that is accentuated at various moments: Rassoul's initial meeting with Sophia's father, for example, replaces Marmeladov's tavern with a *chai-khana* (teahouse). Moreover, Dostoevsky's Russianness in the context of Afghanistan's relationship with the Soviet Union is a key undercurrent of the novel. The persecution Rassoul suffers for being the son of a communist, and so seemingly representing an overthrown communist regime, is a component of his Raskolnikov-inspired isolation from others, especially during his arrest for owning 'Russian books' (*CoD* 39).

However, the most prominent distancing from Dostoevsky made by Rahimi's novel is its portrayal of the absurdity of ethical principles in a wartime setting which has emptied those principles of meaning or value. Rassoul manifests as a mere parody of Raskolnikov when his moral desire to confess his crime and accept his punishment is blunted by the lack of a functioning juridical body to punish him: he is turned away from a ruined Kabul law court and told to come back the next day (*CoD* 176). Like Raskolnikov, his murder was not inspired by financial necessity but by a desire to test his mental fortitude, to transgress 'a moral and social code' (*CoD* 46). Yet that code turns out to be self-established; in an inverse of Raskolnikov's position, his murder was not to set himself apart from others but 'to find out if I was capable of killing, *like everyone else*' (*CoD* 209 – emphasis

added). In an environment composed of an everyday cycle of violence and vengeance, it is Rassoul's capacity to feel remorse, rather than overcome it, that sets him apart from others.

And this distancing from *Crime and Punishment* is structured as an historical transition between Dostoevsky and the setting of the novel, as articulated by Rassoul's final grievance: 'It wasn't me who turned everything upside down. It was Dostoevsky!' (*CoD* 249). At the end, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* confesses itself to be its own crime: its existence can only have come about as a departure from Dostoevsky's world, and so the novel becomes an apology for the necessity of its existence. *Crime and Punishment* is recalibrated as a progenitor of now sinful times (or, at least, a commentary on an era that predicated such times). Rassoul believes that *Crime and Punishment* is best read in contemporary Afghanistan as its 'metaphysical' tropes might reawaken a 'lost […] sense of responsibility' to 'a land previously steeped in mysticism' (*CoD* 46). Dostoevsky's prominence to the novel is thus offered as an historical marker, as representative of an historical moment initiating the deterioration of a sense of responsibility. And, given that the transition is framed as from murder itself to guilt for murder being considered socially abnormal, that lost responsibility is invariably ethical in nature.

Infinite Jest

It takes almost nine tenths of *Infinite Jest's* 1079 pages for its clearest Dostoevskian precursor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, to be mentioned by name. Unlike *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, the allusions to Dostoevsky are not continuously reinforced. Of the novel's sprawling, intricately interconnected plotlines, the only direct reference comes in the form of the Incandenza brothers, each of whom is a Karamazov counterpart.[19] Nevertheless, despite Marshall Boswell's early response to *Infinite Jest* downplaying its indebtedness to *The Brothers Karamazov*, more recent Wallace scholarship has

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[19] There is no immediate counterpart for Smerdyakov. However, the uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of Mario Incandenza's birth, and his noted physical deformities, suggest that Mario, who is most obviously a reincarnation of Alyosha Karamazov, may also be a stand-in for Smerdyakov. The question mark such a pairing leaves over Mario's role as the ethical exemplar of *Infinite Jest* will be discussed in later chapters.

sought to assert the significance of Dostoevsky's influence.[20] Timothy Jacobs begins his essay on

Wallace and Dostoevsky by refuting Boswell, arguing that Dostoevsky was 'much more important to

Wallace's overall aesthetic agenda' than Shakespeare, and that 'in many significant ways, *Infinite Jest*

is a rewriting or figurative translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* into the contemporary American

idiom and context.'[21] In a similar fashion, Lucas Thompson's study of the global range of literature

that influenced Wallace dedicates a subsection to what he terms 'Wallace's Dostoevsky obsession'.[22]

Thompson likewise concurs with Jacobs when he remarks that Wallace's central ambition

was to 'address American cultural concerns', intending his work 'to be read along national lines' as a

response 'to a quintessentially American condition.'[23] In an oft-cited interview with Larry McCaffery

prior to the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace explained that in his fiction he operated 'from the

premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a

real human being.'[24] The translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* to a contemporary American idiom,

then, must likewise dissociate itself from its original: in identifying Dostoevsky as a launch pad for an

aesthetic agenda, *Infinite Jest* must at the same time note the socio-cultural distance travelled

between Dostoevsky and the context of its own creation. Whatever affinities Wallace found

between Dostoevsky's novels and the quintessence of the American condition as he understood it

are isolated in their divergencies even as they are singled out.

And that particular American quintessence which hinders the 'real human being' is

exposed as a hindrance of interpersonal communication, as a failure of ethics. Hal Incandenza, the

novel's neotype for Ivan Karamazov and one of its two central characters, suffers from a clinical

anhedonia that traps him in a solipsistic cage, unable to engage or bond with others. Hal's 'great

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[20] When compared with *Infinite Jest*'s references to *Hamlet* (from where it gets its title), Boswell writes, 'the Dostoevsky references are a bit more muted and hence less important.' Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of Southern Carolina Press, 2003), p.165.

[21] Timothy Jacobs, 'The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.3 (2007) 265-292 (265).

[22] Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) pp.93-106.

[23] Ibid., p.1.

[24] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster* Wallace (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012) pp.21-52 (p.26).

transcendent horror' is that he is 'more robotic than human', only able to feel one thing 'to the limit […] that he is lonely.' And this loneliness 'is one of the really American things about Hal' (*IJ* 694-5). Hal comes to symbolise a spiritual dilapidation both caused by and symptomatic of the America represented in *Infinite Jest*, as though the spiritual and moral angst bedevilling Ivan has become the ethical paradigm of Wallace's time and place. In the scene during which *The Brothers Karamazov* is referenced by name, inconsequential to the plot but crucial to *Infinite Jest*'s ethical dialogue with Dostoevsky, a minor character is shown homeless and destitute, begging not for money but merely for human contact. He is eventually touched by Mario Incandenza, but a question-mark still hangs over Mario's benevolence: Mario lacks the psychological acumen of his forebear Alyosha Karamazov and his decision to acquiesce to contact is as much a misunderstanding as it is a humanitarian act. The novel portrays Mario throughout as both a physical and ethical aberration, and in doing so raises doubts as to the applicability of *The Brothers Karamazov*'s ethical message for millennial America.

The Master of Petersburg and *Diary of a Bad Year*

Instead of standing as a re-articulation of a Dostoevsky novel, *The Master of Petersburg* has a fictional variant of Dostoevsky as its protagonist. Its opening two lines make clear that it seeks to emulate Dostoevsky's St Petersburg. As the plot unfolds however, the narrative departure from Dostoevsky's biography serves to extricate *The Master of Petersburg* from a mere pastiche of Dostoevsky's era. It takes place in 1869 when Dostoevsky was living in Dresden: Coetzee's protagonist returns to Russia following the death of his stepson Pavel (a fictional event). He learns Pavel may have been involved in the revolutionary activity of *Narodnaya Raspraya* (People's Reprisal), the movement founded by Sergei Nechaev (the nihilist revolutionary Pyotr Verkhovensky is based on in *Demons*) and is eventually contacted by a fictional Nechaev. A significant part of the novel concerns Dostoevsky's debates with Nechaev, debates that mirror the ideological struggle running through *Demons*, and of the self-interrogation of his role as a father and writer.

Diary of a Bad Year likewise does not model itself around any particular Dostoevsky novel but instead alludes to the historical figure of Dostoevsky, albeit in a more subtle way. *Diary* combines a fictional plotline containing two narrative voices with a series of short essays on a range of topics such as politics, religion, art and language. It is a paginal combination: the top section of most pages contains the essays, whilst the fictional narratives run underneath. For the first five essays there is only the first underlying narrative; from essay six onwards the pages are (for the most part) split into three. The plot unfolds as an intertwining of the second and third narrative. The elderly writer referred to as 'C' or 'Señor C' (the narrator of the second narrative) hires Anya (the narrator of the third narrative) as a typist. Anya is a beautiful Filipino who resides in the same building as C. His hiring of her is in fact a covert attempt to get to know her better.

Anya is *Diary*'s first allusion to Dostoevsky. Though uncommon in the Philippines, 'Anya' is a common Russian diminutive of 'Anna', the forename of Dostoevsky's second wife, who was originally his stenographer. C's role as a writer is in this respect suggestive of Dostoevsky. This suggestiveness is reinforced by the final essay of the novella 'On Dostoevsky', in which C discusses the 'Rebellion' chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both novels therefore position Dostoevsky as the archetypal writer to be used in conducting an interrogation into the act of writing itself. Both novels too frame this interrogation as specifically concerning the ethics of writing. While an earlier essay in *Diary* lauds the 'rhetorical artistry' (*DBY* 150) of Tolstoy, the essay on Dostoevsky is openly critical of Ivan's 'shameless' use of 'sentiment' and 'caricature' (*DBY* 224) in his tirade against theodicy. Yet the essay concludes by claiming reading Dostoevsky makes the writer 'a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful, but ethically better' (*DBY* 227). In *Diary*, Dostoevsky (along with Tolstoy) is elevated to 'the standards towards which any serious novelist must toil' (*DBY* 227), a standard that is posed in moral/ethical terms. On the other hand, *The Master of Petersburg* concludes with the fictional Dostoevsky performing a type of secular kenosis, an emptying out of his own sense of self to occupy the shadowy memory of his deceased son, who morphs into a prototype of Stavrogin in *Demons*. It is an act that allows the fictional Dostoevsky to cross a moral threshold by envisioning a

creative 'assault upon the innocence of a child' (*MoP* 249), thus inspiring the censored chapter 'At

Tikhon's' in which Stavrogin confesses to such an assault. It forces him to 'give up his soul in return'

(*MoP* 250) for engaging in the creative process: as David Atwell writes, *The Master of Petersburg*

portrays Dostoevsky engaged in 'a diabolic testing of his capacity to press beyond ordinary ethical

constraints.'[25]

Importantly, both novellas are presented as centring around an ethical crisis that is

historically rooted. The consistent argument of both *Diary's* essays and C's discussions with Anya is

an historical transition away from a generally accepted belief 'that the moral law was supreme' to a

necessity-based amorality that, for C, symbolises 'the quintessence of […] the modern' (*DBY* 17-18).

C, and by implication Dostoevsky, are presented as examples of a now-outdated moral authority:

their appeals to morality do not resonate with the modern sensibilities of Anya or her partner Alan, a

neoliberal investment consultant. Meanwhile, the historical setting of *The Master of Petersburg* can

accordingly be said to render the midst of the ethical crisis that culminates in C's estrangement from

the quintessence of the modern. The fictional Dostoevsky is engaged in an ideological battle with

Nechaev; his grief for his son strained by his struggle to come to terms with the possibility that Pavel

supported Nechaev's revolutionary nihilism. The transgression he commits at the end of the novel is

as much an ideological one as an ethical one, and it stems in Dostoevsky's particular historical

moment, as the novel portrays it, 'in this dead time between old and new', a time when '[h]istory is

coming to an end'. It is a time, according to *The Master of Petersburg*, when 'all things are

permitted' (*MoP* 244). In the novel, however, this citation of Ivan Karamazov is actually a

paraphrasing of Nechaev (*MoP* 200). Both *Master of Petersburg* and *Diary* place Dostoevsky on a

threshold between historical eras, between an 'old' time of ethical constraints and a modernity

characterised by the freedom from such constraints. His fiction is invoked as an appeal to ethics, yet

it is called forth under the recognition of that appeal's deficiency. The ethical values he represents

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[25] David Attwell, 'Coetzee's Estrangements', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 4.2/3 The Form of Postcolonial African Fiction
(2008) 229-243 (230).

face redundancy in the context of their re-presentation in the contemporary works. Yet his name is still invoked as representative of ethical writing. Sharing the same premise as Rahimi and Wallace, Coetzee's two novellas hail Dostoevskian ethics even as they suggest those ethics are not '*enough any more*.'

The Crisis of Modernity

As mentioned above, my method throughout this thesis relies on a dual conception of history in which Dostoevsky both relinquishes and retains his ethical significance for the contemporary Dostoevskian texts. Such retention is evidenced by the very existence of those texts, and Part I will interrogate the ethical implications of Dostoevsky's polyphonic structure through a comparative reading of Bakhtin and Levinas, thus providing a theoretical framework for the study of how the contemporary texts reposition Dostoevskian ethics undertaken in Parts II, III and IV.

Meanwhile, the second half of this Introduction will briefly trace the relinquishment, based in an historical narrative that charts the transition from the surety of ontotheological ethics, through to the questioning of absolute ethical values characteristic of modernism, and then to the postmodern disavowal of unifying ethical theories. The crux of this narrative centres round a decisive period in the projection of Eurocentric ontotheology which marks the loosening of foundational and universal ethical absolutes, typically associated with that which Coetzee himself calls the 'crisis' of modernisation. However, as a caveat it must be noted that this historical narrative is by no means authoritative. Perhaps the only defining hallmark of 'modernism' is a gesture towards a particular idea of modernity and a particular idea of what comes after it. Tim Armstrong writes in the opening sections of his study of modernism that '[t]o talk of the crisis of modernity is to suggest that a long history was coming to an end'. Yet Armstrong immediately clarifies that what is meant by

both modernity and modernism 'varies greatly, and depends on the historical narrative one is constructing.'[26]

Armstrong notes that modernity, especially in a European or Western sense, tends to be associated with a number of commonalities, some of which are pertinent to this study: the rise of capitalism from feudalism, the Enlightenment and the discourse of rational progress, the secularisation of society, and the beginnings of humanism. Modernism, by contrast, grows out of 'that other aspect of modernity […]: the tradition of critique which is linked to the birth of the human sciences'. That tradition of critique inevitably turned inwards, and as a consequence modernism, in the sense that it breaks from modernity, 'is often depicted as a protest at the reign of instrumental reason and market culture which attempts to preserve or create a space for individuality, creativity and aesthetic value in an increasingly homogenous and bourgeois world.'[27] Even so, any definitive claim to modernity and modernism necessarily falls apart under interrogation. Like any epoch, modernism is 'characterized by a series of seeming contradictions'.[28]

The specific purpose served by the second half of my Introduction, therefore, is not necessarily to give an authoritative accounting of the philosophical and sociocultural changes between the late-19th and the late-20th centuries but to represent those changes as they are understood by the contemporary works themselves, and by their authors. Such changes necessarily affect the meaning of their invocation of Dostoevskian ethics, as is evidenced by the summaries of the contemporary works provided above. I begin with a comparison of book reviews for Joseph Frank's *The Miraculous Years* written by Coetzee and Wallace, in which both authors intimate their own indebtedness to Dostoevsky himself yet also situate that indebtedness within the context of their own writings. I will endeavour to elucidate that context, showing that the contemporary Dostoevskians position Dostoevsky on the threshold of the modernist turn away from totalising ontotheological absolutes, a threshold position that they also associate with Nietzsche's

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[26] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005) p.2.
[27] Ibid., p.4.
[28] Ibid., p.5.

philosophy.[29] Pinpointing the 1880s in particular as integral to Coetzee's 'crisis' of modernisation, I will claim that, for the modern authors, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche represent either side of this threshold. Their representation of the present-day world as more characteristically post-Nietzschean than post-Dostoevskian is what justifies my use of Nietzsche as a watershed moment in 19th-century thought.

'…like Nietzsche said': Reviews of *The Miraculous Years*

Indicative of the comparable approach to Dostoevsky in both *The Master of Petersburg* and *Diary of a Bad Year* is Coetzee's 1995 review of Frank's *The Miraculous Years*. Written around the same time as *The Master of Petersburg*, the review anticipates the perception of Dostoevsky expressed by C in *Diary*: it likewise commends Dostoevsky's 'radical intellectual and even spiritual courage' in articulating ideological positions that ran contrary to his own, a courage grown 'out of Dostoevsky's own moral character'.[30] And in reviewing Frank's biography Coetzee is able to comment explicitly on the 'historical crisis' that constitutes the setting of *The Master of Petersburg*, 'Russia's crisis of modernization.' Following Frank, Coetzee offers the 1861 publication of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* as a 'symbolic beginning' of this crisis and references Dostoevsky's indictment of the 'intellectual complacency' of its central figure, 'the Nihilist Bazarov'. It is the same nihilist perspective, Coetzee comments, that characterises Raskolnikov and Pyotr Verkhovensky (and consequently must characterise the fictional Nechaev in *Master*). Beset with 'amoral egoism and proto-Nietzschean self-deification', this brand of nihilism 'represented a growing spiritual illness' in Dostoevsky's 'eschatological imagination'.[31] Coetzee thus paints a picture of Dostoevsky as in the midst of the

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[29] Nietzsche is the one of the first names mentioned by Amstrong's comment on modernity's 'tradition of critique'.
[30] Coetzee, 'The Artist at High Tide: Review of Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871*, New York Review of Books*, March 2, 1995, p.15, 16.
[31] Ibid., p.14. Coetzee borrows 'proto-Nietzschean' and 'eschatological imagination' from Frank. See Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 101.

'white heat' of an historical crisis with potentially apocalyptic consequences, thereby representing

him as an ideological opponent of the transition from modernity to modernism and beyond.[32]

The particular naming of Nietzsche further reinforces the Dostoevskian correspondence

between *The Master of Petersburg* and *Diary*. In the later work, Anya's neoliberal partner, Alan,

offers his own definition of a market-driven, fluctuating value system that represents the

quintessence of the modern in Nietzschean terms: he claims that 'individuals are players in a

structure that transcends individual motives', making the economic market 'beyond good and evil,

like Nietzsche said' (*DBY* 98). The transition between the fictional Nechaev (representing the proto-

Nietzschean amorality of Russian nihilism) and the pseudo-Nietzschean, neoliberal-based amorality

of Alan becomes a metaphor for the transition between the moral crisis at the heart of

modernisation and the socio-cultural dominance of amorality in the contemporary West as it is

portrayed in *Diary*. If Nechaev is proto-Nietzschean and the 'modern world' (*DBY* 98) is beyond good

and evil, both these novels then establish an antagonism between Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. They

present simultaneous yet conflicting responses to the crisis of modernisation and, following

Coetzee's review of Frank, their antagonism is ethical in character. And while *The Master of*

Petersburg may portray the 'white heat' of this antagonism by imagining the dialogue between a

fictional Dostoevsky and Nechaev, the depiction of an author moulded after Dostoevsky, who

questions the amorality of the modern world as he understands it, as 'out of touch' (*DBY* 222) is an

implicit pronouncement that contemporary society is Nietzschean, not Dostoevskian.[33] It is in this

spirit that Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan marks Dostoevsky's later fiction as portending 'the awakening of

the modernist consciousness', and aptly terms the aftermath of that awakening the 'post-

Nietzschean world'.[34] Dostoevsky and Nietzsche are perceived as emblems of the end of modernity's

long history. Yet their juxtaposition in Coetzee's review and his Dostoevskian novels implies that

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[32] Coetzee, 'The Artist at High Tide', p.14.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.36.

they represent polarising sides of that ending. Conferring a post-Nietzschean status on the modern

world thus infers that Dostoevskian ethics are archaic.

Wallace's own review of *The Miraculous Years* for the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* in

1996 makes a similar assessment.[35] In a footnote on *The Idiot*, Wallace suggests that the

characterisation of Nastasya Filippovna marks Dostoevsky out as 'the first fiction writer to

understand how deeply some people love their own suffering, how they use it and depend on it.'

Wallace claims Nietzsche 'would take Dostoevsky's insight and make it the cornerstone of his own

devastating attack on Christianity'. Pointing out the irony of how Dostoevsky, claimed to be 'the

most profoundly religious of writers', influenced Nietzsche's hostility towards organised religion,

Wallace echoes Coetzee by claiming that 'in our own culture of "enlightened atheism" we are very

much Nietzsche's children: his ideological heirs'.[36]

Wallace's review has a secondary function in line with his overarching literary agenda: to

critique the 'congenital skepticism' of American postmodern art and literature, its wholesale

rejection of 'ideological passion'.[37] It is intersected by seemingly personal reflections on the nature

of faith, nationality and morality; the implication is that these reflections constitute the very nature

of ideological passion that 'a writer today, even a very talented writer' lacks 'the guts to even try' to

produce in his or her art.[38] Like C's essays in *Diary*, the 'deep convictions and desperate questions' of

these reflections are shown to be out of place within the context of their utterance, separate and

isolated both on the page and within 'our literary culture'. Writers incorporating such convictions

and questions are accused by that culture of 'sentimentality, naivete, archaism, fanaticism', worthy

only of a 'very cool smile' and 'dry bit of mockery'.[39] Such words are apt for describing Rassoul's

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[35] Wallace's review, initially published as 'Feodor's Guide', was amended and republished in 2005 as 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky'. See *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2014) pp.255-274. That authors as prominent as Coetzee and Wallace were commissioned for these reviews gives some indication as to how definitive Frank's biography has become for Western scholarship. It must be noted, however, that I concern myself here not with either Wallace's or Coetzee's reviews of Frank's work, but with the moments in those reviews where the authors offer their respective appraisals of Dostoevsky himself.

[36] Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p.264 (fn.14).

[37] Ibid., p.272. Wallace's literary agenda will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

[38] Ibid., p.274.

[39] Ibid., p.273.

frustrated attempts to invoke principles of morality and justice in wartime Kabul, principles Rassoul associates with Dostoevsky's historical context. Moreover, both C and Coetzee's fictional Dostoevsky are treated as risible figures by their respective ideological antagonists, Alan and Nechaev, who themselves represent a pseudo-Nietzschean freedom from absolute ethical dictates.

The premise of Wallace's review is that Dostoevsky is the kind of ideological writer that 'disgusts' Wallace's contemporaries, a writer of 'passionately moral, morally passionate' fiction whose 'serious art' could 'advance ideologies' in a way millennial American writers 'won't (can't) dare try'.[40] Taking into account Wallace's definition of 'ideology' as 'any organized, deeply held system of beliefs and values', these reflections suggest that he viewed Dostoevsky's engagement with religion, nationhood, morality and self-identity as qualities absent from the literary culture Wallace himself belonged to.[41] Dostoevsky's 'time and culture are alien' to 'readers in 1996 America' because within the former time and culture a writer's concern could be 'what it is to be a human being – that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles'.[42] The absence of 'the stuff that's really important' such as 'identity', 'moral value', 'freedom' and 'spiritual love' in 'many of the novelists of our own place and time', wrote Wallace, makes their work 'look so thematically shallow and lightweight, so morally impoverished'.[43]

Wallace's assertion is that moral impoverishment and thematic shallowness are direct correlates with or consequences of the Nietzschean influence over the contemporary. It accords with how contemporary Western politics and ethics are depicted in *Diary*: any claim for the supremacy of moral law is repeatedly depicted as belonging 'to another generation and another world […] so out of touch with the modern world' (*DBY* 192/6), a modern world that Alan (as representative) describes in Nietzschean terms. Considering the Bazarovian nihilism of *Master*'s Nechaev, a comparison of Wallace's and Coetzee's treatment of Dostoevsky therefore advances a

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[40] Ibid., p.272/274.
[41] Ibid., p.269 (fn.23).
[42] Ibid., p.265.
[43] Ibid., p.271/273.

theoretical positioning of Dostoevsky's writing, time and culture as 'informed by values and principles', distinct from the waning or absence of such values and principles characteristic of a modern society inheriting a Nietzschean ideology. Though both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche can be seen as representing the crisis of modernisation, the way they are treated by Wallace and Coetzee situates Dostoevsky on one side of the threshold and Nietzsche on the other. Dostoevsky's values and principles augur a growing redundancy whilst Nietzsche's repudiation of them augurs a growing relevance. It is a position supported by *A Curse on Dostoevsky* in the sense that the warzone depicted, whilst far from thematically shallow, is devoid of the moral or ethical values and principles Wallace and Coetzee attribute to Dostoevsky's writing. Rassoul, contemplating suicide in the manner of Raskolnikov, ultimately rejects the idea because 'in order to commit suicide you have to believe in […] the value of life'. 'Here, in this country', he laments, 'life has no value at all' (*CoD* 137).

That Alan cites *Beyond Good and Evil* offers further enhancement to this theoretical polarity between Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, where the former stands for the principle of moral supremacy and the latter for a general rejection of principles. Nietzsche's publication of *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886 came six years after the publication of Dostoevsky's final novel and five years after his death, prompting a hypothetical juncture between the passing of one era, the 'another generation and another world' mentioned in *Diary*, and the emergence of the tendencies that would come to encapsulate the contemporary. Augmenting this hypothesis is Frederic Jameson's essay on the relationship between modernism and imperialism, which offers the Berlin Conference of 1884 as the 'emblematic date' for the 'codification of a new imperialist world system'.[44]

Though Jameson admits there is nothing 'empirically verifiable' about choosing 1884 as the inaugural date of modernism, his essay seeks to build connections between the 'innovation and modification' of the 'formalist stereotype' of modernist literature, and a reconfigured global awareness brought about by the regulation of European colonisation.[45] Jameson offers a list of

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[44] Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism' in Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson & Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) pp.43-66 (p.44).
[45] Ibid., p.45.

stereotypical traits inherent in modernist literature such as *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*, including 'its

apolitical character […], its increased subjectification and introspective psychologization, and, not

least, its aestheticism'.[46] The claim is that these traits can be identified as an aesthetic response to

the 'spatial disjunction' that occurred when 'a significant structural segment of the economic system

as a whole' was actualised as being 'located elsewhere'.[47] The inability or refusal to acknowledge

'the radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering, and exploitation' resulted in an 'inability to

grasp the way the system functions as a whole', that is, a sociocultural system structured upon an

imperial economic base. The 'existential experience' of the Western metropolis can 'no longer be

grasped imminently' and as such its artistic products 'will now henceforth always have something

missing'.[48] Echoing the transition from ontotheology to the ethics of alterity that will constitute the

theoretical argument of the coming chapters, Jameson specifically associates the crisis of

modernisation with the philosophical, cultural and economic sensibility of an incomplete totality, of

a gap in knowledge.

Jameson's theory helps elucidate Wallace's contention that the 'formal ingenuity' of 'the

good old modernists' left a legacy of literature 'aesthetically distanced from real lived life': the most

prominent effect of this legacy for Wallace was how it 'elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics –

maybe even metaphysics'.[49] And although Jameson distinguished the influence of imperialism over

modernist literature from the influence of 'internal industrialization and commodification in the

modernizing metropolis', Wallace's specific focus on the ethical/metaphysical contends that both

imperialism and industrialisation had the same effect over Western sensibility at the end of the 19th

century: 'a generalised loss of meaning […] by way of the waning of tradition and religious

absolutes'.[50] The ideas informing Wallace's review implies that the elevation of aesthetics in

modernist literature necessitated an inverse relegation of ethics, the beginning of the turn away

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., p.50.
[48] Ibid., p.51.
[49] Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p.271-2.
[50] Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', p.50.

from passionately moral, morally passionate fiction. The amalgamation of the relocation of capital to imperial outposts and the 'reifying logic' of increased industrialisation produced an effect that constitutes how Dostoevsky's own historical era is reflected in the contemporary fictional works: it is seen as an era in which something extrinsic looms over existential experience, when the absolute certainty of values and principles, particularly ethical ones, are called into question.[51] The crises that permeate Dostoevsky's own works, crises that are criminal, atheistic, suicidal and even satanic in nature, are thus read by the contemporary works as an indictment of the rising extraneous quality within existential experience. It again seems to confirm Dostoevsky as an advocate for these now-questioned values and principles.

Ontotheology and Postmodern Ethics

On the other hand, the ideological heirs of Nietzsche have inherited a cultural context expunged of absolute ethical value. The premise for any consideration of contemporary ethics or morality is the incapacity to resort to either religious or philosophical absolutes. Zygmunt Bauman introduces his 1993 study on *Postmodern Ethics* precisely by summarising the 'postmodern approach to morality' as, in a fashion similar to Jameson and Wallace, 'the celebration of the 'demise of the ethical' that followed 'the substitution of aesthetics for ethics'.[52] Although a postmodern ethical approach by no means involves 'the abandoning of characteristically modern moral concerns', it necessarily entails 'the rejection of […] coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory'.[53] Bauman's introduction offers a swift summation of the 'accomplishment of the modern age' in making the definition of 'moral' pertain to 'the distinction between right and wrong', and laying out the basis of a postmodern critique of that definition. It is therefore worth briefly recapping his introduction here to greater illustrate the

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[51] Ibid., p.50
[52] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p.2.
[53] Ibid., p.4.

historical transition from pre-to-post-Nietzschean ethics that forms one half of my thesis's dual historical narrative.

Bauman initially postulates a premodern, 'traditional' way of life' that was 'lived as if validated by powers no human will or whim could challenge; life as a whole was a product of Divine creation' and thus 'monitored by Divine providence.' Under this 'traditional' moral system, divine providence enveloped the 'totality of ways and means' of an individual's moral existence: free will meant merely 'a departure from the way of the world as God ordained it', whilst 'right' moral action was an avoidance of choice, a commitment to 'following the customary way of life.' The ethical implication for the transition from the premodern to the modern, writes Bauman, was the autonomy of moral choice that followed from 'the gradual loosening of the grip of tradition', a loosening that sprung from the rise of bourgeois capital accumulation and the end of feudalism, and the subsequent casting of people as '*individuals*, endowed with identities'.[54]

A consequence of this rise was the 'modern scepticism' against the religious dogma of divine ordinance and the parallel need for 'comprehensive and unitary ethics' distinct from 'the void left by the now extinct or ineffective moral supervision of the Church'.[55] Bauman's central claim in his introduction is that modernity effected a legislative and philosophical process of ethical secularisation wherein reason, defined as 'a carefully and artfully harmonized set of rational rules', gradually supplanted the totality of providentially mandated custom. The principle remained the same: the 'right and proper' course of action would accord with the faculties of reason inherent within every person, yet the semblance of free will would be retained, so that the modern 'moral code' would 'proclaim its 'man-made' provenance and […] would be embraced and obeyed by all rational human beings'.'[56]

Bauman emphasises the role of European Enlightenment philosophy in this transition to an ethical humanism: it was Enlightenment philosophers who, he claims, 'replace[d] the clergy as

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., p.6.
[56] Ibid.

spiritual rulers and guardians of the nations.'[57] And a central tenet of the 'humanist emancipation' of

ethical thought was the need to claim 'the freedom of self-constitution […] in the name of human

potential.'[58] The validity of reason as the foundation of modern ethics was its 'universal human

capacity'.[59] It had to be 'based solely on 'the nature of Man'': the ethics/morality of a 'properly

human society had to be founded in a way that engaged every human *qua* human being – rely on no

supra- or extra-human authorities'.[60] The 'enlightened spokesmen of the Universal' sought to

'replace the Revelation of the Church – with the yet more radical and uncompromising claim for

universal validity.'[61] In this manner, Bauman's abridgement of the way pre-Enlightenment, clerical

'tradition' refreshed itself in the universal claims of abstract rationality has its correspondence with

the Heideggerian concept of ontotheology, in that both are premised upon a tendency towards a

universally accessible truth.

Whether religiously ordained or concurrent with the Enlightenment prioritisation of reason

and rationality, therefore, the dominant collective understanding of the ethical leading into the

modernist turn was of its universal applicability, of its encompassing of the totality of individuals.

Bauman in particular points to the insistence on universality decreed by the Kantian categorical

imperative, with its formulation that the course for moral action should only be based on maxims

and principles which can be willed to be universal laws of nature for all rational beings.[62] Bauman

claims that Kant's relocation of morality to the universally absolute 'dominion of reason' was

followed 'unstintingly' by 'most ethical arguments' that post-dated him.[63] In many respects the

panhuman potential for moral reasoning articulated by the categorical imperative is the foremost

ethical dictate of the European Enlightenment: Roger Scruton's introduction to Kant asserts that

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[57] Ibid., p.25.
[58] Ibid., p.24.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., p.25.
[61] Ibid.
[62] See Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p.51. Kant's categorical imperative is first proposed in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). See Arnulf Zweig & Thomas E. Hill Jr. (trans and ed) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.222.
[63] Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p.67-68.

Kant's moral philosophy gave the Enlightenment its 'ultimate philosophical endorsement'.[64] And despite the Enlightenment secularisation of the ethical delineated by Bauman, the influence of Kant's Pietist upbringing over his ethical thought connotes a potential further communion between the religious and the humanist in terms of their shared emphasis on universal attainment. Roger J. Sullivan's study on Kant's moral theory notes that Kant's universal morality was based on a 'kind of moral and religious consciousness' which culminated in an ethics bridging 'the distance between, on the one hand, his profound belief in God and, on the other hand, his commitment to the Enlightenment, which valued reason and human progress over religious faith.'[65]

The era of modernism thus emerges as the era questioning both the totality of divine providence and the foundational universality of Kantian deontology, and this questioning can be decisively construed as ethical in nature. Coetzee's review of *The Miraculous Years* even explicitly links Russia's historical crisis of modernisation with the 'searching interrogation of Reason – the Reason of the Enlightenment – as the basis for a good society' conducted by Dostoevsky's major works.[66] If the contemporary works are therefore commensurate in their portrayal of the modern world as, in an ethical sense, an ideological inheritance of Nietzsche, then the ethical crises they depict are direct consequences of the failure or abandonment of ethical recourse to either divine providence or the absolute and universalisable ethical standards of Enlightenment reason.[67] And whilst Wallace may point out the devastating attack on Christianity that permeates Nietzsche's philosophy, an equally significant target in *Beyond Good and Evil* was Kantian ethics and, by association, Enlightenment notions of an absolute ethical or moral standard.[68] One of the

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[64] Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p.113.

[65] Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.7-9.

[66] Coetzee, 'The Artist at High Tide', p.14.

[67] Nietzsche's works are indeed central to the transition away from absolutes that characterise modernism: a recent study by Stewart Smith opens with the reminder that Nietzsche's 'explosive impact' on literary and artistic modernism has long been 'widely acknowledged'. See Stewart Smith, *Nietzsche and Modernism: Nihilism and Suffering in Lawrence, Kafka and Beckett* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.2

[68] The eleventh subsection of 'Prejudices of Philosophers' is focused primarily on 'the comical *niaiserie allemande*' ('German foolishness') of Kant's premise that humans have an innate faculty for reasoned judgement. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Gordon Press, 1974) pp.16-17. *Beyond Good and Evil* is the twelfth volume of Gordon Press' *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*.

fundamental aspirations of *Beyond Good and Evil* is 'to replace the Kantian question, "How are

synthetic judgements *a priori* possible?" by another question, "Why is belief in such judgements

necessary?"', to demonstrate that such universally applicable laws prior to experience equate only

to 'false judgements'.[69]

The Kantian prejudice that Nietzsche is explicitly refuting, then, is his proposition of an

absolute standard of reason transcending each individual and thus applicable to all. And, in *Beyond

Good and Evil*, that refutation is expressed in ethical terms. It is this specifically that marks out

Nietzsche's writings as watershed moment for 19th-century ethical thinking: *Beyond Good and Evil*

postulates the 'old theological problem of "Faith" and "Knowledge," or more plainly of instinct and

reason' as two sides of 'the old moral problem' predating both Christianity and Hellenism.[70] Yet it

works to demonstrate how both reason and faith are reliant on the polarisation of action into

diametric ethical opposites, a consequence of the 'awkwardness' of binary understanding that 'will

continue to talk of opposites where there are only degrees and many refinements of gradation.'[71]

This is perhaps the definitive impulse behind the call to go 'beyond good and evil': it refers to a going

beyond the premise that there is a universalisable and absolute standard of good, and a corollary

definition of anything departing from such a standard as evil.

It is in this respect that *Beyond Good and Evil*, standing synecdochally for Nietzschean

philosophy in general, epitomises the beginning of a transition away from a totalising ethical

standard that defines Dostoevsky's era as it is depicted in the contemporary works. Alan's specific

reference in *Diary* to *Beyond Good and Evil* can be read as a certification that the contemporary

world of the novel, a departure from the era that C (in his role as a Dostoevskian neotype)

represents, is one that has abandoned recourse to universal ethical absolutes sourced in either

providence or reason, and one that consequently proposes a necessity-based, idiosyncratic morality

able to be altered or renounced without repercussion. Conforming with the critique of

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[69] Ibid., p.18.
[70] Ibid., p.111.
[71] Ibid., p.35.

contemporary American literature (and the culture it depicts) in Wallace's review of *The Miraculous Years*, what 'defines modernity' in *Diary* is the fact that 'there are no big issues in any modern state' (*DBY* 99), issues identifiable as characteristically ethical. Likewise, Rassoul's motivation to hand himself in to Kabul's legal authorities is 'to give my crime some meaning' (*CoD* 181). The discernible implication is that, within the lawlessness of the novel's setting, Rassoul's ideological murder is meaningless and the moral crisis of Raskolnikov has been emptied of significance.

The quote from *Slaughterhouse-Five* with which I began this thesis can now be decidedly read as a commentary on the ethical transition away from universal absolutes occurring between the end of the 19th century and continuing up until the present day. This is what Rosewater means by the claim that Dostoevsky is not 'enough any more'. To not be 'enough any more', in an ethical sense, is to portray and endorse an ethical worldview centred round an absolute truth, a truth relevant and attainable for the human totality. It is the commitment to a dependency on absolutes that the dawn of modernism began to question, and the long and variegated path to the respective ethical backdrops of Coetzee, Wallace and Rahimi seemingly dismiss. Rosewater's claim that Dostoevsky is not 'enough any more' premises Dostoevsky as an ideological novelist whose passionately moral, morally passionate principles are deprived of their significance in a context that has inherited the post-Nietzschean disavowal of religious or philosophical ethical absolutes. Although Coetzee rightly notes that Dostoevsky's fiction interrogates the legitimacy of Enlightenment reason as the basis for a good society, Dostoevsky's ideological objection to the 'proto-Nietzschean' nihilism of his time stations him in the contemporary works as the representation of a bygone era.

'His complete devotion to Christ': Ethics and Faith in Dostoevsky

The timeline provided above presents one of the two competing narratives with regards to contemporary Dostoevskian ethics, the 'isn't *enough* any more' that runs up against the invocation

of his ghost made by all four contemporary texts. The remainder of this thesis will work to expand upon the other narrative, returning to Dostoevsky's novels to source that which outlives the death of pre-Nietzschean ethical principles, and which is subsequently repositioned by the contemporary texts to form the centre of their respective ethical outlooks.

By doing so, my thesis will challenge the prevailing association of Dostoevskian ethics with his Orthodox faith. In 1973, towards the end of McHale's 'long sixties', A. Boyce Gibson posthumously published *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, which claimed that 'no account can properly represent [Dostoevsky], even as an artist, which in any way slurs his complete devotion to Christ'.[72] It is an approach that is indisputably central to the study of Dostoevsky: one need only point to the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, Stepan Verkhovensky's deathbed conversion in *Demons*, or the depiction of the Elder Zosima as the spiritual weight of *The Brothers Karamazov* to find evidence for a reading of his ethics as embedded within religious values and principles. Moreover, Dostoevsky's own biography, arcing from his early socialism and its concomitant triumph of reason over faith, through his mock execution and experience in a Siberian prison camp and ending with his embrace of Slavophilism and Orthodoxy, gives credence to the prevailing critical understanding that Dostoevskian ethics are modelled on some form of Christian ethics.

Emblematic of this approach is the repeated critical reference to his letter to a benefactress upon his release from Siberia in which, though self-identifying as 'a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt', he claims he still succumbs to Heaven-sent moments of belief 'where everything is clear and sacred for me.' If in these moments, Dostoevsky writes, he was given proof that 'in reality the truth were outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.'[73] His biographer Joseph Frank identifies this remark as symptomatic of Dostoevsky's Kierkegaardian choice to 'separate faith off entirely from human reason.' The separation of faith and

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[72] A. Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973) p.5.

[73] Dostoevsky letter is translated and quoted in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2012) p.220. For a fuller account of this critical juncture in Dostoevsky's relationship with faith, see chapter 16, 'Monsters in Their Misery', pp.196-222.

reason displayed by Dostoevsky's choice of Christ over 'truth' in this remark indicates that

Dostoevsky's personal ethical position is characterised by the individual's submission to a divine

authority. And whilst this separation seems initially to contradict the conflation of faith and

Enlightenment reason on which Bauman's theorisation of modernism and postmodernism rests, in

some respects it reinforces it. Dostoevsky (along with Kierkegaard) was embroiled in the crisis of

modernisation in which universalising claims on subjective ethical constitution were being

challenged, and both could source those challenges within the Enlightenment's own contestation of

traditional religious values. Both Marxist materialism and the anti-Christian sentiments of Ludwig

Feuerbach, key influences over the Russian nihilism that Dostoevsky's Slavophilism opposed, are

readily identifiable as critiques of post-Kantian German ideology.[74] In siding with traditional faith

over critiques of Enlightenment thought, Dostoevsky identifies himself as hostile to modernism: by

choosing faith over reason, he chooses a residual ideology over an emergent one. However, as I have

thus far argued, the ethical influence of Dostoevsky over literary texts in the contemporary era

complicates the continued reliance on his faith in readings of his ethics. Any analysis of this influence

must consider a decline or waning of the power of an ethical ideal, based either in religious or

philosophical absolutes, between Dostoevsky's era and the contemporary: critical attempts to apply

Dostoevskian ethics to the contemporary era that maintain the necessity of an absolute authority

are always subject to contemporary critique and/or denial of such absolutes.

In order to situate my own study within the context of the continuing association of

Dostoevsky's faith and his literary ethics, I will end this section by briefly detailing and critiquing

some examples. As recently as 2016, the Russian historian Leonard Friesen published *Transcendent

Love*, a work searching for a 'global ethic' which claims that Dostoevsky's writings 'continue to be

relevant' to 'the ongoing discussion about what it means to be ethical' despite 'his cultural milieu

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[74] For a background of the philosophies that influenced Russian nihilism, see Kristian Petrov, ''Strike out, right and left!': A Conceptual-historical Analysis of 1860s Russian Nihilism and its Notion of Negation', *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 71 (2019) 73-97.

seem[ing] vastly different from our own.'[75] And while Friesen accepts that a global, contemporary

ethic must become 'unreasonable', i.e. abandon principles of reason, *Transcendent Love* does not

challenge Dostoevsky's own oft-stated belief that 'the old truths of the Christian faith […] will one

day save all of humanity.'[76] The potentially oxymoronic conflict of an 'unreasonable truth' is never

resolved: he concludes by equating his global ethic with a phoenix rising from the flames of

'scattered moral traditions' to the extent that it 'inescapably links the ethical with the Giver', a divine

force equivalent either to a monotheistic God or the legion gods of various polytheistic religions.[77]

 Transcendent Love serves as paradigmatic of a critical reading of Dostoevsky's ethics/morals

whose adherence to the Christian tradition complicates their contemporary relevance. Rowan

Williams's 2008 study of Dostoevsky is similar to Friesen's, maintaining that Dostoevsky's fiction

'presents a Christocentric apologetic', even though he is willing to admit that the 'unique kind' of

defence of faith in Dostoevsky is one that questions, rather than endorses, 'the notion of a universal

moral order and a just and loving God.'[78] Meanwhile, Malcolm Jones's preface to his work on the

dynamics of religious experience in Dostoevsky notes that Western readers of his seminal work,

Dostoevsky After Bakhtin, were 'troubled' by his 'reintroduction of the notion of originary truth' in

Dostoevskian ethics, accusing him of 'fail[ing] to grasp something essential […] about the post-

modernist enterprise', thereby identifying the necessity for a contemporary reading of Dostoevskian

ethics to depart from such a notion.[79]

 More pertinent examples of the continuing critical tendency to equate Dostoevskian ethics

with absolutism include R. Maurice Barineau's 1994 essay on *The Brothers Karamazov* and Giorgio

Faro's 2017 study of *Crime and Punishment*. Both argue for universal values to be taken from a

Dostoevsky novel and made applicable to contemporary society. Faro builds upon the noted proto-

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[75] Leonard Friesen, *Transcendent Love: Dostoevsky and the Search for a Global Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016) p.1.
[76] Ibid., p.102.
[77] Ibid., p.187.
[78] Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2009) p. p.242-243/233.
[79] Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience* (London: Anthem, 2005) p.ix. *Cf.* Jones, *Dostoevsky After Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Nietzschean philosophical paradigms of the Russian nihilism opposed by Dostoevsky's fiction, identifying Raskolnikov as a forerunner to ethical consequentialism and thus giving 'passage to the proud, contemptuous conception of the Ubermensch', the Nietzschean conception of a superior individual transgressing moral norms in order to progress society.[80] His argument is that Sonia Marmeladov, by personifying 'a deeper reason: the *Logos*, God's logic', offers an ethical redemptive to the Nietzschean renunciation of both God and 'logical argumentation' that prompts Raskolnikov's crime.[81] Faro relates such deeper reason to 'the existence of a conscience that is based on natural law': this natural law, created by God, retains even non-believers within its ethical remit.[82] Faro's natural law corresponds with Barineau's earlier reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*'s ethics as based within Kantian maxims.[83] For Barineau, the existence of a universalising standard for what he (following Kant) calls the 'highest good' can be reasonably deduced from the *a priori* existence of virtue and morality.[84] Both the natural law of God and the Kantian categorical imperative portray a transcendent moral obligation as a founding principle for ethics.

In this respect, Barineau and Faro exemplify all critical associations of Dostoevsky with universal ethical absolutes, and thus exemplify the target of my critique. The concern with both arguments, and consequently with all such associations, is brought to the fore when Faro expands upon a 'secular thesis' with which Dostoevsky confutes post-Nietzschean moral relativism. The universally applicable 'natural law', for Faro, confers the same imperative to every credence or ideology: what is 'evil' to Christian theology is evil to any secular application because all submit to the natural law of conscience.[85] Barineau's paper similarly betrays itself when it says that through Alyosha, whom for Barineau embodies the Kantian imperative, 'Dostoevsky urges his readers to find the meaning to life in spite of the questions, ambiguities and doubts which surround human

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[80] Giorgio Faro, 'A criminal's confession: comparing rival ethics in crime and punishment (F. Dostoevsky)', *Church, Communication and Culture* 2.3 (2017) 272-283 (275-6).

[81] Ibid., 277.

[82] Ibid., 280-1.

[83] . Maurice Barineau, 'The Triumph of Ethics over Doubt: Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*', *Christianity and Literature* 43.3/4 (1994) 375-392

[84] Ibid., 376 *et passim*.

[85] Faro, 'A criminal's confession', 280-1.

existence, and he urges his readers to find the meaning of life in ethics.'[86] However if moral

obligation is *a priori* (or if conscience was a universally applicable natural inheritance), then why

would Dostoevsky's readers need urging? Everyone subject to the natural laws of conscience or the

moral obligation would always already locate the meaning of life, of a virtuous life, in the ethical.

Such an understanding seems to overlook the unique moment of individual subjectivity in which a

moral or ethical choice is made. Ethical conscience would awaken itself in the subject, almost

independent of the subject, and override the moment of choice in which doubt is permitted.

Barineau's attempt to relate Dostoevsky and Kant instead merely reiterates the pre-Enlightenment,

'traditional' way of life alluded to in Bauman's introduction to postmodern ethics: one in which free

will can only be a necessarily evil departure from the preordained. Like Faro's natural law of

conscience, it inevitably advocates a universal ethical standard that encompasses all individuals prior

to the moment of ethical choice.

It is therefore inevitably refuted by the world portrayed in contemporary Dostoevskian

literature. Any discussion of an ethics founded or reliant upon universal absolutes, any that dictates

a priori the unique moment of ethical crisis or choice, is a discussion open to scrutiny if it attempts

to articulate its relevance in a social, cultural and political context inheriting a scepticism towards or

abandonment of such absolutes. This is the context of the Coetzee, Rahimi and Wallace novels. A

study of the way Dostoevskian ethics influence these novels cannot rely on absolute reason or

resolute faith in divine supremacy. The latter even predominates the world portrayed by *A Curse on*

Dostoevsky, yet the distinction between faith in Dostoevsky's novels and wartime Kabul is sharply

rendered through the reiteration of Ivan Karamazov's infamous aphorism on the death of God. The

law clerk belittling Rassoul's confession asks him, 'how would your precious Russian explain the fact

that here, today, in your dear country, everyone believes in Allah the Merciful yet all atrocities are

permitted?' (*CoD* 182). The hold of faith over ethics is here shown to have been decisively loosened.

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[86] Ibid., 392.

Yet though the question posed by the law clerk derides Rassoul's obsession, out of context it becomes central to the ethics not only of *A Curse on Dostoevsky* but also of the other novels to be discussed, as well as to the ethical outlook of all contemporary Dostoevskian literature. As irrefutable as the axiological distance between Dostoevsky and the more recent novels is the fact that he remains for all of them a 'precious Russian'. Though they do not necessarily seek an 'explanation' from Dostoevsky for their respective ethical crises, the novels continue to entreat Dostoevsky's literary legacy for a response to those crises, if not for a solution then at least for a method of approaching the problem; though the novels necessarily accept Dostoevsky cannot give them *the* answer to the ethical dilemmas that they depict, his ghost is nevertheless invoked to give *an* answer. That Dostoevskian ethics are not 'enough any more' references either the Enlightenment principles of absolute reason that he interrogated and critiqued or the doctrinal ethics that continue to be associated with his works even with regards to their contemporary ethical repositioning. The question remains however: why therefore is Dostoevsky still referenced? This is the question that drives the thesis hence and provides one of its central justifications. To relocate Dostoevsky's ethics from his Orthodoxy to the composition of his narrative (or, to extract a secular sense of the ethical from the interaction between his Orthodoxy and his literary composition) is to advance the prevalent tendency of Dostoevsky criticism that continues even to this day.

Thesis Structure, Research Questions and Contributions to Knowledge

Following this Introduction, the thesis splits into four separate thematic Parts, with two chapters devoted to each Part. Part I focuses specifically on detailing the theoretical framework with which the ethics of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels can be understood by and through their significance to the contemporary texts. Following the historical transition laid out in the Introduction, I recognise in Part I that, if Dostoevskian ethics can no longer be sourced in the consummation of the subject via an ontotheological absolute, then an understanding of the ethical is needed that relocates its

grounding from metaphysical security to that which Mikhail Bakhtin terms the 'unfinalisability' of its characters. I thus ask after the constitution of such an understanding. What is the relationship between Bakhtin's theorisation of Dostoevsky's narrative form and his phenomenological understanding of ethics which necessarily departs from the metaphysics of presence? How do the noted similarities between Bakhtinian ethics and the illimitable responsibility towards the Other in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas help explain this relationship, particularly with regards to their respective indebtedness to Dostoevsky? Chapter 1 is an exploration of the ideas raised by these types of questions. In Chapter 2, meanwhile, I strive to both concretise and develop the findings of Chapter 1. Taking what was learned through a cross-analysis of Bakhtin's narrative theory on Dostoevsky with the ethical framework of Bakhtin and Levinas, can it be said that the polyphonic narrative form gestures towards an alternative to a now-lost metaphysical grounding? Using Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's theorisation of modernism's 'metaphysical homesickness' as a trope, Chapter 2 asks whether, in the absence of an absolute ideological authority, literature itself can be understood as the site of the ethical?

In Part II, I begin Chapter 3 by noting the persistence of theological terminology in Levinasian ethical theory, despite its claims to represent a divorce from the ideological authority that religious institutions are premised upon. Bakhtin scholarship, I note, comments upon similar tendencies in his own writings. Reading such persistence in terms of metaphysical homesickness, I thus ask whether the contemporary texts show a similar prevarication between the sacred and the secular. I end Chapter 3 by proposing that the contemporary texts advance postmodernism through a reiteration of modernist concerns, thereby explaining their invocation of Dostoevsky. Chapter 4 continues this proposal with a particular focus on David Foster Wallace. Wallace's interviews and essays prior to the publication of *Infinite Jest* are called upon to develop the concept of 'post-postmodernism' as reaching back through postmodernism to the ethical urgency of modernism, as it was anticipated by Dostoevsky and responded to through the creation of novelistic polyphony.

Part III manifests at the juncture of Parts I and II. Its premise is that the modernist ambivalence over faith and secularism noted in Part II points to the necessary structuring tension of Dostoevsky's and Dostoevskian literature, a tension that is embedded within Part I's understanding of dialogue as the ethical foundation of subjectivity. From this premise, Part III asks whether literature therefore emerges as an optimal site for portraying the inherent tension of post-postmodern ethics due to its capacity to maintain a conditional equivocation before the cognitive and discursive functions of language. In Chapter 5, I use the emerging theory of metamodernism as a counterweight for the idea of a structuring tension within post-postmodern literature. This then allows for an assessment of the variance between ethical and aesthetic theory in Bakhtin and Levinas. I end the chapter by contrasting Levinas's oft-cited disavowal of art, the essay 'Reality and Its Shadow', with the simultaneous endorsement and rebuttal of the aesthetic in Bakhtin's *Problems* and his concurrent essay, 'Author and Hero'. This then raises the question as to whether there is a type of literature that would accord with a Levinasian sense of the ethical, able to conflate linguistic cognition and discourse. In Chapter 6, I begin the search for an answer with the under-examined significance of silence to Dostoevskian polyphony, relating it to a wider discord within his works between literary creation and the ineffability of a 'higher reality' that has been elsewhere associated with apophatic theology. Reading this apophaticism in light of new studies of Levinas's relationship with the aesthetic, however, augurs for a revival of the way literary ethics are perceived. Chapter 6 therefore interrogates the possibility of a type of literature that strives to reveal, rather than conceal, the disharmony between the ethical and aesthetic functions of language. This in turn calls for a reassessment of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony as distinct from monologic literature. If, as the thesis will argue, polyphony can be equated with an understanding of the ethical juxtaposed with cognition, and thus with the aesthetic, can a polyphonic novel be said to exist outside of theory? Or must the literary work be necessarily composed of both the monologic and the polyphonic, a necessity rooted in the language that constitutes it? It is with a response to these questions that I conclude Part III.

Part IV is therefore dedicated to applying the theoretical conclusions of the previous three Parts to a close reading of the contemporary texts. It uses the trope of 'epistemic humility', a humility founded in the disjunction between ethics and aesthetics that has its base in the functional duality of language, as a methodology for this close reading. Beginning with the maximalism of *Infinite Jest* and working through *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, *The Master of Petersburg* and to the idiosyncratic structure of *Diary of a Bad Year*, I attempt to expose some of the different ways in which these contemporary responses to Dostoevsky reveal themselves as indebted to the literary depiction of dialogic ethics given precedence by the polyphonic novel.

By engaging with such topics and working through such questions, I hope to provide broad contributions to research in several areas. Primarily, my re-evaluation of the ethical potential of the polyphonic novel advances conventional scholarship in both Bakhtin and Levinas studies. My contention that Bakhtinian polyphony should be understood as embedded within novelistic monologism stands apart from the bifurcation of monologism and polyphony that Bakhtin himself gestures towards, as I will go on to show, as well as from much Bakhtin scholarship. Likewise, my Levinasian reading of literary ethics, especially in Chapter 6, contributes to an emerging body of critical work that strives to redress critical dismissals of Levinas and literature.

Consequent of these primary contributions, my thesis will offer new interpretations of Dostoevsky, the contemporary Dostoevskians, and the sociocultural conditions of post-postmodernism. As has already been noted in this Introduction, my thesis will go against the continuing associations of Dostoevskian ethics and his Russian Orthodox faith by seeking to read those ethics in light of the secular/post-secular climate of the contemporary works. In doing so, I will offer a more in-depth analysis of Dostoevsky's influence over Wallace and Coetzee than currently exists in anglophone scholarship, especially with regards to *Diary of a Bad Year*. I will also provide a critical assessment of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, which is currently less familiar to anglophone scholarship than both Coetzee and Wallace. It is my hope that, by including *A Curse on Dostoevsky* with an exploration of Wallace, Coetzee and Dostoevsky, I will help introduce Rahimi's works to a

wider research audience with whom, I believe, he should be associated. This in turn speaks to a

broader intention of the thesis: to provide pathways for critical associations of two or more of its

authors and theorists. By grouping a diverse range of writers, I inevitably contribute new

perspectives on the academic body of work that constitutes Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Levinas, Wallace,

Coetzee and Rahimi studies respectively.

PART I – THE ENTIRE FULLNESS OF THE WORD

Chapter 1 – Bakhtin and Levinas

A reading of the ethics of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels that bases itself on a totalising gesture of universally realisable moral obligation (the premise of the Kantian categorical imperative), is necessarily betrayed by the events of those novels. As discussed in the Introduction with reference to R. Maurice Barineau's 'The Triumph of Ethics', the presumption of universal values that awaken themselves in the conscience of the individual discounts the isolated moments of ethical choice that permeate key scenes in Dostoevsky's works. Meanwhile, a reading of the ethics of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels based on the totality of divine ordinance and its aberrations (the premise of Bauman's 'traditional' religion) is validated by Dostoevsky's professed Orthodoxy and given a historical impetus by the crisis of modernisation through which he lived. Even so, this latter reading is necessarily betrayed by the mere fact that Dostoevskian ethics continue to influence authors writing in the aftermath of the transition from modernism to postmodernism to a present-day context.

The aim of Part I is to construct a methodology for reading the ethics of Dostoevsky's works that can account for their translation to a contemporary context. To do so, I intend to begin with the isolated moments of ethical choice permeating Dostoevsky's key scenes, seeking to read them through an understanding of the ethical distinct from the mandates of a totalising authority. This, I will claim, is critical to the understanding of ethics in the philosophy of both Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas. Both Bakhtin and Levinas developed theories that sought to reconceive of the ethical apart from the totalising compulsion of the Western philosophical tradition as they understood it. And for both Dostoevsky was an important precursor. It is from this dual correspondence that I propose to reconsider Dostoevskian ethics. A cross-analysis of Bakhtin's early

ethical writings, the fragments collectively known in English as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, with

his concurrent theorisation of Dostoevsky's 'polyphonic' narrative in *Problems of Dostoevsky's*

Poetics, I will argue, complements the Levinasian emphasis on the unknowable alterity of the Other

that founds the ethical instant. For Levinas, this alterity manifests in the voice of the Other that,

because unanticipatable, necessarily evades subjective cognition. A definition of ethics founded

upon the Other's voice, therefore, accords with the '*plurality of independent and unmerged voices*

and consciousnesses' that constitutes the '*chief characteristic*' (*PDP* 6) of Dostoevskian polyphony for

Bakhtin. By noting the distinction between the polyphonic deference for the voice of the Other and

the 'monistic principles' of authorial monologism that find their 'clearest and most precise

expression in idealistic philosophy' (*PDP* 80), I argue that Dostoevsky's polyphonic structure emerges

as the source of his influence over contemporary Dostoevskian literature.

In this chapter, I aim primarily to build on the previously noted theoretical affinities between

Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics, using their respective acknowledgements of Dostoevsky's

influence as a mooring. Beginning with examples from the post-Siberian novels that indicate their

resistance to universal moral obligation, I will trace how the Bakhtinian emphasis on the

'unfinalizability' (*PDP* 59, *et passim*) of the Dostoevskian hero accords with his understanding of the

architectonics of being in *Philosophy of the Act*.[1] *Philosophy of the Act*, as Michael Holquist notes in

his Foreword to Vadim Liapunov's English translation, was first and foremost an attempt 'to think

beyond Kant's formulation of the ethical imperative' (*PTA* ix). As such, an ethical reading of

Dostoevskian polyphony sets itself against the same ethical tradition targeted by modernist critique

and portrayed as archaic by the post-Nietzschean context of the contemporary works. I will then

correlate this ethical reading with Levinasian ethics, particularly with regards to how Ivan's Grand

Inquisitor seems to presage Levinasian totality, which is in the first instance the totalising impulse of

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[1] My focus on Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels, particularly on the novels from *Crime and Punishment* until *The Brothers Karamazov*, is given precedence by Bakhtin himself. Bakhtin calls the Underground Man the 'first hero-ideologist in Dostoevsky's works' (*PDP* 59), implying that novelistic polyphony developed fully only in the later stages of Dostoevsky's writing career.

cognition. I will end the chapter by suggesting that the Elder Zosima's 'active love' can be

interpreted within the context of ethical dialogism, offering a means by which the Bakhtinian notion

of answerability and the Levinasian notion of responsibility can be compared.

I

'Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel. He created a fundamentally new novelistic genre'

(*PDP* 7). Although sections of Bakhtin's seminal contribution to Dostoevsky studies, written initially

in the 1920s but reworked and republished in 1963, source the development of the polyphonic novel

in the carnival elements of Menippean satire, Dostoevsky's formalisation of *'fully valid voices'*

capable of standing '*alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him' (*PDP* 6) marked a

watershed moment in the development of literary structure.[2] Polyphony had the effect, claims

Bakhtin, of 'destroying the established form of the fundamentally *monologic* (homophonic)

European novel' (*PDP* 8). He later clarifies that in

> a monologic design, the hero is closed and his semantic boundaries are defined: he acts, experiences, thinks, and is conscious within the limits of what he is […]; he cannot cease to be himself, that is, he cannot exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament without violating the author's monologic design concerning him. Such an image is constructed in the objective authorial world […]; the construction of that authorial world with its points of view and finalizing definitions presupposes a fixed eternal position […]. The self-consciousness of the hero is inserted into this rigid framework […] which is part of the authorial consciousness defining and representing him […]. (*PDP* 52)

From this extended quotation it can be seen how Bakhtin equates the 'hero' within a monologic

novel with the individual subsumed within the universalising tendencies of ontotheology. Indeed,

with his later pronouncements on the monistic principles of 'idealistic philosophy', Bakhtin

comments on the way such principles reduce the multiplicity of individual consciousnesses to 'the

unity of a *single* consciousness', no matter 'what metaphysical form the unity takes: "consciousness

in general" ("*Bewusstsein überhaupt*"), "the absolute *I*," "the absolute spirit," "the normative

consciousness," and so forth' (*PDP* 81). By specifically referencing terminology from Kantian and

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[2] See Caryl Emerson's 'Editor Preface' for a brief publication history of *Problems*, *PDP* xxix-xliii.

Hegelian philosophy, Bakhtin makes clear his association of authorial monologism with the Enlightenment principles of universal Reason.[3]

Dostoevsky's polyphony, therefore, 'renounces all these monologic premises' (*PDP* 52). This is the essence of the proposal to treat the polyphonic form as central to the contemporary repositioning of Dostoevskian ethics: if monologism is comparable with Enlightenment absolutes, and polyphony is a departure from monologism, then polyphony retains its significance to the post-Nietzschean context which evolved from the crisis of modernisation as it is portrayed in the contemporary Dostoevskian works. Reading the polyphonic as the site of the ethical thus relocates such ethics away from absolute mandates, thereby also guarding against the claim that Dostoevsky's ethics cannot be dissociated from divine ordinance. And the starting point for assessing the ethics of polyphony is the way the Dostoevskian character 'seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself', rather than being subsumed by the rigid framework of an authorial consciousness. The consciousness of the Dostoevskian hero, by contrast, 'lives by its unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminancy [*sic.*]' (*PDP* 53).

This is the point of entry for the refutation of arguments like Barineau's or Faro's that locate the ethical outside the unfinalisability of the individual subject, gesturing instead towards a universally applicable law of conscience or reason. *Crime and Punishment*, for example, begins precisely with a description of Raskolnikov at the end of 'a whole month' (*CP* 9) contemplating a murder, and so offers an immediate rebuke to the awakening of universal moral obligation embedded in an individual consciousness. Indeed, Raskolnikov's capacity to reason against 'duty and conscience' (*CP* 65) forms one of *Crime and Punishment*'s central themes. The critical focus of Dostoevsky's novels is instead the precise moment of ethical choice, without recourse to (or, alternatively, unencumbered by) an externally mandated prescriptive. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's emphasis was for 'the *crises* and *turning points*' (*PDP* 73) of the lives of his characters: such

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[3] I owe the recognition of 'consciousness in general' as a Kantian expression to Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: An Analytical-historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.296.

characters 'remember from their own past only that which has not ceased to be present for them, that which is still experienced by them as the present […]. Every act a character commits is in the present, and in this sense is not predetermined' (*PDP* 29). Raskolnikov in this sense exposes his own psychological aberration when he imagines that his crime is foreordained. The letter from Raskolnikov's mother about his sister's intention to marry (*CP* 30-39), his coincidental overhearing of 'negligible tavern conversation' (*CP* 66) concerning his intended victim, his encounter with Marmeladov that prompts his contemplation of the 'prejudice' and 'instilled fear' of men who become 'accustomed' (*CP* 27) to their own misfortune: such moments infuse Raskolnikov with a sense of predetermination or 'predestination' (*CP* 66) prior to his murder of Alyona. Yet not only does the unanticipated arrival of her sister Lizaveta offer an immediate rebuke of his Nietzschean Übermensch fantasy, the prevarication between destiny and choice actually confirms Bakhtin's premise. The combination of events that convince Raskolnikov to murder in fact serve only to embellish the immediacy of Raskolnikov's ethical crisis. They are counterweights to the compulsions that would stay his hand, both his conscience and his sense of duty. The conflict of these compulsions demonstrates how Raskolnikov's act is in fact not preordained but rather contingent on his own interior divisions, right up until the final seconds before the murder, when 'he could not waste even one more moment' (*CP* 76). And this emphasis on the immediacy of the act is likewise given to several other Dostoevskian characters at critical junctures in their respective novels, whether it be (to name only a few of the more prominent examples) Dmitri Karamazov holding a pestle outside his father's window (*BK* 393), Ivan's decision to leave for Moscow (*BK* 280), Myshkin's decision to choose Nastasya Filippovna over Aglaya Epanchin (*Idiot* 571), or Kirillov's hesitancy before his suicide (*Demons* 624).

Meanwhile, although Raskolnikov's narrative arc of sin and redemption is the basis for Christocentric readings of the novel, to mistake his 'gradual regeneration' (*CP* 551) by the end of *Crime and Punishment* for evidence of providential direction, as Faro does, fails to account for the absence of the 'natural law' of conscience within Dostoevsky's most villainous characters. Nothing

about Svidrigailov's demeanour or utterances in *Crime and Punishment* suggest he is beset by Faro's natural law: even his whimsical, almost absurd, approach to suicide expresses an urge for autonomy that defies totalising ethical categorisation. In this he is paralleled by Stavrogin and Smerdyakov, both of whom die in their respective novels without expressing remorse for the crimes they committed. Stavrogin kills himself in exasperation over how 'shallow and listless' (*Demons* 676) he finds the world, whilst Smerdyakov's final act is to mock Ivan Karamazov for allowing conscience to plague his pride (*BK* 633). Most notable of all is Pyotr Verkhovensky, who ends *Demons* free of legal retribution and seemingly unimpeded by a guilty conscience for the death and misfortune he (directly or indirectly) causes. Pyotr is arguably the Dostoevskian character closest to the theological concept of 'evil' in that his actions stem from 'the motive to do something horrendously wrong, causing immense suffering.'[4] Yet the causal arc from liberalism to radical nihilism undermines the idea of a metaphysical or theological evil in *Demons*: Pyotr is portrayed as the ideological consequence of the liberalism of his father's generation. Metaphysical evil as such cannot have a secular, ideological cause. In this respect, Pyotr epitomises the way Dostoevsky's novels challenge the totality of a natural law of conscience or universal moral obligation.

Bakhtin, then, found in Dostoevsky's prioritisation of the individual's moment of ethical choice a literary alternative to the finalised, eternal position of the subject in authorial monologism. Consequently, because of the parallel he noted between monologism and the ontotheological absolutes of Kantian and Hegelian moral theory, he found in Dostoevsky precedence for his own ethical investigations, articulated in the opening to *Philosophy of the Act*, into the 'fundamental split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it' (*PTA* 2). The dawn of the post-Nietzschean world, writes Erdinast-Vulcan, effected the 'removal of the ultimate narrator, the unmooring of the subject, and the uncoupling of ethics from metaphysics', encapsulated by Ivan Karamazov's infamous

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[4] Marcus G. Singer, 'The Concept of Evil', *Philosophy*, 2 (2004) 85 – 214 (193).

deduction that 'everything is permitted' (*BK* 69) following the death of God.[5] Bakhtin, writing in the immediate aftermath of WW1, the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War, was in this sense a chronicler of the awakening of the modernist consciousness emblematised (and arguably influenced) by such events. The 'removal of the metaphysical anchor' thereby established an urgent 'need for ethical grounding', to which the crises of Dostoevsky's own works testify.[6]

Though Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson insist that *Problems* should be thought of in the first instance as 'an analysis of that author', and in the second a broad consideration of how polyphony connotes 'the dialogic sense of truth', the emphasis in Bakhtin's study on the immediacy of the act, on the discord between a universally applicable ethical obligation and the distinctive singularity of an individual moment of ethical choice, highlights how the study can too be read as a 'meditation on ethics.'[7] The way such emphasis influenced Bakhtinian ethical theory is further elucidated by a comparison of the overlap between the understanding of the Dostoevskian hero in *Problems* and the 'moral *subiectum* with a determinate structure' (as opposed to the 'purely theoretical *subiectum*' of Kantian ethics) in *Philosophy of the Act* (*PTA* 6).[8] Written between 1919 and 1921, the crux of *Philosophy of the Act* is its critique of 'fatal theoreticism (the abstracting from my unique self)' (*PTA* 27). It recognises that 'within the theoretical world' subject to the mandates of a universally applicable categorical imperative, any kind of '*practical* orientation of my life' becomes 'impossible' (*PTA* 9). In this sense, Bakhtin equates the finalised and rigid conception of the subject within a predetermined ethical framework with fatality itself. Within a world that theoretically abstracts the individual,

> I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact – "as if I did not exist." (*PTA* 9)

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[5] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.46.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) p.265.

[8] In her Editor's Preface, Emerson remarks how all of Bakhtin's 'works in print can in fact be seen as ripped-out segments of one vast philosophical project, begun in 1920, on the nature of language, literature, and moral responsibility.' *PDP* xxxi.

Bakhtin's project, then, was to return a sense of vitality to the ethical subject, to re-establish an

ethical 'ought' with what he called the 'once-occurrent Being-as-event' (*PTA* 18), the actuality of a

subject in a situated, isolated moment in space and time. Abstraction stagnates Being by reducing it

to an entity outside of time. It is only, writes Bakhtin, 'from within my participation that Being can be

understood as an event'. This 'moment of once-occurrent participation does not exist inside the

content seen in abstraction' (*PTA* 18).

The reconceiving of Being as an event rather than an entity therefore connotes a notion of

ongoing participation that aligns with the Dostoevskian emphasis on the immediacy of the act. As

such, its significance is explicated in *Problems* through Bakhtin's stress on the unfinalisability of the

polyphonic character. Concretising the comparison between authorial monologism and

ontotheology, Bakhtin writes that this inner unfinalisability 'seeks to destroy that framework of

other people's words about him that might finalize and deaden him' (*PDP* 59), in the same way that

polyphony destroys the established form of the European novel. Dostoevsky's '*genuine polyphony*'

is, therefore, the result of a structural design which allows for a multiplicity of fully valid voices and

consciousnesses to be combined 'but […] not merged in the unity of the event', a unity expressing

only 'a single authorial consciousness' (*PDP* 6). Rather than the 'usual objectified image of a hero in

the traditional novel', Dostoevsky's 'major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, *not*

only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse' (*PDP* 7).

Problems reiterates the accentuation of vitality in *Philosophy of the Act* by claiming that as 'long as a

person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate

word' (*PDP* 59). In a literary sense, therefore, the final word uttered about a subject would come

from the author, in the same way that the monistic principles of ontotheology abstract the subject

into a theoretical *subiectum*. Dostoevsky's characters are thus, in Erdinast-Vulcan's words, imbued

with 'resistance to narrative determinism' in the same way that the subject's active participation in

once-occurrent being resists philosophical determination. In Dostoevsky's 'abdication of authorial

prerogative', Bakhtin found a parallel with his own denunciation of fatal theoreticism.[9]

II

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is invaluable to the analysis of polyphonic ethics. Like Bakhtin,

Levinas sought a break from an ethical philosophy grounded in absolute universal principles. In a

1981 interview with Phillipe Nemo, Levinas critiques the 'history of philosophy' as

> an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. (*EI* 75)

His own philosophical position can hence be aligned with Bakhtin's critique of the fatal theoreticism

of consciousness everywhere or the absolute I. Both Bakhtin and Levinas sought to reconceive of

ethics away from the totalising impulse of absolute mandates, a quest given greater magnitude

considering that both were directly affected by 20th-century totalitarian disasters.[10] And for both,

Dostoevsky was an acknowledged influence over these reconceived ethics.

Although Levinas did not devote a specific study to Dostoevsky comparable with *Problems*,

he begins the interview with Nemo by listing 'the Russian classics – Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol,

Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy' as a possible if obscure transition between his readings of 'the

Bible and the philosophers' such as Plato and Kant.[11] Later in the interview, Levinas twice repeats

variations of the formula borrowed from *The Brothers Karamazov*: '*We are all guilty of all and for all*

men before all, and I more than others' (*EI* 98, cf. 101). The line, first uttered by the Elder Zosima's

brother Markel, and then variously repeated by Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov, indeed became a

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[9] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.124/126.

[10] Though the impact of the Nazism on Levinas and Stalinism on Bakhtin will be mentioned referentially in Chapter III of this thesis, it would take an independent study to do justice to the convergence of Bakhtin's and Levinas' ethical theories as responses to totalitarianism. As far as I am aware, at the time of writing no such study exists in English. For studies that treat their subjects separately, see R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), and the biographical criticism of Katerina Clark & Michael Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin* (London: Belknap Press, 1984).

[11] Dostoevsky is also named twelve times in the interviews collected by Jill Robbins under the title *Is It Righteous To Be?*, according to Robbins's index (*RTB* 303).

kind of motif for Levinas's ethics, quoted not only in his major text *Otherwise Than Being* (*OTB* 146) but, according to the Levinas scholar Jill Robbins, 'nearly a dozen times in Levinas's works'.[12]

Responding to the totalising gesture of Enlightenment Reason and/or providence, and influenced in this response by Dostoevsky, Bakhtin and Levinas both sought to oppose a branch of philosophy that theorised alterity, transfiguring that which was other into a categorisation of similarity or sameness. They both principally opposed the reduction of unique experience (i.e., the variform multiplicity of perspectives across time and space) to a universally applicable theorisation of consciousness, an 'absolute I' standing for all individuals regardless of a necessarily circumstantial difference. Departing from a shared position that was, in Michael Gardiner's words, 'intensely suspicious of reductive and totalising theories', they instead placed an 'essentially phenomenological stress on the centrality of the everyday life-world'.[13]

Gardiner's essay is one of several studies that mark Bakhtin's and Levinas's analogous response to totalisation as the starting point for a comparison of their ethical philosophy. David Patterson highlights how for both a generalised 'moral imperative' is insufficiently equipped to address the particularities of an individual's unique encounter with another: both, he claims, are driven by the question '[w]hat does my significance, my meaning, have to do with […] the life of the word that unfolds in the dialogical relation to the other?'[14] Jeffrey Nealon too notes that Bakhtin and

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[12] Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999) p.147.

[13] Michael Gardiner, 'Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective', *Theory, Culture and Society* 13.2 (1996) 121-43 (122). Gardiner rightly notes that Bakhtin and Levinas approached such 'totalising theories' from a phenomenological standpoint but fails to elaborate upon how both Bakhtin and Levinas too accused phenomenological thinkers of a lack of consideration for the ethical. *Philosophy of the Act*'s English translator, Vadim Liapunov, notes how 'Bakhtin's key concepts ("event," "event-ness," "a performed action": *postupok*) are similar […] to Husserl's *Erlebnis*'. Such key concepts differ, however, 'in that they distinctly accentuate the problem of responsibility, which does not appear in this form in Husserl's thought' (*PTA* 83, fn. 16). From this, Liapunov states that 'Dostoevsky's *oeuvre* was not only an object, but also a source' for Bakhtin's thought. Liapunov hereby anticipates the central argument of this chapter: the polyphonic articulation of phenomenological 'event-ness' offers a conception of ethics that does not succumb to the totalising reduction of alterity to knowledge.

Similarly, the thought of Husserl and (particularly) Heidegger permeate Levinas's work: Colin Davis's introduction to Levinas claims that 'despite fundamental divergences from Husserl and Heidegger, [Levinas] has remained faithful to the phenomenological method'. Accordingly, Davis labels Levinas's thought as a type of 'post-phenomenological ethics', i.e., as a desire to amend phenomenology's ethical shortcomings. Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) p.7, 8. In this respect, Heidegger's controversial involvement with Nazism holds increased significance ('Heidegger has never been exculpated in my eyes from his participation in National-Socialism' – *EI* 41).

[14] David Patterson, 'Bakhtin and Levinas: Signification, Responsibility, Spirit' in *Literature and Spirit: Essays on Bakhtin and His Contemporaries* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988) pp.98-127 (p.98).

Levinas have in common a 'mutual insistence on the subject's irreducible engagement with otherness', deploying the 'notion of unassimilable excess as a bulwark against the reification of otherness that they […] read in the Hegelian dialectic.'[15] Jeffrey Murray even goes as far as to claim, when reading *Philosophy of the Act*, that 'the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas picks up where Bakhtin's text ends.'[16] Despite a lack of scholarship interrogating the significance of Dostoevsky to the correspondence between Bakhtin and Levinas, the profusion of scholarly comparisons of the two emphasises the strength of their philosophical convergence prior to any discussion of their inevitable divergence.[17]

Erdinast-Vulcan also recognises the equatable ethical theories of Bakhtin and Levinas. Her 2013 study, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, focuses primarily on Bakhtin, yet half of it is devoted to a comparative reading of Bakhtin and three other 'metaphysically disinherited' thinkers, by which she means early 20th-century philosophers also contending with the urgent need for ethical grounding following the post-Nietzschean removal of the metaphysical anchor.[18] Levinas is one of these thinkers, and her chapter on Levinas developed from a 2008 essay which too notes how the 'first point of convergence in the parallel itineraries of these two philosophers is a sense of disenchantment with traditional Western Philosophy'.[19] She likewise recognises that tradition as indissociable from a form of 'theorizing which identifies true knowledge with abstraction, generalization and systematization, as it strives to assimilate the other to the Same.' Moreover, she contrasts such 'formal Kantian ethics' to 'the lived, concrete experience of ethical choice and action' that Bakhtin's and Levinas's 'phenomenological ethics' sought to explore.[20] Both thinkers, she writes

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[15] Jeffrey T. Nealon, 'The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas', *College English* 59.2 (1997) 129-148 (133).

[16] Jeffrey W. Murray, 'Bakhtinian answerability and Levinasian responsibility: Forging a fuller dialogical communicative ethics', *Southern Journal of Communication* 65.2-3 (2000) 133-150 (136).

[17] Some such divergences will be discussed in the next chapter.

[18] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.105. The idea of metaphysical disinheritance prompts a sense of 'metaphysical homesickness' amongst this 'exilic constellation' (p.105). The trope of metaphysical homesickness will be shown to be crucial to my reading of contemporary Dostoevskian ethics over the course of the next few chapters. The other two members of the exilic constellation are Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson.

[19] Erdinast-Vulcan, 'Between the face and the voice: Bakhtin meets Levinas', *Continental Philosophy Review* 41.1 (2008) 43-58 (43).

[20] Ibid., 43-44.

'set out on a quest to recover ethics in the absence or against the silence of God; both can no longer find consolation in the metaphysics of presence and totality, or resort to the legacy of the absolute.'[21]

Erdinast-Vulcan's use of 'no longer' is evocative in this regard of Vonnegut's 'not enough any more'. Her essay and later monograph are perhaps the comparisons of Bakhtin and Levinas that most succinctly frame the analogous ethical theories of the two thinkers in terms of the historical transition enacted through the modernist period, and her recognition of Dostoevsky's influence over both accords with her understanding of Dostoevsky's distinct historical position on the threshold of the pre-modernist and modernist eras. The conception of subjectivity grounded in and subject to the totalising gesture of 'consciousness in general' or an 'absolute I' requires, in words Erdinast-Vulcan borrows from Bakhtin's essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', a 'deep trust in the highest level of authority […] trust in the fact that I do not answer in an axiological void.'[22] Dostoevskian characters, as evidenced by the overwhelming emphasis on the immediacy of the act faced by Raskolnikov amongst others, do in fact 'reel on the verge of that "axiological void"'; such 'deep trust is no longer easily available to Dostoevsky'.[23] Dostoevsky attempted to reflect in his work his historically contingent awareness of the 'collapse' of 'metaphysical scaffolding'.[24] At a plot level, this generated the crises of his post-Siberian works and their consequent gesture towards a potential spiritual redemption exhibited by the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment* and the conversion of Stepan Verkhovensky, and by the ethical significance of Sonya Marmeladov, Prince Myshkin, Makar Dolgoruky, the Elder Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov. Such is the basis for the Orthodox readings of Dostoevskian ethics. Yet at a formal level, as I have been arguing, this awareness produced the renunciation of authorial authority and its concomitant creation of a plurality of independent voices and consciousnesses, each free to rebel against an externally uttered finalising word.

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[21] Ibid., 44.
[22] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.35. Cf. *AA* 206.
[23] Ibid., p.35.
[24] Ibid., p.36.

<u>III</u>

Having established the corresponding foundational premises of Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics, and their shared debt to Dostoevsky, I can now turn my attention to the etymological stress on the role of 'voices' within the poly-phonic work. As the titles to Nealon's, Murray's and Erdinast-Vulcan's essays demonstrate, the importance of the voice in both Bakhtin and Levinas marks their wider analogous shift from ontotheological ethics to an ethics based in discourse or dialogue. Bakhtin indeed writes that the Dostoevskian hero is 'not an objectified image but an autonomous discourse, pure voice; we do not see him, we hear him' (*PDP* 53). Key in assessing the ethics of polyphony, therefore, is the way dialogic ethics differentiate from the universalising tendencies of the philosophical tradition critiqued by Bakhtin and Levinas. This tradition, as mentioned in the Introduction, was premised on a universally accessible truth. It was therefore correlated with the Enlightenment notions of progress, assimilating the very accumulation of knowledge with the advancement towards a 'true' ethics. The various geographic and economic reorientations that, according to Jameson, characterised modernism subsequently connoted a gap in knowledge, a sense of the unknowable and the unattainable.

In this respect, an understanding of ethics based in dialogue, as opposed to the unity of an absolute universal truth, uncovers the fundamental duality of language: language is both a means to cognition and a means to communication. And if language's cognitive function is categorised alongside the universal, the absolute and, in the post-Nietzschean era, the archaic, then the discursive function emerges as the site of the ethical. The particular way dialogue exposes the subject to an alterity that cannot be comprehended, the unanticipatable alterity of the voice of the Other, therefore connotes the ethical significance of Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial prerogative allowing for the many-voiced structure of his novels. This line of thinking will dominate the thesis hence. Beginning by contrasting Levinas's first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, with the Grand Inquisitor section of *The Brothers Karamazov*, I will demarcate the way Bakhtin and Levinas

reconceive of ethics as initiated by the voice of the Other. By doing so, they resituate ethics away from the metaphysics of presence that distinguishes ontotheology, precisely because of the divergence of cognition and discourse: the voice of the Other, being unknowable, is 'absent' from the extent of subjective cognition. Following the post-Nietzschean removal of a metaphysical anchor, the subject is thereby constituted by its response or answer to another's voice. Chapter 1 will therefore close by assessing how response and answer manifest into responsibility and answerability in Levinas and Bakhtin respectively, the reason for Levinas's adoption of Zosima's responsibility 'more than others'. This will then set up the way I establish Dostoevskian polyphony as the site of the ethical in Chapter 2.

The language of vitality and mortality that Levinas uses to introduce *Totality and Infinity* is unsurprisingly reminiscent of the noted sections of *Philosophy of the Act*, given their analogous philosophical starting points and the fact that both writers were responding to cataclysmic events of the 20th century.[25] Levinas's preface starts with a consideration of 'the permanent possibility of war' as a necessary consequence of 'the mind's openness upon the true' (*TI* 21), referring specifically to the singular, universal 'truth' of Western philosophy originating in Platonic forms. Levinas uses conflict terminology to describe 'the mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is no escape' for an individual situated at a specific moment in time and place; like Bakhtin, Levinas understands this 'violence' as 'not consist[ing] so much in injuring and annihilating persons as interrupting their continuity, making them play roles [...] that will destroy every possibility for action' (*TI* 21). The phenomenological method of *Totality and Infinity* advances the singularity of the human 'as the measure of all things', a singularity 'affirmed in the sensing of sensation' (*TI* 59) that can only occur in the once-occurrent moment of Being. In concord with Bakhtin, Levinas claims that

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[25] In the case of *Philosophy of the Act* (estimated to have been written between 1919 and 1921), 'all the hardships and exhilaration created by the Revolution's after-effects' (Michael Holquist's 'Introduction' to *PTA* viii). Meanwhile, the critique of the Holocaust and WWII is an implicit component of *Totality and Infinity*, occasionally becoming explicit, such as in the footnoted condemnation of the 'racist philosophy' of Kurt Schilling (*TI* 120, fn.4). Cf. Robert Bernasconi, 'Levinas and the Struggle for Existence' in Eric Sean Nelson *et al.* (eds.), *Addressing Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005) pp.170-184 (pp.170-171).

'the knowing of an impersonal reason […] integrates the particularities of the individuals in becoming their idea or in totalizing them by history' (*TI* 59). Impersonal reason, in this sense, subjects the necessary 'multiplicity of sentients […] to a universal law, producing unity' (*TI* 59-60). It is a unity of *being* 'radically opposed' to the 'singularity of sensation' (i.e., the necessarily idiosyncratic sensation of each member of a multiplicity of sentients) inherent in Levinas's 'notion of becoming'. It is a notion that, like Bakhtinian unfinalizability, expresses 'resistance to every integration' (*TI* 60). The deadening effect of 'finalization' in a Bakhtinian sense is 'the visage of being that shows itself in war' and is 'fixed in the concept of the totality, which dominates Western philosophy' (*TI* 21).

Levinas's use of conflict vocabulary to preface *Totality and Infinity* becomes increasingly pertinent upon consideration of Dostoevsky's influence. The line from *The Brothers Karamazov* he repeatedly cites, Markel's 'I more than others', comes in the middle of the novel's sixth book, titled 'The Russian Monk', which is framed as a collection of hagiographic biographical details and teachings of the Elder Zosima, written some time after the Elder's death by Alyosha Karamazov. The Christocentric sentiment of being 'guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all' (*BK* 289) is fundamental to the message of 'The Russian Monk'. And, according to Dostoevsky's letters to the editor of *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is a message that stands as 'the refutation' of 'the uttermost blasphemy and the seed of the idea of destruction in our time in Russia' portrayed in the preceding book.[26] Book V, 'Pro and Contra', which contains both Ivan Karamazov's 'Rebellion' against theodicy for the suffering of innocent children, and the legend of 'The Grand Inquisitor', is designed as the ideological antagonist of Book VI.

The visage of being that finalises and deadens a multiplicity of sentients is articulated by the Grand Inquisitor's plans for 'the universal happiness of mankind' (*BK* 257). Dostoevsky presaged both Levinas's and Bakhtin's understanding of 'the need for universal union' (*BK* 257) as the reduction of the individual, in its once-occurrent moment of becoming, to a component of an

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[26] Dostoevsky's letter is quoted in Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.788.

impersonal unicity. The Inquisitor offers a paradoxical 'freedom' for humankind that is contingent

upon each individual's relinquishing of freedom (reiterating the absurdity of Shigalyovism in

Demons, 402): all must 'resign their freedom to us and submit to us' (*BK* 258) in order to partake of a

utopian universal happiness, which becomes achievable only *in articulo mortis*. Individuals thus

become prototypes for a pre-existing ideal of subjectivity, what Levinas variously terms 'plastic

forms' (*TI* 22) or 'plastic image' (*TI* 51). The Inquisitor offers the subsuming of a plurality of

consciousnesses to an 'absolute I'. Yet he simultaneously recognises the individual's desire for

autonomy. The Inquisitor knows, along with Levinas, that the 'universal identity in which the

heterogeneous can be embraced has the ossature of a subject, of the first person. Universal thought

is an 'I think'' (*TI* 36). And it is the confrontation of these two impulses that the ideology of

totalisation and war emerges: in a gesture that anticipates Levinas's use of conflict terminology, the

Inquisitor claims that mankind's yearning to both retain autonomy and 'arrange things so that they

must be universal' produces 'conquerors, Tamerlanes and Genghis Khans' (*BK* 257). Thus, by

appropriating a line from 'The Russian Monk' to represent an ethical philosophy departing from the

prioritisation of an absolute truth, Levinas positions the Grand Inquisitor as the inevitable

consequence of the philosophical concept of the totality, the ultimate fatality of fatal theoreticism.

For Levinas, whose family in Lithuania suffered greatly at the hands of the SS, this consequence had

personal ramifications.

IV

In structuring 'The Russian Monk' as a counterweight to 'Pro and Contra', Dostoevsky affirms that

the ideological polarities represented by the 'Pro' and the 'Contra' of Book V are typified by Ivan

Karamazov, between his compassion for the suffering of innocents and his guilt for betraying his

faith in Christ in return for the 'universal happiness' offered by the Grand Inquisitor. It places Ivan at

the 'moment of *crisis*' typical of the Dostoevskian polyphonic character: he is 'a person *on the*

threshold […], at an unfinalizable – and *unpredeterminable* – turning point for his soul' (*PDP* 61).

Dostoevsky distinguishes Ivan's sincerity in this respect from the utopian socialist thinkers of mid-nineteenth-century Russia, thinkers who had been his long-time ideological targets. Such thinkers, Dostoevsky writes (in terms that adumbrate the Levinasian/Bakhtinian response to totalitarianism), 'do not admit that their idol consists of violence to man's conscience and the levelling of mankind to a herd of cattle.' The specific ambition of 'The Russian Monk', therefore, is a refutation of the totalising impulse of absolutism, and it is in such terms that Levinas appropriates Markel's line. Dostoevsky envisioned that Book VI would 'force people to recognize that a pure, ideal Christian is not an abstract matter but one graphically real, and that Christianity is the only refuge of the Russian land from its evils.'[27]

Dostoevsky's appeal for the renewal of Christian faith accords with his historical position in the midst of the waning of a Christian tradition that prefigured (or ran parallel with) the awakening of a modernist consciousness. Yet if Levinas's use of a line from 'The Russian Monk' likewise called for a revival of religion it would risk being perceived, from the perspective of a secularised, post-Nietzschean society, as advocating an ethical ideal not wholly indistinct from the absolutism grotesquely parodied by the Grand Inquisitor. Nevertheless, the possibility of the graphic reality of ethical transcendence is shared as much by Levinas as by Dostoevsky. Levinasian ethics instead offer a reconceptualisation of divine transcendence that allow for the transcendent, that which surpasses human experience, to be considered in secular terms.[28]

The title of Levinas's first major work juxtaposes the totalising impulse of Western philosophy with 'the idea of the Infinite' (*TI* 25) that Levinas attributes to Descartes's Third Meditation. For Descartes, the infinite serves as the evidentiary foundation for the actuality of God's existence: it can be equated with 'the idea of God', that which (in opposition to material realities)

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[27] Quoted in Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.792.
[28] Part II of my thesis will explore the correspondence between secular ethics and theological terminology in more detail as a way of foretelling the resurgence of questions of faith in the contemporary works, especially in *Infinite Jest*.

forces the individual 'to consider whether there is anything that could not have come from me'.[29]

Descartes's premise is that, if the *cogito* is the first principle of philosophical certainty (the infamous

'I think therefore I am' first proposed in *Discourse on Method*), and if the *cogito* is in itself contingent

on the substantiality of the thinking subject, then the idea of substance can theoretically originate in

the subject.[30] However by such reasoning the idea of insubstantiality, of God as an infinite

substance, cannot originate in the subject, as evidenced by the fact that an individual cannot

conceive of 'the infinite' but can only postulate it as a concept. For Descartes, therefore, 'God exists;

for, although the idea of substance is in me, for the very reason that I am substance, I would not,

nevertheless, have the idea of an infinite substance, since I am a finite being.' Accordingly, the idea

of the infinite must have been 'put into me by some substance which was truly infinite.'[31]

In order to understand Levinas's reconceptualisation of the Cartesian infinite, it is useful to

consider how Erdinast-Vulcan identifies the Cartesian paradigm of subjectivity as integral to 'the

foundations of philosophical modernity' when laying out the theoretical tradition Bakhtinian ethics

responded to.[32] More so than Kant or Hegel (or even Plato), Erdinast-Vulcan writes, it was the *cogito*

that presented the visage of being that, through 'abstract theorizing, strict adherence to formal

logic, and claims to universal validity', would 'dominate the philosophical scene […] well into the

twentieth century.'[33] Her claim rests on the 'accordingly vast' difference between the Cartesian

subject and the 'embodied, concrete, singular, and inherently heterogenous being, firmly positioned

in his time and place' that constituted the narrative voice of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* (to whom

Descartes was responding).[34] The Cartesian *cogito* overcame the 'inner diversity and inconsistency'

of Montaigne's subject by conflating 'the autobiographical subject' with 'the philosophical

construct', thus 'setting itself up as pure thought, absolute knowledge.'[35] By this account it was

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[29] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method* and *The Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1998) p.123.
[30] Ibid., p.53.
[31] Ibid., p.124.
[32] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.10-11.
[33] Ibid., p.8, 13.
[34] Ibid., p.9. Erdinast-Vulcan's argument is that the competing conceptions of subjectivity offered by Montaigne and Descartes can be uses to metaphorically understand the inherent tension of Bakhtin's architectonics of subjectivity.
[35] Ibid., p.8, 9.

Descartes who first conceived of universal thought as an 'I think': by marking the first foundational

premise as the capacity for thought, he bound the multiplicity of thinking subjects to the singularity

of that premise. In doing so, Descartes directed the Western philosophical enterprise towards the

universal validity of abstract logic, 'to the exclusion of the phenomenal world, sensory experience,

and the constitutive diversity of the human subject.'[36]

The Cartesian proposition of a unified, unproblematic cogito is thus predicated as a forbear

to a Kantian consciousness everywhere or a Hegelian absolute I. And the impulse to extend the

certainty of the first principle, the thinking subject, is itself the primordial totalising gesture. The will

to cognition is the will to totalise. Levinas starts his thesis from the 'metaphysical desire [that] tends

towards *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*' (*TI* 33) that cannot be sated by the act

of cognition. The subject's cognitive relation with the world is described in *Totality and Infinity* as a

'*sojourn*', as a departure that intends to return to itself:

> The *way* of the I against the "other" of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by
> existing here *at home with oneself*. In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless
> autochthonous [...]. It finds in the world a site and a home [...]. In a sense everything is in the site, in
> the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them [...]. Everything is
> here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a
> site, everything is com-prehended. The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very
> alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the *way* of the same. (*TI* 37-38)

To know is to collate the unknown to within the sphere of the known, to reduce the alterity or

otherness of the absolutely unknown to a facet of the 'I-not I' dialectic. The impulse to knowledge is

conceived of as an impulse to extend the domain of the cogito, and the annexing or expropriating

component of com-prehension is equated by Levinas with an 'imperialism of the same' (*TI* 39). Thus,

although Nealon's essay distinguishes between the 'tautological unity of the cogito' that 'turns [...]

inward' and the Hegelian 'Enlightenment subject' that turns '*outward* to [...] the diversity of the

other(s) [...] in order to secure the higher dynamism of an evolving, adventuring appropriation that

can confront and conquer ever-newer forms of otherness', that distinction is elided by Levinas.[37] A

'totality wherein consciousness embraces the world' and 'leaves nothing other outside of itself', an

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[36] Ibid., p.12.
[37] Nealon, 'The Ethics of Dialogue', 130.

apt Levinasian description of the Cartesian paradigm, is too aligned by Levinas with the tendency

towards 'absolute thought' that culminates 'in the philosophy of Hegel' (*EI* 75-76). The totalising

gestures of Kant or Hegel are understood as consequences of the unicity of the subject in Descartes.

The 'absolute I' is a logical consequence of 'cogito ergo sum'.

V

The infinite, then, is precisely that which breaches the domain of the cogito, precisely that which

resists the accumulative disposition of cognition. A consideration of the ethical potential of the

infinite is the path Levinas lays out in his philosophy to depart from the totalising impulse of

absolutism that, as can be inferred from both his and Bakhtin's philosophical positions, informed the

totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

      In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas correlates the totalising impulse of absolutism with the

ontological branch of philosophy, understanding the inclination to cognise being and beings as

consisting of 'neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it' (*TI* 45-46). Ontological

cognition is the archetypal rendering of being from becoming, the conversion of the unfinalisable

into a finalised, plastic image. This is the Levinasian definition of ontological freedom: 'thematization

and conceptualization' that play out as the 'suppression or possession of the other' in order to

'ensure the autarchy of an I' (*TI* 46). Counterposing this 'reduction of the other to the same' (*TI* 46),

however, is the insatiability of metaphysical desire, consistently running up against that which

cannot be comprehended (as evidenced by the notion of the infinite). If cognition is 'the freedom

that is the identification of the same' (*TI* 42), then the insatiability of metaphysical desire necessarily

'calls into question the exercise of the same' (*TI* 43), calls into question the freedom to totalise. This

questioning therefore 'cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same'. It must 'be brought

about by the other' (*TI* 43).

The infinite thus stands as an emblem for 'the radical alterity of the other' (*TI* 35-36). This 'calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other' is how Levinas defines the ethical: the 'strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics' (*TI* 43).[38] The ethical is realised by 'a non-allergic relation with alterity' (*TI* 47). Ontology, Levinas writes, is in the last instance 'impossible' because 'the comprehension of Being in general cannot *dominate* [i.e., make a home of] the relationship with the Other' (*TI* 47). The Other, in and of itself, exceeds the capacity for cognition. Analogous to the infinite, the Other can only be understood conceptually. And it is the Other's capacity to exceed cognition that Levinas presents as the notion of the 'face' (*visage* in the French). The 'face' is a confrontation between the freely cognising subject and an alterity that cannot be reduced to a facet of the same, a confrontation that questions the freedom to cognise. It is the 'way the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*' (*TI* 50). The confrontation with the face of the Other is the definitive moment of ethical encounter, because it 'at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me' (*TI* 51).

Employing the analogy of the face allows Levinas to frame the disruption of cognition effected by the approach of the Other in terms of expression. The face '*expresses itself*' (*TI* 51). It does so by exceeding its idea in the cognition of the subject that encounters it: its expression is 'καθ' αὐτό' (*TI* 51).[39] Manifestation καθ' αὐτό consists, for Levinas, 'in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard' (*TI* 65). Proposing the face as expression καθ' αὐτό allows Levinas to utilise another analogy: the visual dynamic of comprehension against the auditory nature of the ethical moment. Levinas notes the integration between the visual and the tactile: vision 'moves into grasp. Vision opens up a perspective […] invites the hand to

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[38] Lingis notes that his translation of *Totality and Infinity* opts for a capitalised 'Other' when referring to 'autrui' in Levinas's original French text (as opposed to 'other' for 'autre'). This, writes Lingis, 'regrettably sacrifice[s] the possibility of repeating the author's use of capital or small letters with both these terms in the French text' (*TI* 24, asterisk). Following the implication of this note, I here try to refer to 'Other' as that which is irreducible in its alterity, as opposed to the otherness that is within the subject's capacity for totalisation. This is reinforced by Levinas's line 'L'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui', which Lingis translates as 'the absolutely other is the Other' (*TI* 39).

[39] καθ' αὐτό is an Aristotelian term referring to a quality or essence that originates within a being itself, rather than being applied to said being externally.

movement and contact'. As such, vision 'opens nothing that, beyond the same, would be absolutely

other, that is, in itself' (*TI* 191). Something seen is revealed only in the consciousness of the seer. As

seen, it is passive and does not express itself. Expression is being telling itself. It is an announcement,

an act of announcing. It is the singular potential of unfinalised being. The finalisation of being is

comprehension in knowledge. To know objectively is

> to know the historical, the *fact*, the *already happened* […]. The historical is not defined by the past; both the historical and the past are defined as themes of which one can speak. They are thematized precisely because they no longer speak. (*TI* 65)

This is the central tenet of Levinas's ethical position, standing in opposition to totalisation within

absolute theoretical knowledge. The breach of the cognitive totality, the revelation of the infinite in

secular terms, is achieved by, in and through the voice of the other. The face that expresses is 'a

living presence […]. The face speaks' (*TI* 66). Its manifestation 'is already discourse […]. To present

oneself by signifying is to speak' (*TI* 66). It is only through the voice of the other that the subject is

confronted with the absolutely Other. The inability to preconceive the expression of the face

breaches the capacity for totalisation through cognition. It is only 'the interlocutor' that 'presents

itself as independent of every subjective movement'. The interlocutor's '*way* consists in starting

from himself, foreign and yet presenting himself to me.' (*TI* 67). As such, the 'primordial sphere' (i.e.,

the totality of cognition, the identifications of the same) 'turns to the absolutely other only on call

from the Other' (*TI* 67).

Language is hereby recognised in its twofold nature by Levinas. On the one hand, language

'conditions the functioning of rational thought' (*TI* 204). Yet it is not 'enacted within a

consciousness': language 'comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting

it in question' (*TI* 204). It implies a multiplicity of sentients, so its 'ethical condition […] function[s]

prior to all disclosure of being' (*TI* 200). Speech in this prior sense founds 'the generality of concepts

by laying 'the foundations for a possession in common.' To speak 'is to make the world common, to

create common places' (*TI* 76).

The discursive aspect of language is likewise essential to Bakhtinian thought. It forms the line of enquiry for his later writings of dialogism and heteroglossia, particularly in the essays of *The Dialogic Imagination*. Its ethical importance, however, is hinted at in *Philosophy of the Act.* Bakhtin writes that, historically, 'language grew up in the service of participative thinking and performed acts', and so 'language is much more adapted to giving utterance precisely to that truth' of the once-occurrent moment of being than to 'the abstract moment of the logical in its purity' (*PTA* 31). The truth of the event of being 'cannot be transcribed in theoretical terms' without losing 'the very sense of its being an event' (*PTA* 30-31). The 'entire fullness of the word' is therefore composed not only of 'its content/sense aspect (the word as concept)' but also in its 'palpable-expressive' and 'emotional-volitional' aspects (*PTA* 31). For Bakhtin, as for Levinas, language as cognition presupposes its discursive function. It initially serves what he defines as the 'common moments' of once-occurrent Being as an event, moments 'that moral philosophy has to describe' outside of an 'abstract scheme'. These moments are 'I-for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other'. Bakhtin stresses that all 'spatial-temporal values and all sense-content values are […] concentrated around these central emotional-volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other' (*PTA* 54).

The respective ethical positions of Bakhtin and Levinas are analogous in their focus on the discursive potential of language to disrupt the unicity of being which manifests as the totalising effects of absolutism. The inclination to knowledge within the Cartesian cogito, standing for a universally applicable subjectivity that reached its apotheosis as the Hegelian 'absolute I', seeks to supress the very alterity that founds cognition. The political implications of this inclination were evidenced by the suppression of otherness within totalitarianism. A post-Nietzschean, secularised ethics has, as its starting point, the breach of cognition enacted by the voice of the other.

VI

Dostoevsky's influence over the analogies between Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics can be understood as the abdication of authorial jurisdiction and the artistic commitment to 'the fully and equally valid voices of other characters' (*PDP* 7) inherent in the polyphonic novel. Equating philosophical idealism with artistic monologism establishes the 'many-voiced' composition of polyphony as paradigmatic for the moment of the ethical in both Bakhtin and Levinas. It is in Dostoevsky's maintenance of a multiplicity of sentients that Bakhtin and Levinas found a model for dialogic ethics, set up in opposition to the absolutist suppression of alterity.

Levinas's predilection for a particular teaching of the Elder Zosima must therefore be reconsidered in the light of the Levinasian/Bakhtinian prioritisation of dialogic ethics, that is, of the ethical potential of the voice of the other to breach the permanence of the same maintained in comprehension. One of the more stringent occurrences of the distinction between universalising ethical prescriptions and the actuality of a dialogic relation comes during Zosima's advisement of Madame Khokhlakov in the chapter 'A Lady of Little Faith'. Khokhlakov seeks guidance from Zosima precisely on account of her loss of faith in religious ordinance: she claims belief in God but not in the possibility of an afterlife. Zosima's counsel, however, is for her to abandon the need for proof and dedicate herself instead to an 'active love' (*BK* 56) for others. Khokhlakov then relates a fantasy that demarcates the boundary between a theoretical love for others, understood here as the adherence to ethical principles, and the active love of intersubjective relations in which those principles do not provide an alibi for Khokhlakov's once-occurrent moment in Being. Within her fantasy, she claims to 'love mankind so much that […] I sometimes dream of giving up all, all I have […] to become a sister of mercy' (*BK* 56). However, the fantasy is only sustained by the promise of 'a return of love for my love.' The possibility of 'ingratitude' on behalf of those she tends to disrupts the ideality of Christian love she envisions fulfilling. As 'often happens with people who are in pain', the irritated shouts and 'rude demands' of a sick man would breach the economy of 'work' and 'pay' established within Khokhlakov's theoretical ethics, reconfigured as benevolent care in exchange for 'praise and a return of love for my love' (*BK* 57).

Zosima compares her to a doctor from his past that held a similar distinction between a 'love' for 'mankind in general' and a 'hate' for 'people individually' (*BK* 57). Again, it is the actualities of lived experience that intrude upon the doctor's theoretical ardency: even 'the best of man' might take 'too long eating his dinner' or keep 'blowing his nose' from a cold. Significantly, though, the doctor envisages the way 'people in particular' rupture his love for an idealised humanity as the oppression of his self-esteem and the restriction of his freedom (*BK* 57). His terminology anticipates the Levinasian understanding of ontological freedom as comprehension. The breach of that freedom is achieved via his participation in the common moments of once-occurrent being, moments contingent upon dialogic relations. The teaching of active love, therefore, reveals Zosima to be a proponent of the kind of non-theoretical, non-prescriptive ethics characteristic of Bakhtinian/Levinasian theory. That Zosima offers Khokhlakov his understanding of active love as an alternative to an unwavering faith in divine ordinance accentuates Dostoevsky's anticipation of the awakening of the modernist consciousness, as well as how Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethics arose in response to the secularisation of a post-Nietzschean world. Active love proposes an embrace of the breach of cognition, a love that exceeds the boundaries of knowledge and categorisation. It is an active love for the actuality of unfinalised being, as opposed to the finalised plastic image of subjectivity predicated by a universally applicable ethical theory. It accords with the embrace of fully valid voices made manifest by the polyphonic novel, and thus accords with the Levinasian/Bakhtinian re-conception of the ethical moment. The polyphonic precedence for a multiplicity of voices is the ethical in this sense.

Zosima's 'active love', postulated as a secularised, post-Nietzschean ethical transcendence enacted by the voice of the other, can thus be interpreted in terms of the correlation in Levinas between 'response' and 'responsibility', and its correspondence with Bakhtinian 'answerability'. Though by no means identical, both responsibility and answerability give emphasis to dialogic

interactivity as the inauguration of the ethical.[40] In *Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin makes

answerability a constituent part of the once-occurrent moment of Being; 'my own individually

answerable act or deed' is how Bakhtin terms '[e]very thought of mine, along with its content'

understood as 'an act or deed that I perform' (*PTA* 3). The 'unity of an answerable consciousness' is

'the fact of an actual acknowledgement of one's own participation in unitary Being-as-event' (*PTA*

40). Bakhtinian answerability transpires within the immediacy of the act; it is opposed to the 'alibi in

Being' that sustains the theoretical subjectivity conforming to abstract ethical principles.

Answerability is inherent within the central emotional-volitional moments that make up the unity of

dialogic being.[41]

The ethical transcendence of the subject accomplished by the voice of the Other is

correspondingly presented in *Totality and Infinity* as the primordial instance of response to the

speaking face. Levinas distinguishes the technicalities of conversation, which necessarily involves the

comprehension (i.e., grasping) of language, from the singular occasion in which the approach of the

face of the Other breaches the subject's totalising cognition: 'The presentation of the face,

expression, […] calls to me above and beyond the given that speech already puts in common among

us' (*TI* 212). The instance of breaching confronts the subject with the '*existing of this being*'; such

confrontation 'is effectuated in the non-postponable urgency with which he requires a response' (*TI*

212). The other, the being that 'expresses itself', necessarily 'imposes itself, but does so precisely by

appealing to me […] without my being able to be deaf to that appeal' (*TI* 200). Presupposing

discursive cognition is 'the epiphany that occurs as a face opens' (*TI* 201); the approach of the Other

cannot be evaded 'by silence' because the refusal to acknowledge is nevertheless an

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[40] Nealon, who likewise accentuates the divergence between Levinasian responsibility and Bakhtinian answerability, nevertheless begins his essay by recounting their 'similar sentiment'. He reads 'ethics' in Bakhtin and Levinas as the 'response to the concrete other', whether it be 'answerability or responsibility'. Nealon, 'The Ethics of Dialogue', 134. The way in which the divergence between answerability and responsibility is understood in critical discourse on Bakhtin and Levinas will be discussed in the next chapter.

[41] Liapunov notes that he chooses to translate Bakhtin's Russian term 'ответственность' as 'answerability' instead of 'responsibility' to foreground the root sense ('ответ': 'an answer' / 'отвечать': 'to answer') of the term. The 'essential point', writes Liapunov, 'is to bring out that "responsibility" involves the performance of an existential dialogue' (*PTA* 80, fn. 9). Answerability and Levinasian responsibility, therefore, concur on this essential point.

acknowledgement. The voice of the Other commands a response which is presupposed by all response. 'The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation'; this primordial discourse 'obliges the entering into discourse' (*TI* 201). The obligation to respond binds the subject to the Other, and that binding can only be an embrace of the alterity of the Other (posited as a responsibility for the Other), transcending cognition.

This obligation to respond is the active love preached by Zosima, overcoming the fantasy of a theoretical commerce of altruism and gratitude. It infers a 'bond between expression and responsibility' contingent upon the primordial 'function of language prior to all disclosure of being in its cold splendour': the 'essence of language, for Levinas (and Bakhtin), is its 'ethical condition' (*TI* 200). The voice of another always already commands the subject to respond, makes it subject to response. It is the first instance of subjectivity: Levinas asserts from the outset that *Totality and Infinity* 'will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other' (*TI* 27). Both Bakhtin and Levinas exchange the certainty of the subject that founds Descartes' first principle for a subject that, in its once-occurrence in Being, is embedded within a multiplicity of sentients.[42] It is this embeddedness that founds the Levinasian/Bakhtinian conception of subjectivity. The subject is first and foremost subject to the call of the Other: Bakhtin and Levinas use 'almost the same words' to describe the 'appearance of a relation of alterity at the very moment in which the consciousness of self is achieved.'[43] The very capacity for answer and response, which is first and foremost the affirmation of the passive receptivity of the responder, is the first initiation into the language that inaugurates subjectivity and cognition.[44]

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[42] It is worth noting, as Emerson does in her translation of *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the 'crucial' importance of 'событие' ('event', as in 'the event of being') in Bakhtin's oeuvre. At its root, со-бытие can be literally rendered as 'co-being': the event of being, it can be inferred, is one that 'can occur only among interacting consciousnesses; there can be no isolated or solipsistic events' (*PDP* 6, fn. a).

[43] Augusto Ponzio, 'The Relation of Alterity in Bachtin, Blanchot, Lévinas', *Russian Literature* 41.3 (1997) 315-331 (321).

[44] Potentially significant to this conception of subjectivity, in opposition to the primacy of the Cartesian cogito, is simply the way Russians conventionally introduce themselves: 'меня зовут', though commonly translated as 'my name is', reads literally as 'they call me'. Hence there is an emphasis in Russian (which Levinas, schooled in Kaunas while it was still part of the Russian Empire, would have understood) on not only the passivity of the subject in the announcement of subjectivity, but also that passivity's recognition of multiple others.

It is on such terms that Bakhtin and Levinas deem the ethical relation between beings, rather than the primacy of ontological Being itself, 'first philosophy' (*TI* 46). In his 1961 notes for a second revision of *Dostoevsky's Poetics* (included as a second appendix in Emerson's translation), Bakhtin's espousal of the way Dostoevsky 'artistically visualized the life of human consciousness' is put forth in distinctly ethical terms:

> Dostoevsky confront[s] all decadent and idealistic (individualistic) culture, the culture of essential and inescapable solitude. He asserts the very impossibility of solitude, the illusory nature of solitude. The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. *To be* means *to communicate* […]. To be means to be for another […]. (*PDP* 287)

In explicating the ethical condition as the essence of language, Levinas articulates a similar sentiment:

> Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as a basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane. (*TI* 201)

It is, therefore, '*ethics* – answerability or responsibility – that is literally first philosophy' for both Bakhtin and Levinas: 'response to the concrete other comes first, before the thematics of abstract ontology.'[45] Response is the primordial responsibility. It is the first concern for an otherness that cannot be totalised. Bakhtin and Levinas pivot their ethics around the obligatory call to answerability or responsibility intrinsic to intersubjectivity, to dialogue, to the transcendence of answer or response. Dostoevsky's artistic visualisation of human consciousness dramatised the dialogic call to responsibility that arose in Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethics, in response to the failure of universally applicable ethical dictates and the increasing secularisation of a post-Nietzschean world. The polyphonic novel is the artistic embodiment of this conception of ethics. The capacity to respond or answer is the integral component of the vitality of each character, their actuality as a fully valid subject of their own directly signifying discourse, distinct from their objectification (i.e., their finalisation, their plastic form) within the authoritative, authorial discourse of monologism.

Some of the scenes in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels in which this vitality is most prominently demonstrated involve the occasions where a phrase or idea is uttered by more than

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[45] Nealon, 'The Ethics of Dialogue', 134.

one character. Though Dostoevskian polyphony cannot be reduced to contextual variations in the repetition of a phrase, such moments illuminate a character's once-occurrence in Being as ineluctably bound to its dialogic interaction with other characters. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, the cynical seminarian Rakitin torments Alyosha during the latter's spiritual crisis that followed the death and bodily corruption of the Elder Zosima. In an attempt to get him to renounce his faith, Rakitin provokes Alyosha by claiming he has 'rebelled' against God in his anger; with a crooked smile, Alyosha responds, 'I do not rebel against my God, I simply "do not accept his world"' (*BK* 341).

The quotation marks identify Alyosha's remark as having previously been said by Ivan, precisely in the build up to 'Rebellion' (*BK* 253). Alyosha's utterance however disrupts any attempt by character or reader to perceive his character as the finalised articulation of an idea-consciousness. Rakitin himself dismisses Alyosha's words as 'gibberish' (*BK* 341): he cannot comprehend Ivan's words in Alyosha's mouth. Rakitin's narrative of the world is breached; he is faced by an other who exceeds his cognition. Alyosha is in a period of transition, and that transition is wrought through dialogic encounters with others. It is through this 'transferral of words from one mouth to another' (*PDP* 217) that Alyosha's sense of self is most distinctly actualised.[46] Alyosha's consciousness is in communion with Ivan's; each encounters the other in a once-occurrent event of Being and so neither character's thought is finalised, nor is their relationship reduced to one of dialectical opposition. The polyphonic novel strives to articulate throughout that which is evidenced in this example: the full weight of a character's utterance in a unique, once-occurrent moment in the event of Being, an utterance that exists only in relation to others.

A key scene in *The Idiot* offers a similar approach to dialogic interaction. In the aftermath of Ippolit's failed suicide, Myshkin wanders alone, unable to sleep having been disturbed by an aspect

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[46] Bakhtin recognises this 'fundamental device' of Dostoevsky's only in terms of 'parody or ridicule' (*PDP* 217), growing perhaps from the Menippean roots of the polyphonic structure. The argument here is that one character speaking another character's words is more nuanced than oppositional relation of pure parody: it advances the carnival essence of Menippean satire that makes possible 'the *open* structure of the great dialogue' helping Dostoevsky 'overcome gnoseological as well as ethical solipsism' (*PDP* 177).

of Ippolit's 'Necessary Explanation'. Ippolit's lament of his estrangement from the world, when even a 'little fly' in the sun knows its place and is content, reiterates a sentiment Myshkin himself claims to have felt prior to the events of the novel, during the early days of his treatment in a Swiss sanitorium. The coalescence of the same sentiment in two different characters, so neatly merged that Myshkin even impossibly believes Ippolit 'had taken the words about the "little fly" from him' (*Idiot* 423) is the cause of Myshkin's restlessness and the 'violent beating' (*Idiot* 422) of his heart. The repetition of the sentiment intrudes upon the uniqueness of the once-occurrent moment: to hear Ippolit articulate an impression he himself felt when 'he could not even speak properly' (*Idiot* 423) briefly intensifies Myshkin's awareness of his dialogic relation with others. Myshkin is commanded, in answer to Ippolit's words, to both internalise an external sentiment and acquiesce to the externalisation of his interior consciousness, apperceived long ago but here returned to the immediacy of Myshkin's conscious experience. His intense dialogic communion with Ippolit here, going beyond the very possibility of discursive comprehension, prompts his anguish. In *Demons*, Shatov suffers a similar anguish when repeating Stavrogin's disquisition on nationhood (supposedly remembered word-for-word from a two-year-old conversation) back to him. Stavrogin tells him that, although the words are similar, the ideals expressed are now more Shatov's than his: 'You took it ardently, and you have altered it ardently without noticing it' (*Demons* 251). Though they are restaging an earlier conversation, the immediacy of their unfinalisable, once-occurrent being is inherent in their dialogic interaction.

Ethical transcendence reconceived as the approach of the Other in dialogue corresponds to the active love preached by the Elder Zosima. It is a conception of ethics embodied by Dostoevsky's artistic rendering of subjectivity (or, in Bakhtin's term, consciousness) as necessarily in communion with others. For Dostoevsky, a 'single person […] cannot manage without *another* consciousness. One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone' (*PDP* 177). The prioritisation given to independent voices and consciousnesses characteristic of the polyphonic novel depicts the event of being, an event always already of co-being, in which subjectivity is inaugurated as the command to

answer/respond to the Other. Dostoevskian polyphony is a site of, and arguably a source for, the post-Nietzschean ethics of Bakhtin and Levinas.

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Further interrogation, however, is needed to develop active love into the responsibility for all, more than others, emblematic of Levinasian ethics. Moreover, the scholarly tendency to assess the divergencies of Bakhtinian answerability and Levinasian responsibility must be scrutinised with a renewed consideration of their respective indebtedness to Dostoevskian polyphony. In Chapter 2, I will reanalyse prominent Levinasian concepts that are explored in his second major text, *Otherwise Than Being*, alongside *Dostoevsky's Poetics*. This will help establish a consolidated ethical theory which can be used as a foundation for contemporary Dostoevskian literature's understanding of the ethical.

Chapter 2 – Polyphony as Saying

I

Erdinast-Vulcan notes how Bakhtin, in his reworking of *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, defines atheism in

Dostoevsky as the lack of '*a sense of faith*, that is, an integral attitude (by means of the whole

person) toward a higher and ultimate value.' Atheism is the 'indifference' towards or 'rejection of an

ultimate position in the ultimate whole of the world.' Erdinast-Vulcan picks up on how, for Bakhtin,

Dostoevsky's works are themselves beset by 'vacillations as regards the *content* of this ultimate

value' (*PDP* 294). Summarising this vacillation, Bakhtin writes, is the Elder Zosima's diagnosis of Ivan

Karamazov's spiritual torment. Having heard a summary of Ivan's contention that, without a belief in

the immortality of the soul, 'nothing would be immoral any longer, everything would be permitted'

(*BK* 69), Zosima acutely tells Ivan that 'in all likelihood you yourself do not believe either in the

immortality of your soul or even in what you have written about the Church' (*BK* 70). Ivan's torment

arises because the issue of faith or atheism 'is not yet resolved in [his] heart' (*BK* 70). Bakhtin offers

Ivan as typical of 'the type of people who cannot live without an ultimate value and yet at the same

time cannot make a final choice among values' (*PDP* 294). A definitive rejection of any sense of faith,

be it 'in orthodoxy, in progress, in revolution, etc.' (*PDP* 294), would constitute the Bakhtinian

atheist; it is not solely the rejection of God or religion, but of anything constituting a higher ideal

that would transcend the individual.[1]

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[1] Bakhtin's understanding of atheism is not wholly indistinct from the definition Levinas offers in *Totality and Infinity*. For Levinas, 'atheism' is a 'separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated' (*TI* 58). Which is to say, an individual existing outside of an historical or ideological totality that would constitute it. This theoretical atheistic being manifests as the 'refusal' of conceptualisation: the 'ipseity of the I consists in remaining outside the distinction between the individual and the general' (*TI* 118). The atheist is therefore fundamental to the welcoming of that which is absolutely Other: both Bakhtin and Levinas posit atheism as indispensable to the event of being, necessarily an event of co-being. Indeed, Levinas associated atheism with the totalising tendency of Western ontology, in that ontological thinkers (in particular, Hegel) seek to accommodate the irreducible alterity of 'God' (i.e., the Other) within a systematised understanding of Being. A parallel understanding of 'God' and 'Other' as unknowable alterity is at the heart of Levinas's ambivalence over the advocation or denunciation of religion and stands behind the use of theological concepts in his ethical writing. The first half of Chapter 3 will explore this ambivalence in further detail.

The 'failure of formal Kantian ethics' and the 'process of secularization' brought about during the modernist turn left a 'core question of Western ethics […]: how is one to choose that "ultimate value" without recourse to an ultimate authoritative other?'[2] Dostoevsky, on the historical border of the pre- and post-Nietzschean, was still able to frame the anarchical consequences of a godless world in eschatological terms, as a coming event to be prepared for and mitigated. For Bakhtin, claims Erdinast-Vulcan, the more pertinent question was how to maintain the ethical now that everything was permitted. A paradox arose that pivoted around the very concept of a 'choice'. As opposed to the universal applicability of providential or ethical absolutism, where choice entailed a transgression from the norm or the reasonable, a post-Nietzschean citizen without metaphysical foundational premises is confronted by the immediacy of the act and the subsequent demand for a decision. It is an ethical freedom bought and paid for by the collapse of absolutes but requiring a choice of 'ultimate value'. The freedom to choose an ultimate value arises only under conditions in which ultimate values are sufficiently weakened enough to allow for choice. It leaves the post-Nietzschean citizen in an inherently ambivalent ethical position that Erdinast-Vulcan posits through the metaphor of 'homesickness'.[3] On the one hand post-Nietzschean subjectivity, as recognised by Bakhtin, embraces 'the open-endedness, fluidity and inner diversity of actual human experience'. On the other, it generates 'a deep current of nostalgia for […] some form of authorial grounding'.[4]

An alternative metaphor, offered frequently by Levinas to represent dialogic ethics in its divergence from subject-Other relations in Western philosophy, echoes the homesick ambivalence of post-Nietzschean subjectivity. Juxtaposing preeminent figures from Hebrew and Greek traditions, the 'biblical Abraham, opposed to the Hellenic Ulysses, appears repeatedly as the privileged figure

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[2] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.23, 45.

[3] Ibid., p.1. Accordingly, Bakhtin, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Bergson are all termed as metaphysical 'exiles', emphasising that they are unable to return to the home they are sick for.

[4] Ibid., p.14. This sense of ambivalence drives her study of Bakhtin's competing 'centripetal' (i.e., the need for consummation from an authorial other) and 'centrifugal' (i.e., the open-endedness of lived experience) conceptions of subjectivity. The centripetal impulse, she claims, is most prominent in Bakhtin's early essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', which conceives of the relation between an author and a character in terms of the relation between God and the individual. Bakhtin's essay will be more thoroughly critiqued in Chapter 5's analysis of the role of art in Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethics.

for Levinas's philosophical project as he leaves behind his home (ontology) to explore an unknown world (alterity) without expectation of return.'[5] Odysseus typifies the sojourning aspect of the cognitive act: a departure from the singular consciousness which ultimately returns to reabsorb alterity within that consciousness. Yet although Davis correctly suggests that Abraham's unidirectional venture (proffered as a metaphor for the ethical confrontation with the absolutely Other) is given precedence over the cyclical Ulyssean gesture, it is worth remembering that, for Levinas, the Western philosophical tradition is an amalgamation of the Socratic concern for Truth and biblical notions of responsibility for others. 'Europe,' he remarked in an interview late in his life, 'is the Bible and the Greeks' (*RTB* 137). Europe is 'central' to Levinasian thought, in that 'those of us in this tradition should remain in this tradition'. The 'Greek way' means,

> as in Plato, that there is a reply to every objection, and that what is said should not be forgotten. What one said yesterday must be true and important today as well […]. One begins in the clarity of an unequivocal sign.

Levinas did not dispute his interviewer's claim that his theorising of 'the ethical situation' arose from 'a mode of originary philosophy […] aiming at eternal truths' (*RTB* 137-8). Though Levinasian ethics substitutes Odysseus for Abraham, Levinas showed unwillingness to relinquish entirely the Greek ontological tradition. In doing so, he implies the same nostalgia for a bygone authorial grounding for subjectivity that Erdinast-Vulcan attributes to Bakhtin.

Nevertheless, a scholarly practice has arisen that strives to distinguish Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics in a way that overlooks this ambivalence. Comparisons of their respective ethics tend to polarise Bakhtin and Levinas in terms analogous to the Abrahamic and Ulyssean versions of subject-Other relations. Levinas, customarily read in Abrahamic terms, is proclaimed for theorising subjectivity as an ethical event. The truly ethical encounter is a responsibility borne from the primacy of response to the infinite alterity of another's call. It is a responsibility that in the first instance cannot be refused: the welcoming of the Other is the first moment of subjectivity. Bakhtinian answerability, on the other hand, is championed for its Ulyssean retention of ethical

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[5] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, p.94.

agency. In his assertion of the emotional-volitional moments that constitute the once-occurrent

moment in Being, Bakhtin's focus falls upon the individually answerable act or deed. Their commonly

noted 'fundamental divergences' therefore revolve round how 'Levinas emphasises [the] approach

towards the other and his strangeness, to the point where I give myself for the other', whilst

'Bakhtin in his intersubjectivity aims at returning to oneself in an enriched way.'[6]

Those advocating Levinasian responsibility subsequently accuse Bakhtin of 'overlook[ing] the

nature of ethics in its metaphysical, over against ontological, ground', meaning that his 'formulation

of answerability can be considered an incomplete characterization of the ethical structures of the

architectonic.'[7] He is charged with a 'subjective privilege' that only advances the Cartesian cogito

instead of overturning it; answerability remains within an '*identity politics*' rather than engaging with

the '*alterity politics*' required to substantiate post-Nietzschean ethics.[8] Meanwhile, critical readings

of Levinas claim his theorised passivity of the subject-Other relation requires supplementing with a

pathway for conscious activity. Response implies both the passivity of hearing and the activity of

speaking; Levinasian responsibility is faulted for its 'preethical' fixation on 'hearing' rather than the

'interaction' of 'interpretation' that sparks the 'decision making process of justice.'[9] It is the

perceived passivity of Levinasian subjectivity that occasionally prompts the misreading of his ethics.

Patterson's comparison of Levinas and Bakhtin, for example, frames the ethical encounter with the

Other in distinctly active terms. He writes of a 'move out of myself and into the dialogical relation

where the other moves into me and where signification thus occurs.' A paradox arises in which the

vulnerability of the passive subject is actively sought. Patterson's imperative that 'I must rend

myself: tear away from myself in a tearing open, and expose myself to being wounded' therefore

retains the welcoming of the Other within the primacy of the same.[10] His attempt to then

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[6] Tore Dag Bøe *et al.*, 'Change is an Ongoing Ethical Event: Levinas, Bakhtin and the Dialogical Dynamics of Becoming', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 34 (2013) 18–31 (22).
[7] Murray, 'Bakhtinian answerability and Levinasian responsibility', 143, 144.
[8] Nealon, 'The Ethics of Dialogue', 145-146.
[9] Val Vinokurov, 'Levinas's Dostoevsky: A Response to "Dostoevsky's Derrida"', *Common Knowledge* 9.2 (2003) 318-340 (332).
[10] Patterson, 'Signification, Responsibility, Spirit', p.109.

amalgamate Levinas and Bakhtin results in a contradictory premise, in which subjectivity both

presupposes and is presupposed by the response to alterity: 'there is no response to the other

without a return to oneself for there is no responding to the other without being made other to

oneself.'[11] It is a contradiction that typifies the scholarly convention to favour either Bakhtinian or

Levinasian ethics. The alleged abdication of subjective agency in Levinas, and the corresponding

allegation of subjective primacy in Bakhtin, establishes the most significant impediment to a co-

reading of their analogous ethical theories.

Throughout this thesis I propose a different approach to such prior attempts at integrating

Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics. The struggle to consolidate their comparable understanding of the

ethical is, I believe, a consequence of the will to downplay their respective vacillations before the

metaphysics of presence and the ethics of alterity, before the Greek and the Hebrew, before the

cognitive and the discursive functions of language. These attempts strive to identify either Bakhtin as

Levinasian or Levinas as Bakhtinian, without reflecting on the awkward but conceivable possibility

that each is simultaneously both and neither. Their mutual ambivalence over the constitution of the

post-Nietzschean subject, liberated from the finalising and deadening effects of universal abstraction

yet with such freedom always already irrupted by the unknowable alterity of the Other, is key in

using their ethical theories to construct a framework which can support a reading of the

contemporary Dostoevskians. It is a sense of ambivalence that guides the thesis from here on out,

and augurs how literature itself manifests as an optimal site for assessing post-Nietzschean ethics:

the text presents both an encounter with unknowable alterity and a demand for subjective

cognition. The implications of such ambivalence with regards to the literary work will be further

interrogated in Part III.

     For the rest of this chapter, however, I will focus on explicating how Dostoevsky's polyphonic

structure offers a way of approaching the root of this ambivalence: the need for ethical anchorage

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[11] Ibid., p.113.

following the waning of ontotheological absolutes. I begin with comparable critiques of Levinasian

responsibility in favour of the supposed reciprocity of Bakhtinian answerability made by Erdinast-

Vulcan and Jill Robbins: both pinpoint Levinas's adoption of Zosima's 'I more than others' as

epitomising the untenableness of illimitable responsibility. Their critiques, I argue, are only valid if 'I

more than others' is taken as an ethical dictate. By contrast, approaching it as an adage for

something fundamentally inexpressible opens up a correspondence between the polyphonic

structure and the emphasis on the pre-discursive site of ethics that constitutes Levinas's second

major work, *Otherwise Than Being*. It is this correspondence which permits a post-Nietzschean

reading of Dostoevsky's ethics, sourcing ethical anchorage in language's presupposition of the Other

that does not diminish the ethical freedom of the once-occurrent subject.

II

Erdinast-Vulcan is forceful in her Bakhtinian critique of Levinas. She reads Levinas's greatest

divergence from Bakhtinian ethics as a betrayal of the very 'discursive formation of subjectivity' that,

in other critical readings, is a focal point of their convergence.[12] Erdinast-Vulcan, however,

distinguishes the responsibility of response with 'the affirmation of agency, and a recognition of

commonality and reciprocity' that characterises discourse. Bakhtin, she claims, 'is not afraid of

reciprocity', implying that the 'unconditional subjection and martyrdom of the self before the

demand – any demand – of the other' advocated by Levinasian ethics necessarily renounces

reciprocity for 'fear' of tainting that martyrdom. Discursive reciprocity 'is not in evidence in Levinas's

ethical postulate.'[13]

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[12] Erdinast-Vulcan, 'Between the face and the voice', 56.
[13] Ibid.

Levinas confirms the renunciation of reciprocity, conceived of as the 'asymmetry of the interpersonal' (*TI* 215) mirroring the asymmetry of cognition and the infinite, in his interview with Nemo. When asked if the Other 'is not […] also responsible in my regard', Levinas replied

> Perhaps, but that is *his* affair. One of the fundamental themes of *Totality and Infinity* […] is that the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation […]. I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity […]. Reciprocity is *his* affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. It is I who support all. (*EI* 98)

Following these comments, Levinas reiterates 'that sentence in Dostoyevsky' (*EI* 98). He makes it clear that the value of 'I more than others' to his ethical thinking is its insistence on the asymmetry of subject-Other relations: the subject 'always has one responsibility *more* than all the others' (*EI* 99). It is not because of some individual guilt on behalf of the subject peculiar to specific crimes, but a responsibility of response that 'answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility.' The responding subject is 'responsible for a total responsibility' (*EI* 99).

In this way 'I more than others' is a renunciation of the reciprocity of the dialogic relation that Erdinast-Vulcan countenances in Bakhtinian ethics. She bases her critique of Levinas in the 'kenotic conception of subjectivity' offered by Levinas's 'Dostoyevskian allusion'.[14] The extract from 'The Russian Monk', she claims, is 'modeled on the Russian spiritual tradition of the saints' lives' and is thus 'conventionally thematic in its assimilation of and convergence with their kenotic aspects'. Such aspects are 'deeply problematic' in that the conception of subjectivity they offer, a 'self-abdicating saintly subject', takes 'its cue from the explicit imperative of a particular Dostoevskian character'.[15] It therefore offers little more than a renewal of the ethical dictates renounced by the post-Nietzschean age: it is equivalent to 'a categorical imperative which is absolute, binding, and non-negotiable'.[16]

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[14] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.182. The argument put forward in 'Between the face and the voice' is consistent through its rewriting in Erdinast-Vulcan's book chapter on Levinas, pp.182-195. For the convenience of expression in this chapter, I quote here interchangeably from the book and the essay. It should be noted, however, that in the book Erdinast-Vulcan takes a far more nuanced and restrained view of Bakhtin, focusing the first part entirely on his ambivalence (from which she develops the concept of metaphysical homesickness). It is to her discredit that she fails to fully explicate a similar ambivalence in Levinas.

[15] Ibid., p.183.

[16] Erdinast-Vulcan, 'Between the face and the voice', 54.

Erdinast-Vulcan's critique follows on from Jill Robbins's ambivalence towards the extent of Dostoevsky's influence over Levinas. Robbins on the one hand recognises that the 'convergence between Dostoevsky's phrase and Levinas's ethical emphasis on kenotic subjectivity' suggests 'so great [an] affinity' between the two 'that Dostoevsky would seem to be the one writer to whom Levinasian ethics [...] could be "applied."'[17] On the other, however, Robbins sees the phrase itself as 'close to being an instance of "aestheticized" religion' occurring within 'a stereotypical patterning of sin to salvation'.[18] It resides in the 'aestheticized economy of personal salvation' evocative of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, a subjectivity Levinas himself repudiates as an 'egoism' or 'tension over the self'.[19] For Levinas, Robbins notes, the Kierkegaardian response to Hegelian subjectivity sought to retain the authority of the same: it is the singular 'I' who 'resist[s] the system' of Hegelian totality in Kierkegaard, not the 'absolutely other' (*TI* 40). Therefore the 'subjectivity that Kierkegaard relentlessly affirms over and against the universal' is still, for Levinas, 'too self-centred, even in [its] self-division.'[20] Zosima's 'I more than others', read in the light of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, retains the Ulyssean homecoming dynamic. In this way, Robbins uses Levinas's own critique of Kierkegaard to question his adoption of Zosima's teaching as an aphorism for his ethical theory.

Augmenting the comparable readings offered by Robbins and Erdinast-Vulcan is that 'I more than others' first appears in 'The Russian Monk', an imitation hagiography. The hagiographic sections of *The Brothers Karamazov* are, as both note, 'the sole parts of it that are *not* constructed according to the polyphonic structure of voices that elsewhere prevails'. The 'hagiographic word' is 'monological'. [21] Bakhtin indeed notes that it is 'without a sideward glance, calmly adequate to itself

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[17] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.149.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p.112, 109. Levinas's essay on Kierkegaard, 'Existence and Ethics', appears in the collection *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) pp.66-74. There is a long history of academic study comparing the work of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. For a useful summary of this history, see George Pattison, 'Freedom's dangerous dialogue: Reading Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky together' in Pattison & Dianne Oenning Thompson (eds.), *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp.237-256.

[20] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.113.

[21] Ibid., p.150.

and its referential object' (*PDP* 248).[22] Robbins uses this discrepancy to maintain her ambivalence with regards to Dostoevsky's influence over Levinas. For her, Levinas's 'particular affinity to aspects of the Russian spiritual tradition' merely builds upon the 'intrication of Jewish and Christian traditions that nourish his work', which thus 'complicates any simply Judeo-centred reading of Levinas's ethics.'[23] The question is whether Dostoevsky's influence helped formulate the Abrahamic gesture of Levinasian ethics, or whether the egocentrism suggested by 'I more than others' merely swaps the Hegelian totality for a Kierkegaardian personal salvation that nevertheless remains Ulyssean in its prioritisation of the subject. This question is left unresolved in Robbins's brief aside on Dostoevsky.

For Erdinast-Vulcan, however, the hagiographic origin of 'I more than others' confirms the 'metaphysical absoluteness of the unconditional, nonreciprocal subjection to the other.'[24] It is the cornerstone of her rebuff of Levinasian responsibility in favour of Bakhtinian answerability. The saintly edict becomes an order to be followed, a universal standard to be achieved. Erdinast-Vulcan's critique accuses Levinasian ethics of betraying the very immediacy of the act that it sought to rediscover. The lack of reciprocity deadens the subject, in the sense that the subject is unable to 'respond' in any way other than affirming its responsibility for all others. The Levinasian subject cannot in this way sustain within itself the open-endedness, fluidity and inner diversity of actual human experience. Non-reciprocity is absolute, and the post-Nietzschean citizen has outgrown absolutes.

In this way Erdinast-Vulcan makes the reciprocity of dialogue the glue that holds together post-Nietzschean ethics in the absence of metaphysical grounding. It supposedly offers the assurance against ethical anarchy that threatens the post-Nietzschean citizen. Reciprocity is prescribed to combat metaphysical homesickness. It is, in a sense, an alternative subjective

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[22] It is worth noting that, in spite of the 'monotone and utopian' tendency of hagiographic discourse recognised here in *Problems*, Peter Slater nevertheless claims that, to Bakhtin, religion 'mostly meant […] quests for personal salvation'. Slater, 'Bakhtin On Hearing God's Voice', *Modern Theology* 23.1 (2007) 1-25 (6-7).

[23] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.148, 150.

[24] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.183.

grounding. The subject is free to act, free to engage dialogically with others who in turn engage with it. Unburdened by a 'totalising' responsibility for all, the ethical moment is the apex of dialogue. It is not, as it is in Levinas, inaugurated by the voice of the Other. Instead, the voice of the Other is the confirmation of the voice of the subject. My answer is a precondition of the Other's call.

Yet doubts arise as to whether an ethics 'grounded' (for lack of a better word) by reciprocity can in truth overcome the Ulyssean gesture. Reciprocity is the only form of subjective anchorage Erdinast-Vulcan can provide under the demand that subjective freedom be prioritised. On the one hand, this conception of ethical interaction still relies on consummation by another. Others are necessarily part of the emotional-volitional moments that constitute the subject, but the emphasis on ethical reciprocity implies a similar subjugation to a transcendent alterity that Erdinast-Vulcan finds 'deeply problematic' in Levinasian ethics. The other *must* reciprocate in order for the ethical moment to be actualised. Such an understanding of dialogic ethics threatens the very subjective freedom it champions.

On the other hand, if the other is not impelled to reciprocate *in toto*, it at least must reciprocate the subject's terms. If reciprocity presupposes ethical freedom, meaning that the other is likewise free not to reciprocate the approach of the subject, then the approach of the subject establishes the terms of interaction. If I call the other, the other is free to answer my call. If the other calls me, I am free to answer. Yet in both these cases, if the one called is free to answer, it is also free to *not* answer. If the one called does not answer, the ethical moment (if it can still be said to exist at all) is an entirely solipsistic event. It cannot be an event of co-being, in which the alterity of the other remains intact. The other must thus reciprocate my own answerability. I am answerable on an axiological plane where I alone can judge what is valuable. I need others to reciprocate what I deem to be ethical, even if what I deem to be ethical is responsibility for others. In that sense, their responsibility returns to me: it is ultimately Ulyssean. It is a mere reiteration of Madame Khokhlakov's need for 'a return of love for my love'. So, while Erdinast-Vulcan uses reciprocity's precedence in Bakhtin to critique Levinas, scholars like Murray use it to critique Bakhtin. A reading

that Bakhtinian ethics 'remains centered on the self's own evaluative center' forces the near

oxymoronic conclusion that 'for Bakhtin it is in the presence of the Other that the self is answerable

to itself'.[25] The subject can only be answerable to itself if it is the sole axiological determiner. If the

other is free to relinquish answerability, if it can choose not to answer, then the subject calls to an

empty room. Only then can the subject be answerable to itself.

Reciprocity here becomes an unstable bed for the anchorage of the subject in post-

Nietzschean ethics. It is actualised either by the subject's imposition that the other reciprocates in

dialogue, or by the demand that any reciprocating other accord with the terms of engagement. It

retains the subjective ethical freedom granted by the eradication of religious/philosophical

absolutes. Yet its emphasis to retain this freedom comes at the expense of a prioritisation of the

subject, which therefore risks reiterating the suppression of alterity enacted by those ethical

absolutes. Though given the chance to be Abrahamic, it succumbs to the Ulyssean. The emphasis on

reciprocity in Erdinast-Vulcan's studies, however, points to a wider issue at stake for post-

Nietzschean ethics of any kind, which prompts the fundamental ambivalence of both Bakhtin and

Levinas: the need for subjective anchorage. The immediacy of the act that becomes the focal point

for the ethical subject following the turn away from ontotheological grounding assumes the promise

and potential of liberation, but it likewise engenders the fear of that which is beyond cognition. It

harks back to the unavailability of the deep trust in axiological authority that induces both the

conflict of choice and the sense of crisis in Dostoevsky's works: the realisation that the subject thinks

and acts in an axiological void is, as Erdinast-Vulcan later writes, 'as terrifying as it is liberating.'[26]

Required instead, then, is an understanding of post-Nietzschean ethics that can actualise the

individually answerable subject in the immediacy of the act, free from abstract grounding, yet is

nevertheless anchored by a responsibility to the irreducible alterity of the Other. By using Levinas's

own investigations into the intrinsic paradox of dialogic ethics, theorised in *Otherwise Than Being* as

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[25] Murray, 'Bakhtinian answerability and Levinasian responsibility', 144, 145.
[26] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.94.

the necessary subordination of ethical 'Saying' to cognitive 'Said', as a means to read the polyphonic structure itself, I intend to proffer such an understanding.

III

Both Robbins and Erdinast-Vulcan make Levinas's appropriation of 'I more than others' a focal point of their interrogation of ethical non-reciprocity. In both interrogations, an impediment acclaiming non-reciprocity is the quasi-hagiographic origin of the phrase. Indeed, the 'monological' quality of 'The Russian Monk' is central to Erdinast-Vulcan's critique of Levinas in favour of the ethical reciprocity she claims is given precedence in Bakhtin. The basis of this critique is that an ethical theory sourced in a hagiography offers no great advance of the Kantian ethical imperative. The veneration of Zosima's life proffers it as a model to be emulated. Though his talks and homilies are framed in terms of advice given to readers, rather than demands made of them, they nevertheless serve as examples to be adhered to. By making 'I more than others' the credo of his ethical position, Levinas risks presenting it, and the life in which it is sourced, as a renewed ethical dictate: if not a 'do as I say' then at least a 'do as I have done'. Zosima's life is the standard to be followed.

Resolving this 'deeply problematic' issue of reciprocity in Bakhtin and Levinas would therefore potentially create a platform for a reconciliation of their ethical philosophy. And the attention given to the origin of 'I more than others' in Robbin's and Erdinast-Vulcan's analysis suggests that one path towards a resolution would be to reassess that origin. To reconceive of Levinas's use of the line as something other than an ethical dictate would allow for a deeper understanding of Levinasian ethics within the ethical dynamic of the polyphonic novel form.

With this in mind, it is first worth noting that this supposed ethical standard, taken from a monologic hagiography and set before Levinasian readers, is actually one of the places within 'The Russian Monk' where the 'stylized tones of a clerical-hagiographical or clerical-confessional style' (*PDP* 249) betray themselves. Hagiographic discourse itself is only ever stylised in Dostoevsky. An

actual 'monologically firm and self-confident voice […] never really appears in his works', even if in 'The Russian Monk' a 'certain tendency toward it is clearly felt' (*PDP* 248). All such tendencies towards the subordination of narrative polyphony to the monologism of a hagiography must therefore be considered alongside Bakhtin's aside on '*penetrated discourse'*. If the monologic word comes to the fore within a character when he (or she) 'comes close to the truth about himself' and thus 'takes possession of his own authentic voice' (*PDP* 248), then the '*penetrated word*' is a word 'capable of actively and confidently interfering in the interior dialogue of the other person, helping that person to find his own voice' (*PDP* 242). It is the acceptance that any firm monologic voice can be arrived at only by and through confirmation by another: the example Bakhtin gives is one of several instances in *The Idiot* where Prince Myshkin seems able to intuit the inner sentiments of another character.[27] Thus 'firmly monologic, undivided discourse […] without internal polemic' is likewise characteristic of penetrated discourse, a style of discourse that 'is only possible in actual dialogue with another person' (*PDP* 249).

The accusation of a hagiographic word levelled against 'I more than others' can hence be countered by a reading of the phrase as an example of penetrated discourse. Zosima arrives at his tenet by and through discursive interaction with others. Val Vinokurov picks up on this in his study of Levinas and Dostoevsky. Though he echoes Erdinast-Vulcan and others in claiming 'I more than others' conforms to an egocentric notion of Christian salvation, for Vinokurov it only does so in its first iteration by Zosima's brother Markel. Vinokurov claims that it is ultimately Alyosha's actualised self-effacement during the later events of the novel that reorients the sentiment away from

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[27] Penetrated discourse is part of Bakhtin's wider discussion of inauthentic confession in Dostoevsky, such as Ippolit's Necessary Explanation, Stavrogin's (excluded) confession in *Demons* or the equivocal 'confessions' of the Underground Man. Such confessions are 'intensely oriented toward another person' and are thus 'deprived of any finalizing force'. This in turn leads to the 'vicious circle' (*PDP* 244) wherein characters both need confirmation from others and haughtily reject such confirmation as a relinquishing of self-assertion. Interestingly enough, Coetzee's essay on confession in Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Rousseau begins from a similar perspective. See 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992) pp.251-293.

Markel's 'ecstatic outburst' (emblematic of a Western Christian tradition) towards a Judaic 'ontology of radical responsibility' that characterises Levinasian ethics.[28]

Vinokurov here hints at the fact that the importance of 'I more than others' to Levinas is not its hagiographic origin but its encapsulation of a sense of responsibility emerging from the independence of voices and consciousnesses within polyphony. In many ways, the phrase is another example of the polyphonic tendency noted earlier: the repetition of a similar utterance by multiple characters, evidencing the full weight of a character's once-occurrent moment in Being as existing in a dialogic relation. And reading it in this sense would counter the hagiographic critique of Robbins and (in particular) Erdinast-Vulcan. It is not a monologic utterance taken as an authoritative ethical dictate for others to follow. It is a phrase wrought out of dialogic interaction. If the polyphonic novel articulates the ethical dynamic of dialogism, then perhaps 'I more than others' is significant for Levinas because of the way it resonates the responsibility of response integral to his ethical philosophy.

This reassessment of 'I more than others' is augmented by Dostoevsky's important qualifier concerning 'The Russian Monk'. In his discussion of the juxtaposition of Books V and VI, Frank notes how the latter 'has not fared very well in critical opinion because it is viewed primarily as a direct answer to the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.'[29] In writing about the 'risk' Dostoevsky took by 'couching the response to Ivan in the genre of a saint's life', Frank expresses sentiments similar to Erdinast-Vulcan's critique. 'The Russian Monk', with its 'highly poetic style', 'pious language' and 'clerical sentimentalism' can seem 'ineffectual in countering the brunt of Ivan's unbridled assault' on faith in 'Pro and Contra'. It lacks Ivan's 'powerful vehemence' and so appears unconvincing when compared to his struggle 'to confront the problems of human existence.'[30] The 'timeless quality' of

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[28] Vinokurov, 'Levinas's Dostoevsky', 322.
[29] Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.880.
[30] Ibid.

'The Russian Monk' is here identified as abstract and universalising, in contrast with the portrayal of the actuality of 'mundane existence' in 'Pro and Contra'.[31]

Commentators who support this reading, however, 'have not paid sufficient attention to Dostoevsky's remark that "*the whole novel* is an answer" to Ivan and his Legend'.[32] Frank points out that treating 'The Russian Monk' as a singular and authoritative response to 'Pro and Contra', as Erdinast-Vulcan does collaterally in her critique, fails to consider this 'definitive assertion' of Dostoevsky's. The 'stories and utterances' of the hagiography hold significance only through the 'interweaving of Zosima's experiences with the remainder of the plot action, which reveals the salutary effects of his own life, and of the values he practiced, on the lives of others.'[33] The book as a whole is the response to Ivan's atheism. The whole work is the counterweight to his metaphysical homesickness, to his (arguably anachronistic) post-Nietzschean vacillations between the Ulyssean and the Abrahamic. Dostoevsky's 'answer' is not grounded in an authoritative ethical dictate. It is anchored by the polyphonic structure of his novel. Responsibility to all, for all, more than others is intrinsic to the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses given precedence in a genuine polyphony. The individual responsible for a total responsibility is not antagonistic to Bakhtinian reciprocity. It is a constituent part of 'an event of interaction between fully valid consciousnesses' (*PDP* 9).

IV

The voice of the Other, tantamount to the incomprehensibility of the Infinite in Descartes' Third Meditation, transcends the subject's freedom to grasp alterity within a cognitive totality. This is the philosophical basis of *Totality and Infinity*. In his later major work, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence,* Levinas reconceives the relationship between the subject and the Other. Robbins writes

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

> Whereas *Totality and Infinity* described the putting into question of the self in the presence of the other, *Otherwise than Being* describes the self as always already worked over, traumatized and dispossessed by the other. In the later work, ethics does not happen to a self or subject. The conception of responsibility and ethics that emerges is nonvoluntaristic and nonvolitional. Responsibility does not emanate from the initiative of the subject; it chooses me before I choose it.[34]

Her simplified distinction here overlooks the necessary entrenchment within language that constitutes the speaking subject of *Totality and Infinity*: cognition presupposes the voice of the Other, and so the responsibility of response is just as much a subjective condition in *Totality and Infinity* as it is in *Otherwise Than Being*. Robbins does, however, make clear that the later work marks a definitive emphasis on subjectivity's presupposition of the Other. In doing so, it strengthens the affinity between Levinasian ethics and Bakhtinian ethics, the ethics expressed through a dual reading of *Problems* and *Philosophy of the Act*.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, the 'subjectivity of the subject' is 'subject to everything' (*OTB* 146). The subject exists as a 'hostage', 'under accusation by everyone', responsible for all 'to the point of substitution.' Everything is, 'from the start in the accusative' (*OTB* 112).[35] Subjectivity, initiated by the call of the Other and therefore initially passive, determines that the 'uniqueness of the self' is only ever 'the very fact of bearing the fault of another.' Responsibility for another is constituted 'only in this unlimited passivity of an accusative'; such responsibility 'does not issue out of a declension it would have undergone starting with the nominative' (*OTB* 112). It is this sense Levinas means to express in his repeated iteration of 'I more than others'. Immediately after its first quotation in *Otherwise Than Being* (a quotation which, importantly, never appears in *Totality and Infinity*), Levinas again stresses that

> the subjectivity of the subject is persecution and martyrdom. It is a recurrence which is not self-consciousness, in which the subject […] would still remain somehow in itself […]. It is a recurrence on this side of oneself, prior to indifference to itself. It is a substitution for another. (*OTB* 146)

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[34] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, pp.xiv-xv.

[35] For the Francophone Levinas, the condition of subjectivity is exemplified by the phrase '*me voici*' ('here I am'). The bond between the grammatical accusative case and the subjective condition of being 'accused' is critical to Levinasian subjectivity: it reinforces the idea of being always already under accusation (prior to and presupposing the subjective act). In this, it is reminiscent of the Russian меня зовут noted earlier; however, *me voici*'s typical utterance as the primary response to another's call seems to offer Levinas greater pertinence. *Me voici* could also be said to correspond to the Hebrew word הנני ('hineni'), the expression of complete passivity and readiness to accept God's command. For more on the concept of הנני in Levinas, see David M. Goodman & Scott F. Grover, 'Hineni and Transference: The Remembering and Forgetting of the Other', *Pastoral Psychology* 56 (2008) 561–571.

The idea of being 'on this side of oneself' is an example of the way Levinas uses geometric terms in *Otherwise Than Being* to describe the distinctly non-Euclidean constitution of subjectivity. The title itself is a reference to the transcendence of essence by alterity: essence belongs to the properties of Being, and if Being (in the sense of subjective being, the cognitive grasping of otherness) presupposes the Other, then 'otherwise than being' connotes 'a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness' (*OTB* 3). It is the circumstance of a multiplicity of beings (the *event* of being in a Bakhtinian sense) to which the subject is primordially subject, which grants subjectivity. 'Transcendence', writes Levinas, 'is a passing over to being's *other*' (*OTB* 3), rather than holding a conscious relation of diametric opposition with another within the conscious realm.

A key component of the later work, then, is Levinas's proposal of a non-spatial geometry that stands in for an ethical vocabulary. It is introduced most prominently in the concept of proximity. In responding to Nemo's question about the 'structure of subjectivity' in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas says

> Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another. In the book, the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space […] but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself – insofar as I am – responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object. (*EI* 97)

In the text itself, Levinas indeed begins his introduction of proximity by dismissing 'an initial geometrical and physical impassiveness' (*OTB* 81). Such 'impassiveness of space' must first refer to 'absolute coexistence, to the conjunction of all the points, being together at all points without any privilege, characteristic of the words of a language before the mouth opens' (*OTB* 81). Proximity is described as a 'restlessness' that 'overwhelms the calm of the nonubiquity of a being' (*OTB* 82). It is a being's primordial awareness (preceding any claim to conscious awareness) of its own limits, of its vulnerability in passivity, and of its difference to that which is otherwise than being. It is 'an immediacy' manifested as 'contact with the other.' To contact in this sense 'is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to supress myself in the other' (*OTB* 86). Prior to all cognition, prior

to all signification, proximity is the condition in which being is exposed to alterity.[36] The difference in proximity 'between the one and the other, between me and a neighbour, turns into non-indifference, precisely into my responsibility' (*OTB* 166).

Levinasian proximity, then, expresses a non-geometric, ethical relation between beings. In this sense, if polyphony can be read as the 'articulation' of the event of being, a theoretical articulation in that it is prior to and presupposed by linguistic cognition, then the polyphonic structure 'articulates' Levinasian proximity. The spatial metaphors Levinas is impelled to resort to have their counterpart in the Bakhtinian concept of the threshold. Because polyphonic characters are never finalised, always in a state of 'becoming', they exist on a threshold within themselves. The significance of literal thresholds in Dostoevskian novels (doorways and windows, waiting rooms and parlours…etc.) is to give strategic emphasis to the immediacy of the moment in which polyphonic characters traverse the events of the novel. Reiterating Dostoevsky's denial that he was '*a psychologist*', Bakhtin claims the categorisation of a psyche as one thing or another becomes 'a degrading *reification* of a person's soul, a discounting of its freedom and unfinalizability' (*PDP* 61). Dostoevsky's 'main object of representation' was instead 'that peculiar indeterminacy and indefiniteness' of a character. He therefore, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, 'always represents a person *on the threshold* of a final decision'.

Yet to exist individually on the threshold is to exist within the commonality of the once-occurrent moment of Being, in which 'I', the 'other' and 'I-for-the-other' are central emotional-volitional moments. The unfinalizable 'I' on the threshold exists within the event of Being in which the other cannot be complete. The autonomy of the other calls the subject's autonomy into question: the polyphonic novel maintains a '*fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*' (*PDP* 63). Dialogue permeates all being, the 'I', the 'other' and the 'I-for-the-other' in all its

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[36] Levinas devotes much of his subchapter on proximity to its comparison with the Face (*OTB* 88-93). In many respects, the approach of the Face, as theorised in *Totality and Infinity*, is an approach founded upon proximity. If the primordial awareness of that which is otherwise than being can be termed as the awareness of the 'neighbour' (*OTB* 5 *et passim*), then the '*way* of the neighbour is a face' (*OTB* 88). The basis of proximity, therefore, is the way the 'face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility' (*OTB* 88).

manifestations. And so 'the great dialogue in Dostoevsky is organized as an *unclosed whole* of life

itself, life poised *on the threshold*' (*PDP* 63). A gesture towards a nonspatial structure comes through

Bakhtin's study that runs analogous with Levinasian proximity. 'Every thought of Dostoevsky's

heroes', writes Bakhtin, 'senses itself to be from the very beginning a *rejoinder* in an unfinalized

dialogue. Such thought […] lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought, someone

else's consciousness' (*PDP* 32). Indeed, everything in the polyphonic novel 'lives on the border of its

very opposite' (*PDP* 176); it is why a single person cannot manage without another consciousness.

And though Bakhtin's theory is proposed precisely in terms of interdependent and interacting

consciousnesses, at first glance a divergence from the markedly pre-subjective, precognitive

condition of Levinasian proximity, it must be remembered that the Bakhtinian threshold does not

exist at the level of consciousness. The threshold is indicative of the structural basis for the

polyphonic novel. It is that which supports the interaction of such consciousnesses. When theorising

the 'monologic design', Bakhtin discourses upon its 'rigid framework', upon the 'strictly defined'

semantic boundaries of the monologic hero. The polyphonic design, it therefore can be inferred,

involves loosely defined semantic boundaries. Its framework is irresolute. Its thresholds are

traversable. It is nevertheless a design, one specific to the coexistence of independent characters

within the event of Being. The structure itself must therefore presuppose a multiplicity of

consciousnesses, and in this sense is comparable to Levinasian proximity.

Enhancing this comparison is the temporal characteristic of the threshold. In the polyphonic

novel, characters exist in a simultaneous moment of the event of Being, a being in common in which

the act or utterance extends beyond the borders of the actor without return (or returned

inescapably altered through contact with the other). Action is interaction in the polyphonic novel,

without finalisation. This is its articulation of the ethical. This prompts Bakhtin to suggest two

variations of time in Dostoevsky's later novels, a time of plot action and a 'time of crisis' (*PDP* 172).

The former is equivalent to 'biological time, experienced in the interior spaces of life' (*PDP* 172). The

time of crisis, however, is 'time on the *threshold*', understood as a carnivalisation of 'ordinary life'

(*PDP* 172). Regardless of plot action, be it gambling, penal servitude or 'the final moments of consciousness before death', threshold time is 'an identical *type of time*' (*PDP* 172). It is time prior to cognition, the time that presupposes the biological time experienced in the interior spaces of the life of the subject. Bakhtin proposes that certain exceptional moments within the events of the novel offer a trace of the threshold structure, though such moments are not explained in detail.

The difference between biographical and threshold time can be viewed alongside Levinas's distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic.[37] Synchrony is the effect of the 'temporalization of time' (*OTB* 9) in which being manifests in signification. Synchronic time 'is essence and monstration of essence': it is the site in which time marks 'a recuperation of all divergencies, through retention, memory and history'. Within synchrony, 'nothing is lost, everything is presented or represented, everything is consigned and lends itself to inscription' (*OTB* 9). Essence or meaning is made manifest through synchrony. For Levinas, it is through the synchronisation of time that cognition emerges from the chaos of inescapable sensation.

Levinas's project however is to propose the meaning of transcendence as that which signifies 'the fact that the *event of being* […] passes over to what is other than being' (*OTB* 3). Building on the notion of the infinite Other in *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise Than Being* is the philosophical articulation of that which is presupposed by essence (or at least the articulation of its 'inarticulate-ness'), that to which transcendence passes. Necessary for that articulation is the concept of diachrony which signifies (synchronically) the difference between being and 'otherwise than being', an otherwise outside of the dialectical opposition of being and nothingness (as transcendence cannot be negative). It is the signalling of 'a lapse in time that does not return' in signification, a preoriginal and anarchical *passed*' (*OTB* 9) outside of cognition. Diachronic time is 'refractory to all synchronization' (*OB* 9).

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[37] This distinction is perhaps given its most detailed explication in *Time and the Other*, a series of lectures Levinas gave in 1946/47 at Jean Wahl's Collège Philosophique, and then later published. However, both for the sake convenience and to tie synchrony/diachrony with proximity and Saying, I source my understanding of the distinction in *Otherwise Than Being*.

Diachronic time is the condition for time understood synchronically. It is an opening unto the ethical. The freedom for cognition arises in synchronic essence: the diachronic 'moment' is the responsibility of response to the Other. It is a time prior to time, a 'non-present par excellence […], prior to or beyond essence' (*OTB* 10). The diachronic moment is the condition for signification, and so its trace is evident as the infinite Other that breaches subjective cognition. It is in this sense that diachrony can be equated with threshold time. In 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope', Bakhtin lists 'the chronotope of *threshold*' (*DI* 248) as one (albeit, significantly, the last) type of chronotope, which would classify it as synchronic. Yet he describes the 'most fundamental instance' of the threshold chronotope as a '*break* in a life' (*DI* 248). It is the chronotope that disrupts and uncovers the sense of time applicable to all other chronotopes. Threshold time is the initial exposure to the event of being that can only ever be an event of co-being. It is inherent in the polyphonic novel where each character lives on the border of someone else's consciousness. Though a character or an act may inhabit a threshold chronotope, the 'time' of a polyphonic structure (prior to and presupposed by the characters within it) is threshold time. In this respect, it is diachronic time.[38]

V

Diachronic time cannot be conceived of as an essence, but rather that which is presupposed by the manifestation of essence in synchrony. Synchronic essence is bound with cognition through language. It is the manifestation of Being through signification. The diachronic, presupposed by signification, is the 'proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification' (*OTB* 5). The signifyingness of signification is

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[38] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to comprehensively study the diachronic aspect of Bakhtinian chronotopes. That individual chronotopes can be understood as the particular space-time components of an artistic work would initially render them synchronic. A synchronic understanding of time would be necessary to identify and discuss individual chronotopes. However, the peculiarities of the threshold chronotope as a '*break* in a life' would question this synchronic understanding. A life is lived in synchronic time: a break in a life is therefore outside of synchrony. Morson and Emerson's definition of chronotopes as 'not so much visibly *present* in activity as […] the *ground* for activity' gives further impetus to this line of enquiry. See Morson & Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, p.369.

'antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates'. It precedes 'linguistic systems and 'semantic glimmerings' (*OTB* 5). It is instead the very possibility of such signs, systems and glimmerings, a condition of the primary response to the Other demanded by proximity. It is the words of a language before the mouth opens.

The matrix of signification that connotes essence is termed the 'Said' by Levinas. Presupposed by the Said is the condition for its being said. Levinas refers to this condition as 'Saying'. Saying is 'prior to language' (*OTB* 16). It is the existence or possibility of language prior to any utterance. This is what Levinas means by the signifyingness of signification. The metaphor of a spatial structure that Levinas uses to convey the concepts indicative of an 'otherwise than being' coalesces around Saying. These concepts can only ever be theoretical precisely because cognition itself is a property or consequence of the Said. The correlation of Saying and the Said, better conceived of as 'the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology' is 'the price that manifestation demands' (*OTB* 6). Nevertheless, because the Said presupposes its being said in the Saying, the 'time of the *said* and of essence there lets a preoriginal saying be heard, answers to transcendence, to a dia-chrony' (*OTB* 10). The necessity for the Saying is glimpsed in the Said. That necessity is the plurality of interlocutors presupposed by language: 'the beyond being is posited in doxic theses, and glimmers in the amphibology of *being* and *beings* – in which beings dissimulate being.' (*OTB* 7).

Saying, therefore, is response. The 'act of saying', paradoxically, 'will turn out to have been introduced here from the start as the extreme passivity of exposure to another, which is responsibility for the free initiatives of the other' (*OTB* 47). Which is to say, the instance of subjectivity arising in response to the Other is a passive responsibility for the Other's approach. In saying 'here I am' (the *me voici*, or *hineni*), the subject affirms its responsibility for the freedom of the Other to speak, a freedom both generated and guaranteed by the subjection of the subject. Zosima's active love is, prior to any act, the passive affirmation of responsibility for another. The relationship with the neighbour, Levinas writes, is 'incontestably set up in saying'. Its maintenance is

structured round 'a responsibility for the neighbour'. Saying 'is to respond to another, is to find no

longer any limit or measure for this responsibility, which […] is to be found at the mercy of the

freedom and fate […] of the other man' (*OTB* 47).

To read Dostoevsky through a Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethical framework, then, is to read the

polyphonic novel as the artistic expression of the event of being, an event manifested in the Said but

presupposing a responsibility to all, for all, initiated by the anarchical passivity of Saying. It is to

perceive the polyphonic form as composed in threshold time, as a primordial diachrony prior to the

significance of synchronic utterance or plot. It is to read in active love the trace of the subject's

primary subjection to the Other.

Myshkin's epileptic aura in *The Idiot*, in the moments preceding Rogozhin's attempt to

murder him, is one of the most significant scenes of Dostoevsky's later works exhibiting this sense of

the ethical. The narrative during this scene parses out only small and shadowy details of Myshkin's

wanderings around Petersburg, in an attempt to portray the 'tormentingly tense and uneasy' (*Idiot*

224) pre-epileptic mindset of the Prince. The scene too involves a gradually loosening relationship

with time. It begins by clearly noting the time ('almost half-past two') and demarcates Kolya Ivolgin's

regimented daily structure (*Idiot* 223). Myshkin, however, contents himself with waiting for Kolya at

Kolya's hotel without any specified objection. Realising Kolya will not return, Myshkin arbitrarily

leaves to stroll 'mechanically' without noticing 'precisely where he was going' until he finds himself

on a railway platform a few hours later (*Idiot* 223-224). Moreover, the narration itself blends

between third- and first-person, posing questions and following trains of thought that are clearly

supposed to be Myshkin's. It reads as if Myshkin's consciousness intrudes upon the narrative

consciousness, as if the threshold between the two is in a heightened state of exposure and thus

more readily traversable.

The scene is the clearest example of what Robin Feuer Miller identifies as the 'Gothic voice'

of *The Idiot*, a voice that establishes a sense of 'terror in its heightened mood and in the extreme use

of the technique of arbitrary disclosure'.[39] Yet for Myshkin himself the aura is not one of terror.

Amidst the confusion and lack of reasoning, Myshkin struggles to express a feeling of intense

harmony and joy. It is a sensation transcending the day-to-day that allows him to access what he

calls the 'highest synthesis of life' (*Idiot* 226). The impression is powerful enough to overcome the

'extraordinary need for solitude' (*Idiot* 224) with which Myshkin begins the scene, yet at the same

time it offers him 'flashes and glimpses of a higher self-sense and self-awareness' (*Idiot* 226). It

awakens in him a 'hitherto unheard-of and unknown feeling of fullness' (*Idiot* 226) by invoking

Bakhtin's dictum that one person can never find complete fullness in himself alone.

Typically, therefore, the sensation of the highest synthesis of life inspires in Myshkin a deep

desire to embrace others, to be in communion with Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna. He is imbued

with an 'unbearable surge of shame' (*Idiot* 233) before Rogozhin for unspecified deeds, and such

shame manifests as an incalculable sense of responsibility for him and for all. His belief that he is

'unpardonably and dishonourably guilty' before Rogozhin is sourced in his conviction that

compassion 'is the chief and perhaps only law of being for all mankind.' It is this unconditional

compassion that would even 'give meaning and understanding to Rogozhin himself.' It would allow

him to forgive Nastasya 'all her past, all his suffering' and 'become her servant, her brother, friend,

providence' (*Idiot* 230).

Myshkin's disposition in this scene prefigures Zosima's ethical message, characterising him

as one of the Dostoevskian characters (along with Alyosha Karamazov and Sonya Marmeladov) best

able to exemplify Zosima's active love. Yet it must be remembered that the particular sensation that

inspires Myshkin's ethical awareness is undergone in complete passivity. It is initially an 'impulse'

that 'ardently seizes his heart' (*Idiot* 224) and that fills him with 'a sort of sublime tranquillity' (*Idiot*

225). The confused narrative serves to illustrate the absence of coherence or cognition that

accompanies these pre-epileptic moments: his 'reasoning' or 'evaluation of this moment [...]

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[39] Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and* The Idiot*: Author, Narrator, Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) p.116.

undoubtedly contained an error' yet is nevertheless an 'actuality'. He 'did not insist on the dialectical part of his reasoning' (*Idiot* 226). And not only is it an actuality outside of reasoning or comprehension, it is also outside of time. The 'ultimate second' (*Idiot* 226) preceding the epileptic fit exists only in the diachrony of threshold time. It comes to be, to borrow the 'extraordinary phrase' from Revelations, in the instant that '*time shall be no more*' (*Idiot* 227). The epileptic moment Myshkin experiences but cannot describe, a moment that seems to undermine any sense of reason or coherence, can hereby be understood as a paradigm of the ethical Saying in a Levinasian sense. Although it must be reduced to the Said in order to be understood and thus narrated for the reader, the text makes clear that there is always already a delay between the moment itself and its narration: Myshkin can 'reason about it sensibly' only when 'his morbid state [is] over' (*Idiot* 226). The moment itself, prior to and presupposing its narration, corresponds with Saying.[40]

Therefore, if we can read the moment Myshkin struggles to describe in this scene as an 'articulation' (albeit one that articulates that which cannot be articulated) of the diachronic Saying, we can understand not only the ethical significance of the scene itself (which is noted in many critical readings of the novel), but how the scene is emblematic of the ethical function of narrative in Dostoevsky's novels. Sarah Young's study of 'the ethical foundations of narrative' in *The Idiot* is one such critical reading that seeks to approximate the novel's ethics with its narrative structure. Young indeed identifies the scene as 'key to [Myshkin's] entire worldview'.[41] Yet her thesis is premised on the ethical freedom of characters to assert their own 'scripts' on the plot. Myshkin's 'saintly scripting', however, is not aimed at the self-assertion against prevailing societal attitudes that motivates Nastasya Filippovna, but at 'allowing the other to attain selfhood, using his stories as an example for others to imitate the reality of his life.'[42]

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[40] The conflict between the moment itself and its narration, understood as the necessary subordination of Saying to Said, will become the central topic of interrogation in Part III, particularly in Chapter 6.

[41] Sarah Young, *Dostoevsky's* The Idiot *and The Ethical Foundations of Narrative* (London: Anthem Press, 2004) p.105.

[42] Ibid., p.94.

The issue with Young's reading is the reliance on the saintly act to consecrate the narrative. Ethical responsibility exists only as potential within the narrative, subordinated to the precedence for character self-assertion. The impetus remains sourced within the character itself. It reiterates Erdinast-Vulcan's prioritisation of ethical freedom in Bakhtin, and the potential pitfalls of such prioritisation are exposed by Myshkin's ultimate failure to inspire responsibility for others at the level of plot. Scripting must retain its emphasis on action and reciprocity. It cannot serve as ethical grounding or anchorage other than through the imposition of an impulse Young recognises to be divine. It is only towards the end of her study, when considering the broader implications of scripting, that Young turns her attention to 'the centrality of character as the structural dominant in Dostoevsky's fictional world.'[43] By 'freeing his characters from subordination to the plot and allowing them to 'author' their own lives', Dostoevsky was able to 'develop strategies […] to link narrative form to the question of the self's relation to the other.' Only through the 'linkage between forms of narrative and questions of ethics' can readers of *The Idiot* espy 'a seed of hope […] which assuages some of the darkness of the novel's ending.'[44]

Young here touches upon, but does not develop, the ethical potential of the polyphonic narrative structure in itself. Her concluding comments are similar to points made by Michael Eskin in a chapter on Bakhtin during his study of ethical dialogism. Eskin, like many others, picks up on how 'Bakhtin's attention to personal answerability is directly indebted to Dostoevsky'.[45] However, Eskin builds upon this indebtedness to propose that 'in addition to simply possessing an 'ethico-religious worldview', Dostoevsky raises this worldview to the principle of aesthetic creation'. Thus, Dostoevsky 'not only prefigures Bakhtin's ethical philosophy, but, more importantly, paradigmatically stages the architectonic of coexistence in the poetic mode.' The formal structure of

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[43] Ibid., p.185.
[44] Ibid., p.186, 185.
[45] Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.98.

the polyphonic novel, therefore, is an 'exemplary' staging of 'the architectonic of co-existence on the discursive level'.[46]

Eskin here comes close to acknowledging the ethical dynamic of the polyphonic structure by recognising the poetic mode as the paradigmatic staging ground for Bakhtinian ethics. Crucially, however, narrative polyphony does not only stage discursive ethics. It also offers a paradigm for understanding the ethical composition of subjectivity itself, understood as the primordial responsibility for the Other prior to and presupposed by discourse. Both Eskin and Erdinast-Vulcan devote chapters of their respective studies to Levinas, yet both fail to conceive of the polyphonic structure as the 'articulation' of Levinasian Saying. If polyphony is paradigmatic of coexistence on the discursive level, it is only so because it is paradigmatic of coexistence on the pre-discursive level. Only this way can the ethical significance of the event of being be connoted in scenes bereft of actual dialogue, such as Myskhin's pre-epileptic aura or Alyosha's wordless response to Ivan upon hearing the tale of the Grand Inquisitor (*BK* 263). Saying is not discursive in and of itself, but the precondition for the speaking, thinking and acting subject. The price that the manifestation of polyphonic characters demands is the subordination of its pre-discursive ethical dynamic to the multiplicity of independent voices and consciousnesses.

The polyphonic novel, as the literary expression of the ethical event of being, is the articulation of ethics conceived of as Saying. Prior to their directly signifying utterance, the directly signifying subjects of the polyphonic novel must coexist in proximity. As independent voices they are an integral part of a nexus that manifests as novelistic polyphony. They are the content (comprehensible in the Said) that occupies the polyphonic form, and through them the trace of ethical Saying can be glimpsed. Polyphony is an artistic structure that articulates the nonspatial dynamic of Levinasian ethics. It is the signifyingness of its characters' directly signifying subjectivity. In offering a Dostoevskian alternative to Aristotelian tragic catharsis, Bakhtin summarises this exact position: '*the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken,* […]

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[46] Ibid., pp.98-99, 101. 'Ethico-religious worldview' is a phrase Eskin takes from *Problems* itself.

everything is still in the future and will always be in the future' (*PDP* 166). If the ultimate word has not, nor cannot, be spoken, the world turns on the diachronic potential for speaking, on the pre-discursive possibility of discourse.

<u>VI</u>

Erdinast-Vulcan effectively reaches this conclusion in her chapter on Levinas, albeit via a misreading of the hagiographic quality of 'I more than others'. She claims that Levinas's theorisation of the ethical nonreciprocity of subjectivity is centred around a 'thematic formulation or thesis' analogous to Zosima's 'imperative'. Polyphonic ethics, however, have 'little to do with what any characters say'. Rather, the 'revolutionary potential of Dostoevsky's work lies entirely in the "how," in the discursive relationship between author and character and among the characters themselves.'[47] Prompted by the recognition of Dostoevsky's 'abdication of authorial transgredience', it is

> in Bakhtin's reading, which focuses on the discursive dynamics of Dostoyevsky's novels […] that the radical move from the "said" to the "saying" is made, and it is this move that enables a conception of the ethical as predicated on the subject's discursive position in relation to the other.[48]

Leaving aside the somewhat curious assumption that Bakhtin has a more secure understanding of Saying than Levinas, Erdinast-Vulcan's misperception here stems from the insistence on equating Saying with discourse itself. It is only from such insistence that she can read 'I more than others' as an ethical dictate, rather than as a maxim that expresses the consequence of the (inexpressible) proximity constituting subjectivity. Responsibility for the Other does not develop from the response to another's call, from the actuality of the subject's discursive position in relation to the other. It is inherent in the primordial response presupposed by discourse, by language. It is the *me voici* that inaugurates and founds any such discursive position.

Hence the polyphonic subject is responsible for a total responsibility. The polyphonic structure itself is Saying: the book *as a whole* is the response to Ivan's need for ethical grounding in

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[47] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.184.
[48] Ibid.

the absence of an ultimate value. Polyphony-as-Saying reorients this grounding for, or anchorage of, post-Nietzschean subjectivity because it is prior to and presupposed by the reciprocity of dialogue. It is not the freedom to choose and to reciprocate in dialogue (i.e., the once-occurrent answerability to the self) that constitutes the ethical dynamic of polyphony, as Erdinast-Vulcan reads it. Responsibility for all is an intrinsic component of the polyphonic form. The responsibility of response emerges from it: the polyphonic subject is subject because it supports all, even before it directly signifies.

It is 'this precise sense' (*EI* 101) that Levinas intends to convey through his use of 'I more than others'. To be responsible for a total responsibility means that 'I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is the inalienable identity of the subject' (*EI* 101). The polyphonic form depends on each directly signifying subject within it for its existence and maintenance. If one subject cannot support all through the inalienable responsibility of response, the whole polyphonic dynamic fades. The repression of alterity characteristic of monologism thus becomes the operating dynamic of the artwork. For the polyphonic subject, however, it matters not whether others reciprocate the responsibility of response. That is their affair, but no one can substitute for the subject's primordial response precisely because it is prior to monologic discourse.

This is the anchorage brought about by a Levinasian/Bakhtinian reading of ethical subjectivity. The freedom of ethical agency is rooted in a Said which presupposes the responsibility of the Saying. Answerability, in the sense of ethical reciprocity, is an ensuing stage of responsibility: to be answerable for my own actions is to always already be in answer to the Other. Ethical agency must proceed from, must presuppose, my unique, once-occurrent moment in being without alibi, which is constituted by responsibility to all. Levinas explains in *Otherwise Than Being* that such an understanding in no way relegates ethical freedom to a secondary characteristic of subjectivity: the 'hither side of or the beyond being [...] does not signify an exercise of being, an essence, that is truer or more authentic [than] the being of entities. The entities *are*, and their manifestation in the said is

their true *essence*.' However, the relation of the Said to the Saying is 'beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true' (*OTB* 45). The answerability of the act, the freedom to ethically reciprocate, is the condition of Being and essence in a post-Nietzschean world no longer totalised by ontotheological absolutes. It is an essential condition of the directly signifying subject. Yet it presupposes the signifyingness of signification characteristic of Saying. The multiplicity of independent voices and consciousnesses that comprise the polyphonic novel are 'anchored' by a novel form that they themselves support. They are anchored by a responsibility to maintain the polyphonic form inherent in their very capacity to directly signify through response to others.

It is through this reconceptualisation of the ethical dynamic of polyphony that, moving into the next chapters, Dostoevsky's influence over the contemporary works can be read. This sense of the ethical instils a responsibility in the subject that, in theory, does not impinge upon the new-found freedom from absolute ethical authorities characterising the post-Nietzschean condition. It assuages the post-Nietzschean metaphysical homesickness without returning to a metaphysical home. It is this that can keep Dostoevsky buried in the ground whilst supplicating his ghost for an ethical understanding to negotiate the post-Nietzschean world. Through this ethical reassessment of Dostoevskian polyphony, it may still be said that Dostoevsky is *enough*.

PART II – ~~POST-POST~~MODERNISM

<u>Chapter 3 - Circumfession</u>

<u>I</u>

The overarching intentions of this thesis could be broadly conceived of as falling into two related categories, each of which progresses from the predominant investigation into Dostoevsky's continuing influence over the ethics of contemporary Dostoevskian literature. Beginning with the recognition that Dostoevsky's importance for the contemporary works appears anomalous within the context of an increasingly secularised post-Nietzschean society, the first category sought to reconceive of the ethics of Dostoevsky's later fiction as distinct from his long-recognised aspiration 'to create a Christian moral image that would serve as a positive example for the new generation.'[1] For Joseph Frank, such a moral image in Dostoevsky's fiction went hand in hand with its inherent 'worldly failure' (predicated, of course, by Christ's paradigmatic self-sacrifice), as encapsulated by the disastrous ending of *The Idiot* or by the otherworldly aspect and inevitably moribund trajectory of 'ethical' characters such as the Elder Zosima, Makar Dolgoruky, Marya Lebyadkin and the converted Stepan Verkhovensky. Christ's ethical message to love others as oneself stands in contrast to what Frank, quoting Dostoevsky, calls the 'law of personality on earth'.[2] The implication is that ethical salvation in Dostoevsky, read through the lens of his Orthodox faith, is reserved exclusively for the afterlife.

Yet the evidence of his ethical legacy found in Wallace, Coetzee and Rahimi (amongst others), writers whose novels present and confront a dominance of secularism in the late-20th and early-21st century, in itself challenges that implication. Shorn of faith in the afterlife, the invocation

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[1] Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.xvi.
[2] Ibid.

of Dostoevsky made by these novels thus becomes the endeavour to salvage his ethics from the wreckage of their 'worldly failure'. Part I thus sought to relocate Dostoevskian ethics away from faith by interrogating the ethical potential of the polyphonic narrative structure. In Chapter 1, I noted how Dostoevsky's focus on the immediacy of ethical choice, refuting the correspondence of his ethics with ontotheological dictates, paralleled the ethical theories of Bakhtin and Levinas, two philosophers who were likewise seeking to reconceive of ethics away from universally applicable absolutes. This in turn allowed me to equate the prominence of the voice of the Other in Levinasian/Bakhtinian theory with the many-voiced quality of the polyphonic novel. Chapter 2 then extended the findings of Chapter 1. Taking a cue from a Levinasian understanding of subjectivity as always-already called to responsibility by the voice of the Other, the chapter proposed that the polyphonic novel form binds together its multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices (of which it is composed) through an inescapable obligation towards all other voices, an obligation founded upon their pre-discursive capacity to directly signify through response to others. The polyphonic narrative structure in this sense, equatable to the Levinasian concept of 'Saying' and epitomised by the Elder Zosima's entreaty for responsibility 'more than others', opens the avenue for a secular reading of Dostoevskian ethics. It does so by replacing the 'metaphysical grounding' (to borrow Erdinast-Vulcan's term) no longer available to citizens of the post-Nietzschean world, offering an ethical basis for subjectivity that can stand as an alternative to the security of a transcendent religious or philosophical ideal.

The second category, to which the focus of this thesis now switches, seeks to assess how this proposed conception of Dostoevskian ethics motivates and is utilised by the contemporary texts. It will explore the tension between their appeal to Dostoevsky and the ethical demands of the worlds they present. It asks how they attempt, if at all, to incorporate polyphony-as-Saying into their narrative at the level of both form and content. How does the interplay between narrative ethics and the practicalities of plot action reveal itself? What does it mean to term their respective ethical outlooks as 'Dostoevskian'? It is this line of enquiry that drives the thesis hence.

In order to carry out this assessment, the two chapters that constitute Part II of this thesis will analyse the ethical context portrayed in the contemporary texts, tracing a parallel between the metaphysical 'homesickness' attributed by Erdinast-Vulcan to Levinas and Bakhtin, and the ambivalence with regards to faith and secularism that permeates the novels of Wallace, Coetzee and Rahimi. I will begin by analysing the critical tendency to identify the religious sentiments of Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethical philosophy, a tendency that, as far as this thesis is concerned, equates to the accusation that their ethics merely masquerade their underlying adherence to Russian Orthodox/Judaic faith respectively. From here, the chapter will mark an analogous critical trend in both the writings of and critical studies of Coetzee, Rahimi and Wallace: quasi-religious ethical sentiments held in check by the predominant secularism and solipsistic cynicism of both the creative setting and the context of writing.[3]

I will then build on this parallel to postulate that the contemporary Dostoevskians bear closer philosophical and creative affinities with the metaphysical homesickness of Bakhtin and Levinas than with the 'incredulity towards master and meta-narratives' characteristic of the postmodern theory and art that, chronologically, directly precede them (and with which they are most often critically associated).[4] In contrast to the postmodern incredulity towards master narratives, Linda Hutcheon defines the artistic impulse of the modernists to have been driven by their 'paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realisation of the inevitable absence of such universals'.[5] Accordingly, the moral indignation and desperation for a more ethically structured society, running concurrently with an anguished frustration towards the possibility of change and the subsequent retreat into 'pessimistic anarchistic quietism' (*DBY* 203),

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[3] The critical literature offered in English concerning the novels of Atiq Rahimi (let alone concerning *A Curse on Dostoevsky*) is scant, especially when compared to the wealth of scholarship about Wallace and Coetzee. Accordingly, noting the critical trend to identify strained ethical/religious sentiments in *Infinite Jest*, *The Master of Petersburg* and *Diary of a Bad Year* will by necessity touch only lightly on Rahimi's novel. However, *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s civil-war setting, within the context of a country in which Islam 'remains an all-encompassing way of life', indubitably suffuses the novel with a comparable religious ambivalence. *Cf.* Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2010) p.40.

[4] Hutcheon, 'Beginning to theorize postmodernism', *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1987) 10-31 (13). Hutcheon is here paraphrasing the sentiments of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition*.

[5] Ibid.

that underpins the contemporary Dostoevskian texts points towards their classification as more

modernist than postmodern. It suggests that if the contemporary texts represent a progression away

from their direct postmodern antecedents, such progression in fact takes the form of a regression.

These texts, I will argue, accuse the postmodern incredulity towards stable aesthetic and moral

values of failing to adequately address their consequent ethical solipsism. They portray a late-

20th/early-21st-century context in which postmodernism's indulgence of '[p]rovisionality and

heterogeneity' (as opposed to the 'wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing' of

modernism), whilst effective in the dismantling of any 'totalizing or homogenizing system', fails to fill

the vacuum created by the consequent dismantling of ethical imperatives.[6] Ultimately, the texts

infer that by confronting what they perceive to be the ethical vacuum of their age, they progress

from postmodernism by circling back to '*pre*-postmodern' concerns. And this confrontation is

inherent in their very invocation of Dostoevsky: in the way each of the four texts asks whether

Dostoevsky is 'enough any more'.[7]

To avoid losing itself in the notorious indistinction between modernism and postmodernism

(and their theoretical counterparts, such as New Criticism and poststructuralism), Part II will

establish its timeline through Wallace's and Coetzee's own writings and interviews, as well as from

scholarship concerning them. In Chapter 3, I give particular focus to the ways in which *Diary of a Bad*

Year and *A Curse on Dostoevsky* seek to rearticulate the ethical questioning associated with

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[6] Ibid., 17.

[7] Aside from his invocation of Dostoevsky, who (as earlier chapters sought to establish) is an author as synonymous with the transition from pre-Nietzschean (i.e., Kantian) to post-Nietzschean ethics as Nietzsche himself, Wallace is further embedded in literary and philosophical modernism through his critical association with another significant author of this period: Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987) is permeated by his interpretation of the way Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) responds to his earlier work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). For Wallace, the *Tractacus* central thesis was that 'the only possible relation between language and the world is denotive, referential.' Subsequently, the linguistic subject is divided, 'metaphysically and forever, from the external world.' The subject is therefore necessarily solipsist. Wallace claimed *Investigations* thus provided 'the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made' by postulating that language 'must always be a function of relationships between persons'. This function overcomes solipsism by theorising that the linguistic subject is first and foremost subject to the ethical basis of language (Wallace's reading of *Investigations* clearly resonates, therefore, with the Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethical theory explicated in the previous chapters). Moreover, for Wallace, the realisation in the *Tractacus* (which first appeared in English in 1922, the so-called *annus mirabilis* of literary modernism) that 'no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism […] makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me'. Even prior to the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace makes it clear that the search for a way to overcome ethical solipsism is both a defining characteristic of modernism and a significant priority of his own literary vision. See McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.44.

modernism but must do so by passing back through the postmodern turn away from the ethical.[8]

This sets up the extended meditation on Wallace that I undertake in Chapter 4. Reading *Infinite Jest*

in the light of both his contemporaneous interviews and, primarily, his well-known cultural essay 'E

Unibus Pluram', I outline in Wallace a more exhaustive formulation of what I term the 'post-

postmodern' position, a position that expresses the sense of nostalgia for, but irrecoverable distance

from, ethical grounding which unites the contemporary Dostoevskians, as well as paralleling them

with Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethical philosophy. In this way, I establish the foundation for Part III's

analysis of the relationship between polyphonic ethics and the necessity for comprehension which

underlies all aesthetic texts. The conflict between the inexpressibility of the Other and the aesthetic

demand for expression extends from both modernism's and post-postmodernism's fundamental

equivocation between pre- and post-Nietzschean conceptions of ethics. Literature's capacity to

respond to and incorporate this conflict, Part III will argue, constitutes Dostoevsky's aesthetic legacy

for the contemporary works, complementing his ethical significance for them.

II

The previous chapter addressed the scholarly tendency to critique Levinas by reading his repeated

citation of 'I more than others' as an injunction for the nonreciprocity of the ethical relationship, and

thus merely a reformulation of a religious or philosophical imperative. This tendency is typified by

Erdinast-Vulcan and (to a lesser extent) Jill Robbins, who consequently stress that 'I more than

others' occurs first in 'The Russian Monk', the hagiographic section of *The Brothers Karamazov* that

Bakhtin himself suggested was 'without a sideways glance'. As argued in Chapter 2, the line of

critique centred round the hagiographic origin and tone of 'I more than others' holds sway only if the

phrase itself is viewed as the initiation for, instead of the consequence of, a conception of the

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[8] This, I claim, is presaged by *The Master of Petersburg*'s characterisation of Nechaev, but due to *Master*'s setting my focus is weighted towards the other two texts.

subject as founded by discourse. It would indeed mark the origin of ethical subjectivity in the

Levinasian Said, rather than in the pre-discursive capacity for response theorised as Saying, and thus

constitute it as a dictate from an authoritative source necessary for the consummation of the ethical

subject. As the previous chapter sought to clarify, the perception that nonreciprocity enables ethical

subjectivity, rather than constituting its inescapable foundation, is antithetical to Levinas's entire

philosophical project. As such, it at best represents a misreading of the significance of 'I more than

others' to Levinas's oeuvre.

As a misreading though, it holds value in identifying a larger ambiguity at work in the

theories of both Levinas and Bakhtin: the extent to which their ethics seek to sublimate the

grounding of the subject by a transcendent ideal, in an inverted sense of refocusing the drive for the

sublime into an ethical theory more acceptable to a post-Nietzschean world. By making a phrase

sourced in another work the credo of his ethical position, Levinas risks reducing the core of his ethics

to an utterance that transcends his own thinking: Erdinast-Vulcan's (mis)reading imagines the Elder

Zosima (or, perhaps, Dostoevsky himself) as a type of transcendent authority for Levinas, a neo-

godhood whose wisdom offers its own form of ethical salvation to post-Nietzschean subjects. In his

short-story 'The Zahir', Jorge Luis Borges references the devotional practice of *dhikr* in Sufi Islam,

wherein the Sufis, 'in order to lose themselves in God […] recite their own names, or the ninety-nine

divine names, until they become meaningless.'[9] It is an analogous venture that Levinas is accused of

undertaking. Paralleling *The Brothers Karamazov* that too iterates variations of 'I more than others'

throughout, the phrase acts in Levinas's writings as a surrogate for the union of the discursive

subject and the pre-discursive ethical foundation for subjectivity that transcends the subject

individually.[10] One can posit, following the 'hagiographic origins' critique of Levinas to its unintended

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[9] Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Zahir', trans. Dudley Fitts in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates & James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 2000) pp.189-197 (p.197).

[10] It is worth noting here that Levinas himself defines the subjectivity's foundation in alterity as 'the very movement of transcendence'. The subject, writes Levinas, 'is not a contingent formation by which the same and the other, as logical determinations of being, can in addition be reflected *within a thought*. It is in order that alterity be produced *in being* that a "thought" is needed and that an I is needed' (*TI* 39). Discursive subjectivity, then, arises to maintain 'the distance between me and the Other', understood as 'the radical separation asserted in transcendence' (*TI* 40).

extremity, a practice similar to *dhikr* in which the endless repetition of 'I more than others' dissolves its meaning in the Said to trace the actuality of the inexpressible, pre-discursive Saying. In this sense, the phrase is Christ-like. It is an expression rendered in the Said that is intended to encapsulate the Saying: the pre-discursive ethical basis of discursive subjectivity. It replaces the incarnation (spirit-as-flesh) of Christian theology with an 'indication', with a Saying-as-Said.

And though this is a drastic reading of the role Zosima's utterance plays in Levinas, it is indicative of the persistent irresoluteness found throughout his work with regards to a transcendent ideal. In a lecture addressed during the annual *Semaine de l'Intellectual Catholique* shortly before the English-language publication of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas discoursed upon the integration of 'Judeo-Christian wisdom' (*EN* 47) within his ethics.[11] In terms of Levinas's conceiving of 'transcendence', the address expresses sentiments typical of *Totality and Infinity* and later works. At the outset, Levinas distinguishes himself from the faith of his Catholic audience, claiming not to possess 'the effrontery to enter an area forbidden to those who do not share the faith' and accepting his ideas may be 'judged insufficient by the believing Christian' (*EN* 47). Yet at the same time, his theorisation of the so-called 'Man-God' is driven by considering Christian incarnation, the 'descent of the Creator to the level of the Creature', as 'an absorption of the most active activity into the most passive passivity.' In this respect, the Man-God's 'expiation for others' (expressed specifically by the vulnerability of the flesh in the Passion story) is equatable with the 'passivity pushed to its ultimate degree' (*EN* 46) contained within his notions of ethical proximity and substitution. Levinas's reconceiving of transcendence, then, grows from 'the humility of God' demonstrated by the Passion as the supreme example of substitution. This reconceiving, he claims, 'allows for [...] a relationship with transcendence in terms other than those of naiveté or pantheism'. It is transcendence inherent in 'the idea of substitution' as predicated by the Passion that 'is indispensable to the comprehension of subjectivity' (*EN* 47). Levinas here elevates Christ's expiation

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[11] The English translation of this address, first published in French as *Qui est Jesus-Christ?*, was included in the collection *Entre Nous*. Its translated title in the collection, 'A Man-God?', is more literal rendering of *Un Dieu homme?*, the title of the original address.

for others to the archetype for the unlimited passivity of an accusative constituting subjectivity (as later articulated in *Otherwise Than Being*). In this address, the transcendence of the subject that overcomes ethical solipsism, that founds subjectivity, is put forward in Christocentric terms in spite of its initial disavowal of Christian faith.

It is from this ambivalence that Levinas isolates two distinct conceptions of 'God', which in the terms of this thesis can be understood as, on the one hand, the metaphysics of presence and totality and, on the other, the 'God' of ethics (or, alternatively, as the pre- and post-Nietzschean God). In a section of his speech worth quoting at length, Levinas summarises the transition from pagan pantheism to monotheism as the elevation of divinity within the Western philosophical tradition to an indifference towards humankind:

> The appearance of man-gods, sharing the passions and joys of men who are purely men, is certainly a common characteristic of pagan poems. But in paganism, as the price for this manifestation, the gods lose their divinity. Hence philosophers expel poets from the City to preserve the divinity of the gods in men's minds. But divinity thus saved lacks all condescension. Plato's God is the impersonal Idea of the Good; Aristotle's God is a thought that thinks itself. And it is with this divinity which is indifferent to the world of men that Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, that is to say, perhaps, philosophy, ends. As the world absorbed the gods in the works of the poets, so in the works of the philosophers the world is sublimated into the Absolute […]. Man is no longer *coram Deo*. The extra-ordinary surplus of the proximity between finite and Infinite falls back into the order. Men, their misery and despair, their wars and sacrifices, the horrible and the sublime are all resolved and summed up in an impassive order of the absolute and the totality. (*EN* 47)

With regards to religion, Levinas's project (both in this address and elsewhere) is to theorise how the 'irrefutable formalism of logic itself' engenders such divine indifference, proposed as the 'impossibility for the philosopher of thinking the face to face, the proximity and the uncanniness of God and the strange fecundity of the encounter' (*EN* 47). This is the second conception of 'God' in Levinas: the 'absolutely Other' as it 'appears to me' (*EN* 47). His address seeks to reconcile the subjective pre-discursive experience of the face to face, conceived of as 'an extravagant movement toward God', with 'a universe in which everything is God, in which everything is world' (*EN* 48). That is to say, it attempts to resituate 'transcendence' away from its extraneous relationship with the world. This relationship, built upon the impassive order of a totality, has been irreparably weakened by the collapse of the authority on which a transcendent absolute was built, typified by the Nietzschean proclamation of the 'death of God' to which Levinas's address refers (*EN* 48). The

second conception of God arises from a post-Nietzschean philosophical position, theorising the post-Nietzschean subject's relation with transcendence that nevertheless does not fall back into naiveté or pantheism. This conception has, therefore, a specific affiliation with its historic context: it is 'the great experience of our time' (*EN* 48).

Levinas's 'God' subsequently infers the 'idea of a truth whose manifestation is not glorious or bursting with light'. Instead, Levinas asks, is 'the idea of a truth that manifests itself in its humility […] not henceforth the only possible modality of transcendence?' The humility of the Passion 'disturbs absolutely' the glorification of the 'coherence of the universe': it is 'precisely not to return to the order' (*EN* 48) of totality. It is from this sense of 'truth' that Levinas opposes the Nietzschean death of God: Nietzsche's deceased God is made manifest within 'the unity of an order that makes it possible' (*EN* 48). It is a God of presence and coherence, of totalising and absolute knowledge. Levinas's reconceiving of transcendence as the humility of the self before the unknowable alterity of the Other is not, he writes,

> the feeble faith surviving the death of God, but the original mode of the presence of God, the original mode of communication. Communication does not mean certainty's presence of self to self, that is, an uninterrupted sojurn in the same – but the risk and danger of transcendence. […] The idea of a persecuted truth thus allows us to put an end to the game of unveiling in which immanence always wins out over transcendence […]. (*EN* 48-49)

The God associated with the game of unveiling, the grasping of comprehension, is dead. Levinasian ethics offer the post-Nietzschean citizen ambiguity in place of comprehension, humility in place of glory. Levinas's God is not dead but hidden. One may wonder, he writes, 'whether the true God can ever discard His incognito, whether the truth which is said should not immediately appear as not said, in order to escape the sobriety and objectivity of historians, philologists, and sociologists' (*EN* 49).

III

Levinas's address during the 1968 Week of Catholic Intellectuals has been discussed at length here because it condenses the ambivalence of his corpus of philosophical writings over the question of God/gods and religion. His overarching intention in this address is to encourage a rethinking of transcendence as the encounter with the face of the Other, the initial moment of subjectivity as subject to the Other's call. In doing so, he is able to stand 'transcendence' in opposition to the unveiling impulse of immanence that reached its ultimate elevation in the absolute knowing of the Hegelian Spirit.[12] It is through this opposition that Levinas is able to shield his persistent use of theological nomenclature from the accusation that his ethics merely extend a now-dead Western philosophical tradition. Levinas's God-incognito occupies the theoretical space between ontotheological absolutes and the Nietzschean death of God.

The vacillations found in Levinas's works between the critique of a religious tradition and the seeming continued commitment to theological concepts in his writing can thus, following the stated intention of 'A Man-God?', be framed in terms of his seeking a secular home for transcendence.[13] It is only this way that his religious ambivalence can be reconciled. In *Totality and Infinity*, he hints at this reconciliation by praising the Third Meditation for 'discover[ing] a relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority', something Descartes manages 'better than an idealist or a realist' (*TI* 211). Though the Cartesian premise of a unified and unproblematic cogito is emblematic of the Western predilection for immanence over the ambiguity of transcendence, by positing 'the infinity of God' as exceeding 'a simple thematization of God', Descartes 'leaves a door open' for an accord between

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[12] To consider the Hegelian Absolute as part of (or even the culmination of) the theological/philosophical interrogation of immanence remains a controversial position. For a detailed explication of this controversy, see Anselm K. Min, 'Hegel's Absolute: Transcendent or Immanent?', *The Journal of Religion* 56.1 (1976) 61-87. It is, I suspect, Hegel's own irresolution concerning religion that prompts Levinas's hesitation when commenting on the *Encyclopedia*. The critical takeaway, however, is that for Levinas the Hegelian Absolute represented the totalising of the world, the erosion of the transcendence of alterity as that which exceeds subjective thought. Admittedly, Levinas's language with regards to transcendence, immanence and the absolute is (perhaps deliberately) disorienting.

[13] The commitment I refer to is limited only to the writings broadly conceived of as 'philosophical', in opposition to his specifically Talmudic commentaries. Levinas scholars have often sought to distinguish his ethical philosophy from his Judaic writings, most likely in order to preserve the secular potential of his ethics. Nevertheless, as Davis points out, Levinas 'is a thinker crucially informed by his Jewish roots, though he consistently maintains that he is a philosopher rather than a theologian.' *Levinas: An Introduction*, p.93. Thus, his use of theological concepts (God, transcendence, goodness…etc.) is contrasted in a more refined sense with his critique of the Western philosophical tradition, and the role of 'god' within that tradition from Plato through to Hegel.

'the ethical relation' (which, if between people, can be considered secular) and divine

transcendence. The idea of infinity 'is not for me an object. The ontological argument lies in the

mutation of this "object" into being, into independence with regards to me; God is the other' (*TI*

211). Colin Davis notes in his commentary upon Levinas's later collection, *Of God Who Comes to

Mind*, that Levinas maintained a critical position against the 'fundamentally atheist' stance of

'ontological thinking' in that it 'acknowledges nothing outside of itself and leaves no place for

alterity.'[14] Thus, Levinas instead 'endeavours to speak of God "in a discourse which would neither be

ontology nor faith"'; and so, in his works 'the difficulties involved in talking rationally about God are

the same as those raised by alterity'.[15] The primary ethical relation, the constitution of the subject by

and through the welcoming of the Other, holds within it the potential to consider transcendence in

secular terms. Levinas's religion, writes Robert Gibbs, is 'a religion without sacrality'.[16]

Again, this reconciliation of Levinas's religious ambivalence is located within a specific

historical moment. In a 1987 interview discussing Christianity and Judaism, Levinas is forceful in his

critique of the former's role in the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust:

> Above all else, Christianity has not thwarted people from doing the things they have done – from the
> Holocaust. […] The message of the Gospels has been forever compromised by history. […] [A]ll the
> perpetrators at Auschwitz were – as children – baptized Protestants or Catholics; this did not prevent
> them from doing what they did. (*RTB* 256) [17]

The rejection of ontotheology or faith is historically motivated. The disintegration between the

'ethical truth' of the Gospels, what Levinas elsewhere affirms to be 'a common Bible between men

who belong to different traditions or who do not acknowledge themselves to be part of any religious

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[14] Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, p.96. *Cf.* 'One may call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself', *TI* 58.

[15] Ibid., p.96, 95. Davis quotes from his own translation of *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*.

[16] Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p.266. Quoted in Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.69 (fn.15). Others who have made similar pronouncements of Levinas's religious sensibilities include Robbins, who terms Levinasian religion a '*non*ontotheological theology' (*Altered Reading*, p.38), and Simon Critchley, who calls Levinas's ethics 'religion, but not theology'. See Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) p.115.

[17] Building upon footnote 13 above, the interview referenced here offers up further complications when considering Levinas's position on religion: in what way does his Judaic upbringing affect his reading of the role of God and religion in an overwhelmingly Christocentric Western tradition? Davis's chapter on 'Religion' in *Levinas: An Introduction* (pp.93-119) is particularly illuminating in this regard. It is enough for this thesis to note that Levinas's philosophical response to, for example, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche is necessarily a response to philosophy's relationship with the Christian faith. This henceforth validates the alignment of Levinas's condemnation of Christianity in the aftermath of the Holocaust with his theoretical critique of 'the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.'

tradition' (*EI* 115), and the unethical practices of humans who identify as part of such religious traditions, is confirmed time and time again in history and, for Levinas, reached its culmination with the Holocaust. It is an extension of Ivan's 'Rebellion' against theodicy for the sake of suffering children, in that those committing such unholy acts against children were, superficially at least, adherents to the ethical message of the Gospels. Yet in a different interview, three years after his condemnation of the 'Christian' perpetrators of Auschwitz, Levinas was asked whether 'the current visibility of religions signif[ied] a real return of faith?' His response was to affirm that 'this return exists. But it is not always accompanied by participation in worship and the practice of precepts.' By the early 1990s, in anticipation of the religious ambivalence of the contemporary Dostoevskian texts, Levinas reconstrued 'religions' as 'a source of consolation for adults, a foyer of true human warmth […]. Not a hidden power, but a source of kinship for mature persons. And also the assurance that it is not totally absurd to have suffered' (*RTB* 198).

What these numerous examples from his interviews and published writings evidence is that Levinas, through the early formulation, maturation and later reconsideration of his ethical philosophy, remained irresolute with regards to the relationship between ethics and religion. His conflation of the Cartesian 'Infinite' and the ethical foundations of subjectivity within the otherwise-than-being necessarily led him to postulate 'God' as 'non-thematizable in thought' (*EI* 106), and the initial assumption of responsibility for the Other as the primordial 'testifying to the glory of the Infinite' (*EI* 113). The theological legacy inherent in his writing is hereby validated in spite of the disavowal of ontotheology, something exemplified by Levinas's countenancing of the ethical transcendence of the Other (as opposed to theological immanence). Ultimately, his ethics concern the 'explosion of the human in being' (*EI* 121), the face to face, the welcoming of and responsibility for another. In this most important sense, Levinasian ethics maintain secular potential, a way to configure human relations as ethical without the reliance on a transcendental imperative or divine injunction. However, Levinas reads as if, though secular, he cannot entirely break from the

metaphysics of presence. His theological lexicon in particular betrays something touching on a nostalgia for (inverting Boethius) the 'consolations of religion' (*EI* 118).

It is precisely this nostalgia, and the tension it creates between the secular potential and the theological evocations of his ethical philosophy, that allows for multidirectional pathways between the writings of Dostoevsky, Levinas, Bakhtin and the contemporary texts to be created and traversed. Building upon that which Erdinast-Vulcan, referring only to Bakhtin, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, termed 'metaphysical homesickness', the contention of Part II is that each of the writers analysed by this thesis shares a common nostalgia for the ethical consolations of religion. The central concerns of the contemporary writers echo both the Dostoevskian and Levinasian/Bakhtinian vexations over a post-ontotheological ethical foundation for society, in spite of the historical distance between their respective writings. Moreover, the resonance of this echoing can be identified as that which impedes the classification of the contemporary writers within the postmodern literary tradition. According to Simon Critchley, the postmodernism/poststructuralism movements that developed in the 1970s and 80s (ideologically analogous with McHale's 'long sixties') tended to either 'overlook or relegate the importance of the relation of ethics to deconstructive reading', assuming that 'ethics, conceived of as a branch of philosophy, namely moral philosophy or practical reasoning […] presupposes the philosophical or metaphysical foundation that deconstruction deconstructs.'[18] The concern of the contemporary Dostoevskians for the societally ethical, and their apparent nostalgia for its long-expired ontotheological/metaphysical foundation, therefore circles them out of that postmodern/poststructural tradition and back towards the modernist sensibilities anticipated by Dostoevsky and evident in Bakhtin's early ethics.

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[18] Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, pp.1-2.

A 'delayed book review' by Nina Pelikan Straus builds on Critchley's remarks by attesting to this movement of circling out of postmodernism and back to modernist metaphysical homesickness. Like Critchley, Straus gives her focus to a theorist whose writings are closely associated with Levinas: Jacques Derrida.[19] The 'review' treats what Straus claims to be an unacknowledged affinity between Derrida and Dostoevsky, based on the former's 'recent conversion' to a type of apophatic theology.[20] The confrontation with questions of God and faith after the supposed atheism of his earlier writings inscribes Derrida 'into a long tradition of Western thinkers and literary figures whose careers evince the classical developmental pattern of skepticism leading to affirmation and faith.'[21] Straus alleges that Dostoevsky is chief among such literary figures: Dostoevsky's infamous declaration that he would prefer to remain 'with Christ than with the truth' stands for Straus as an exemplar of the 'unfinalized' or 'impossible faith that Derrida himself articulates.'[22] Moreover, Bakhtin's diagnosis of Dostoevsky's dialogic/polyphonic narrative marks Dostoevsky as a forebear to the way Derrida 'cunningly mastered the rhetoric of undecidability.'[23]

Straus's essay goes on to juxtapose Dostoevsky's faith with Nietzschean philosophy in a similar manner to this thesis, using the Nietzschean origins of Derridean deconstruction to extend the kinship between Dostoevsky and Derrida's later writings: both, as it were, responded to the post-Nietzschean 'deconstruction' of the ontotheological God-of-presence, whether by anticipation or in retrospect. It is not necessary to recapitulate Straus's argument; significant for this chapter is Straus's pairing of the Western postmodern tradition with Derridean deconstruction theory, and her proposed timeline that reads Derrida's 'circumfession' as a circumvention of the

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[19] Nina Pelikan Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', *Common Knowledge* 8.3 (2002) 555-567. It is styled as a review of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994) and his disquieting essay 'Circumfession', which (in a typically Derridean way) supplements Geoffry Bennington's 1993 biography of Derrida. Val Vinokurov's 'Levinas's Dostoevsky' (referenced in the previous chapter) is a response to Straus's essay. For more on the philosophical relationship between Levinas and Derrida, see Edward Baring, 'Levinas and Derrida' in Michael L. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Critchley's *Ethics of Deconstruction* also provides an in-depth treatment of this relationship.

[20] Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', 555. Dostoevsky's apophaticism will be further discussed in Part III.

[21] Ibid., 556. In a different essay, Baring argues against the conversion narrative associated with Derrida's writings from the 1990s, claiming that Derrida treated theological questions in unpublished writings from his time teaching at the Sorbonne between 1960 and 1964. See 'Theism and Atheism at Play: Jacques Derrida and Christian Heideggerianism' in Baring & Peter E. Gordon (eds.), *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) pp.72-87.

[22] Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', 556.

[23] Ibid., 557.

postmodern/deconstructive position regarding both God and ethics. For Straus, the renewed image

of Derrida that emerges from 'Circumfession', of his 'carry[ing] the burden of the return of religious

longing' is less a personal spiritual trial and more of a 'cultural symptom' for a particular moment in

Western literary and philosophical theory. Situated on the other side of the deconstruction of the

metaphysics of presence, Derrida's

> twisting toward God and toward a messianic "eternal justice" marks his boredom with a narrow
> subversiveness and with the ethical evasions of Grand Theory. Derrida's gesture indicates a potential
> reembrace of religious themes in literature as it appears to concede, not the shredding of the
> Linguistic Turn, but its circumcision. […] Linking Derrida to Dostoevsky restores the significance of
> deconstruction's repression of metaphysical and ethical vocabularies in the 1970s, and invests their
> reinvention in the late 1990s with meaning.[24]

An exceedingly particular timeline is established. It begins with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. The

former wrestles with his agnosticism, oscillates between atheism and faith and ultimately recognises

God as beyond the totalising impulse of knowledge, a Christ outside of Truth. The latter falls on the

other side of the oscillation by proclaiming the death of absolutes means the death of God. The

timeline then moves from the mid-to-late 19th century to the Linguistic Turn of the early 20th.

Without further elaboration, Straus's reference to the 'Linguistic Turn' manages to incorporate both

the analytic and continental schools of thought, allowing for the more discernible influences over

Derrida around this period (Heideggerian phenomenology / Saussurean linguistics) to be considered

within the same historical context as the more prominent linguistic analysis of, say, Wittgenstein.[25]

This (potentially deliberate) reticence emphasises not the linguistic turn of a particular tradition, but

of the specific historical context of the early 20th century. Importantly, this period also includes the

early writings of Bakhtin (*Philosophy of the Act*, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', and the first

drafts of *Dostoevsky's Poetics*) and was the major formative period of Levinasian ethics.

Following Straus's timeline, the re-examination of metaphysical and ethical vocabularies

from a linguistic standpoint made way for their 'repression' in the 1970s during the heyday of

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[24] Ibid., 559.
[25] See also Katherine Rudolph, 'The Linguistic Turn Revisited: On Time and Language', *differences* 17.2 (2006) 64-95.
Rudolph's essay seeks to analyse how the analytic and continental approaches to the 'Linguistic Turn' complement each
other. In particular, it argues that for both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the turn to linguistics was 'symptomatic of
philosophy's failures' (65), again emphasising how such complementarities converge around an historical context.

theoretical poststructuralism and artistic postmodernism. If Derrida, as Straus claims, was the 'basic

spokesman' for 'postmodern discourses' that 'by the 1970s […] were either ignoring or ironizing the

themes (God's death, "demonic" excess, atheistic freedom) that had linked Nietzsche and

Dostoevsky', then his circumfession by the end of the century represented the 'smuggling back of a

recovered, transcendent dimension'.[26] It represented a 'culture' of the 1990s that displayed signs of

'fatigue concerning "disseminative undecidability"'.[27] Derrida's return to a metaphysical/ethical

vocabulary in the 90s is symptomatic of the unspoken affinity between his later writings and

Dostoevsky, and critical to this affinity is the Bakhtinian reading of Dostoevsky's polyphony.

Polyphony, or 'dialogism' as Straus understands it, retained 'the "trace" of metaphysics'; Erdinast-

Vulcan's introduction to Bakhtin sees him 'straddling an unbridgeable divide between ideological

secularity and a profound temperamental religiosity.'[28] And it is this religiosity in Bakhtin that, for

Straus, most adequately expresses the re-emergence of metaphysical vocabulary in Derrida. By the

time of 'Circumfession', Derrida's 'embracing [of] the eschaton, which he formerly appeared to

attack' marked 'the emergence of a new synthesis of dialogism with deconstruction, of a Bakhtinian

version of Dostoevskian Christianity with a messianic Jewish deconstruction.'[29] The 'unfinalized

discourse' characteristic of Dostoevskian polyphony 'functioned for literary theory as a transitional

object between deconstruction's quasi erasure and dialogism's quasi preservation of a religious

sensibility.'[30]

Thus, Bakhtin scholars that note how his theorisation of 'truth' as dialogic expresses a

'prophetic tone' that 'verges on the theological' are, effectively, advancing polyphony as a

reconceived theology to suit the secularity demanded by the post-Nietzschean.[31] By stressing the

significance of this reconceived faith to 'his earliest writings' (i.e. around the 1920s-1930s), such

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[26] Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', 561/566.
[27] Ibid., 564.
[28] Ibid., 564; Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.1.
[29] Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', 564, 563.
[30] Ibid., 562.
[31] Morson & Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, p.61. See also: 'Bakhtin sought God [in] the spaces between men that can be bridged by the word, by utterance […]. In seeking a connection between God and men, Bakhtin concentrated on the forces enabling connections, in society and language, between men.' Clark & Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p.62.

scholars place Bakhtin within the central themes, as well as the chronology, of Straus's timeline: Bakhtin emerges at the confluence of analytic and continental philosophy.[32] It is therefore this particular period, recognisable as beset by a distinctly modernist sense of metaphysical homesickness, that Straus claims is returned to in the 90s by those, like Derrida, fatigued by postmodernism/deconstruction. If Straus's timeline is to be accepted, the renewal of both the theological and the ethical following the postmodern/poststructural heyday of the 1970s, which I will henceforth warily term 'post-postmodernism', is a renewal of the modernist sensibility of metaphysical homesickness.[33] In an algebraic sense, the double 'post' of 'post-postmodernism' cancels itself out. With regards to ethics and faith, what comes 'after' postmodernism is modernism.

V

Retracing the parallels Straus makes between Bakhtin and the later-Derrida's revived interest in ethical and metaphysical vocabularies allows for a neat (albeit extremely simplified) chronological progression with regards to the metaphysical foundations for both faith and ethics. It starts with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche on either side of the Berlin Conference: both struggling to reconcile God with a growing disregard for metaphysical absolutes, with the former choosing Christ over Truth and the latter perceiving the world as composed only of 'degrees and many refinements of gradation.' It continues to the modernist sensibilities of early-20th century Europe, with a particular focus on the Interwar period, in which the 'paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values', even in the

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[32] Morson & Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, p.61. Immediately following their comment on Bakhtin's 'prophetic tone', Morson and Emerson even use a quote from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to epitomise Bakhtin's reconceived sense of faith.

[33] I was introduced to the phrase post-postmodernism by Adam Kelly's essay 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010) pp.131-146 (p.145). I am wary to use it because the term is clearly problematic. Postmodernism characteristically eschews definitive labelling, and so a progression from anything termed 'postmodern' is necessarily a postmodern gesture. Its use here, therefore, is intended only to signify a specific and narrow chronology: the way authors and theorists in the 1990s-2000s responded to authors and theorists of the postmodern/deconstruction heyday of the 1960s and 70s. Wallace himself equates the term with 'Image Fiction': American literature that evolves postmodernism by 'imagining private lives for public figures'. Since Wallace contrasts his own work from Image Fiction, his use of the term differs from my own. See 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay, 1998) pp.21-82 (p.50). Kelly's essay will further discussed in Chapter 7's close reading of *Infinite Jest*.

face of the absence of universal values, engendered a sense of metaphysical homesickness. Following this, the heyday of postmodernism/deconstruction, associated by Straus with Derrida after *Of Grammatology*, seemingly neglected or disdained both metaphysical and ethical vocabularies altogether. This then leads to a renewal of interest in ethics and metaphysics by the 1990s, typified by Straus's paralleling of Bakhtin and Derrida but more widely representative of the way responses to postmodernism and poststructuralism revive the ethical and metaphysical vocabularies of modernist metaphysical homesickness.

Disrupting this potentially neat chronology is Levinas himself. Levinas's early influences coincide with Bakhtin's: he too is one of Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphysical exiles. However, his major works are more readily associated with the poststructural heyday, particularly the 1976 publication of *Otherwise Than Being*. His later writings (he died in 1995) cannot be said to correspond to the Derridean re-embrace of the eschatological because, as explored above, his work has never neglected a metaphysical/religious vocabulary. His religious sensibility emanates through his entire oeuvre, even if this oeuvre is arbitrarily bifurcated into Judaic and philosophical categories. Why, therefore, does Levinas seem immune from the cycle of secularism, fatigue and renewal of faith?

The answer is both elegant and readily apparent: Levinas was a philosopher of ethics and being a philosopher of ethics meant he was perpetually afflicted by metaphysical homesickness. That an abundance of critical literature exists comparing Levinas with both Derrida and Bakhtin further reinforces Straus's chronology. If Levinasian ethics are commensurate with both early Bakhtin and late Derrida, then the themes and methods of either era are likewise analogous: the post-postmodern shares the traits of modernism. And Levinas, whose Dostoevsky-inspired ethics are '[i]mplicit in the return of ethical concerns to literary culture', did not abandon the modernist position because the primary focus of that position was conceiving of the ethical after the death of metaphysical (i.e., ontotheological) presence.[34]

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[34] Straus, 'Dostoevsky's Derrida', 567. Straus subsequently quotes from *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, the text born out of Derrida's speech given at Levinas's funeral, thereby suggesting that Levinas played an integral role in Derrida's supposed return to an ethical/metaphysical vocabulary.

Derrida's thematic progression, as explicated by Straus, nearly completes in his own oeuvre the historical progression from Bakhtin to the contemporary Dostoevskian texts. By claiming that Derrida's 'circumfession' (return to questions of faith) allows for a comparative reading of his late texts with Dostoevsky's fiction, and by pre-empting that comparison with a paralleling of Derrida and Bakhtinian dialogism, Straus's article effectively also identifies Bakhtin's Dostoevsky as the overarching presence of a 'post-postmodern' return to ethics, a return achievable by a Levinasian reading of the ethical. Thus, the unity of Bakhtinian polyphony and the Levinasian Saying finds its home in the Dostoevskian echoes of the contemporary texts. Straus's chronology ultimately proposes that Dostoevsky's mature works, if read through Bakhtin, create a home for the metaphysically homesick by providing quasi-religious ethical foundations for subjectivity with the potential to retain their validity in a secularised, post-Nietzschean society. If a paradoxically secular impulse towards religion can be read in these texts, it can be read through the legacy of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky. If a paradoxically post-postmodern modernist impulse can be read in these texts, it can be read through the legacy of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky. Most importantly, if a Levinasian sense of ethics shines through these texts, it illuminates the legacy of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky. Such a legacy stems from Dostoevsky's own 'poetics of subjectivity' (as Joseph Frank reads them), which refused traditional religious imagery to instead contain the relationship between the human and divine purely within 'the human psyche'.[35] It is from this that both Levinas and Bakhtin were able and willing to note that, concerning the paradise Markel dreams of in 'The Russian Monk', 'nothing is said about any cooperation of man with God in effectuating such a transformation, and it thus appears to be an entirely secular event'.[36]

Reconstituting Dostoevskian ethics as laden with secular potential, a reconstitution achieved through the coalescence of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky with the ethical transcendence of the Other's voice, completes an important last step in recognising how the contemporary works signify

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[35] Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.885.
[36] Ibid., (fn.5).

Dostoevsky's ethical relevance. If the contemporary texts, following Straus's chronology for Derrida, recall modernist concerns, they evoke a thematic position familiar to some of Dostoevsky's most notorious characters. Raskolnikov, Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov (to name but three) each, in their own way, are driven by the tension between 'seeking for God' (*Demons* 250) and the concession that '[e]verything is always shallow and listless' (*Demons* 676). This tension comes to the fore in *The Brothers Karamazov* immediately preceding Ivan's 'Rebellion'. Preparing to level against Alyosha the accusation that any theodicy involving the suffering of children is insufficient, Ivan first confesses

> "[…] My dear little brother, it's not that I want to corrupt you and push you off your foundation; perhaps I want to be healed by you." Ivan suddenly smiled just like a meek little boy. Never before had Alyosha seen him smile that way. (*BK* 236)

The confession is crucial in revealing Ivan's struggle between faith and the atheism that would ultimately engender the ethical relativism of 'everything is permitted'. It does not just reveal the irresolvable tension of this struggle: it betrays Ivan's longing to return to a 'childlike' state of innocence, a theoretical 'pre-Nietzschean' age in which the security of his ethical foundations was without threat. The age reversal between the two brothers is telling: the little boy Ivan *needs* the spiritual strength of his brother to remain incorruptible as he explains why he can no longer 'accept the world' (*BK* 236).

Ivan's ideological battle with Alyosha is here shown to be a precursor of modernist metaphysical homesickness. The same sentiments pour forth from a wealth of different characters in the mature works: Versilov, Stavrogin, Kirillov, Shatov, Raskolnikov, Grushenka, Ippolit…etc. All, in their own way, are tormented by the longing for ontotheological foundations they can no longer rely on. A long-standing critical tendency has highlighted the parallels between Ivan and Nietzsche, with a focus on Nietzsche's own formulation of 'everything is permitted' that appears in *Zarathustra*, *The Genealogy of Morals* and some of his posthumous fragments.[37] In this respect, then, the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, along with Raskolnikov's great men, Kirillov's Man-God, Ippolit's 'Explanation' and Shatov's 'god-bearing' (*Demons* 252) Russian nation are all, in their own ways, aligned with

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[37] This critical tendency is given an overview in Paolo Stellino's introductory remarks to Part II of his study, *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: On the Verge of Nihilism* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015) pp. 145-152.

Nietzschean philosophy: they all seek to work through and overcome the tension between the disavowal of ontotheological ethical foundations and the desire for them.

The contemporary works, however, return to this metaphysically homesick concern having undergone the postmodern/poststructural repression of metaphysical and ethical vocabularies. If modernist interest was piqued by the ideological battle between Ivan and Alyosha, contemporary Dostoevskians must also contend with the battle between Ivan and Smerdyakov. Smerdyakov here represents the acceptance of 'everything is permitted', understood as an aphorism for post-Nietzschean moral relativism, which stands him in Straus's timeline as emblematic of poststructuralism.[38] The contemporary texts thus face the allegation of having been 'a former brave man' (*BK* 633), brave enough to have disregarded questions of faith or the ontotheological foundations of ethics. The works need to refute both Alyosha and the Grand Inquisitor: the case they make for their ethics cannot rely on ontotheology but must emerge intact from the consequences of European totalitarianism during the first half of the twentieth century.[39] Only then can they respond to Smerdyakov's accusation of cowardice, of being unwilling to stomach the horrors that predate them.

A Levinasian reading of Dostoevskian ethics that bases itself on the polyphonic structure of his novels must therefore expose the contradiction inherent in Ivan's rebellion against theodicy, a contradiction that, like the vacillation between the unknowability of alterity and the security of metaphysical foundations which constitutes both modernist and post-postmodern theory and art, is irresolvable. 'Everything is permitted' is in defiance of the predetermination of a divine ordinance. Ivan's rebellion is precisely against a world in which the suffering of children is the price paid for the kingdom of heaven on earth: their suffering is in this sense preordained. Yet 'everything is

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[38] His utter aversion to the religious pomposity of his adoptive father, Grigory Kutuzov, lends further weight to this analogy. Straus, of course, is not suggesting that poststructural/postmodern theory and art advocate, or even pave the way for, Smerdyakov's criminality. The analogy merely illustrates how Smerdyakov has outgrown Ivan's spiritual questioning to embrace his atheism and moral relativism. It is Dostoevsky himself that equates such an embrace with Smerdyakov's amorality and capacity for crime, as he also does with Pyotr Verkhovensky.

[39] It is of course worth remembering that, after the death of the Elder Zosima, Alyosha too succumbs to his own sense of metaphysical homesickness, the spiritual crisis related in Book 7 of *The Brothers Karamazov* (*BK* 327-363).

permitted' would likewise foster suffering, would lead to the acknowledgement that 'evildoing' is 'reasonable' and even 'necessary' (*BK* 69). Either terrible things happen because God ordains them, or terrible things happen because there is no God to prevent them happening.

The former argument requires a subjection to a higher Truth, an access through faith to an infinite Other. The latter argument, however, relies solely on an ethical obligation to the Other that recognises the eternal failure of the knowing subject to totalise the world, in which that subject's freedom is called into question. In rebelling against God, Ivan opens up the opportunity for a world in which 'God' is precisely the relations between people, in which the potential for becoming takes precedence over the objectivity of being. The atrocities remain in both worlds. In the latter, however, they do not have to. The Grand Inquisitor wants to replace a spiritual totality with a secular one, but Ivan's rebellion is not against spirituality: it is against totality. Levinas's 'God' is the secular relations between people: though unfeasible, the universal realisation of ethical obligation remains one of the possibilities permitted by Ivan's rebellion.

VI

This is the position from which an analysis of contemporary Dostoevskian literature can begin. The Introduction defined 'contemporary Dostoevskian' works as those that, while identifying their compositional debt to Dostoevsky, simultaneously evoke an irrecoverable gap, a non-traversable axiological distance, between Dostoevsky's era and the present day. And although such an axiological distance could in theory express any sociohistorical era, the particularity of contemporary Dostoevskian literature is its manifestation as a nostalgia for the stability of axiological foundations that likewise infuses Dostoevsky's polyphonic works, especially with regards to ethics. That nostalgia comes to the fore in characters such as Sonya Marmeladov, Makar Dolgoruky, Prince Myshkin, the Elder Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov: such characters come to represent the spiritual and ethical harmony of stable metaphysical foundations, strong enough to withstand the ethical turbulence that

besets them (excepting for the denouement of *The Idiot*). It is to Sonya, to Myshkin and to Alyosha that the proto-modernist, metaphysically homesick characters of Dostoevsky's novels turn to for reassurance. And in this way such figures represent the perceived security of Dostoevsky's choice, straddling the divide between the pre- and the post-Nietzschean, to remain with Christ through his era's renunciation of absolute metaphysical 'truth', thereby evincing the 'home' to which the metaphysically homesick desire to return.[40] It is that sense of nostalgia, weighed against the ultimate disavowal of absolute truth (concretised by the economic and humanitarian desolation of the 20th-century West), that provoked the reassessment of Dostoevsky's ethics with a view to diagnosing their secular potential. This reappraisal of the polyphonic structure as the articulation of the pre-discursive ethical foundation for subjectivity is ultimately what allows Dostoevsky's polyphonic works to progress past archaism and retain their ethical significance to a post-Nietzschean world.

Furthermore, for the contemporary texts this nostalgia is filtered through the subsequent decline not only of absolute ethical foundations but of significant preoccupation with ethics or metaphysics that typified poststructural/postmodern theory and culture. In this sense, the nostalgic evocation of Dostoevsky that occurs within literature of the recent past does not necessarily signify the desire to return to the stability of absolute ethical foundations, to the security of either Christ or Truth. It instead signifies the desire to return to a state wherein the loss of such foundations was keenly felt, a state beset by those exiled from and homesick for metaphysical/ethical foundational premises. Such works must endorse Ivan's rebellion against theodicy, a necessity borne out by their retrospective position at the end of the 20th century. Yet at the same time they express Ivan's spiritual and moral anguish regarding the consequences of his rebellion, not merely fearing but able to historically confront the self-serving moral relativism of Smerdyakov and 'everything is permitted', and the perverted political manipulation of the Grand Inquisitor. The nostalgia for Dostoevsky that

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[40] As Part III will go on to show, the perception of a choice is more significant for the contemporary texts because it makes manifest the conditional capacity *to choose*. It is not so much the metaphysical security Dostoevsky's choice represents, but the validity of such security when weighed up against the post-Nietzschean renunciation of absolute values. That Dostoevsky's works can still present an equivocation over either Christ or 'truth' is fundamental to the hesitancy that constitutes Dostoevsky's artistic legacy, a hesitancy which, as Chapter 6 will argue, can be traced back to the dual function of language as a means for both cognition and discourse.

pervades the contemporary texts is thus a cardinal marker for identifying how they return to

modernist motifs, namely the inclination to reimagine ethics for the post-Nietzschean world.

As a result of this correlation between the nostalgia for Dostoevsky and the return to

modernist themes regarding the ethical, a further significant characteristic of contemporary

Dostoevskian literature is its laboured, potentially critical assessment of its immediate postmodern

forbears. Of course, the phenomenon of authors distancing themselves from their influences is

readily apparent throughout the history of literature; following the legacy of the critical study of

influence from Eliot to Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Boom, all authors at all times maintain a

complex relation with a pre-existing literary 'tradition', bedevilled by the 'anxiety of influence' as

they confront and seek to overcome the 'burden of the past'.[41] The peculiarity of Dostoevskian

literature however is that it calls forth Dostoevsky's spectre by way of opposing that burden. It has a

twofold relation with its literary antecedents. It seeks to 'break with' the postmodernism of the 70s

by recalling the literary tradition that 70s postmodernism supposedly breaks with, in that it seeks a

binding ethical premise to serve its own era, despite binding ethical premises having been deemed a

relic of the past. A parallel can hereby be established between the nostalgia for Dostoevsky that

unites the contemporary works and their respective sense of frustration with or disavowal of the

heritage of postmodern literature. A refusal to condone the ethical outlook of

postmodernism/poststructuralism, counterbalanced by the inheritance of postmodern literary

tropes and/or techniques, is the first point of entry for reassessing Dostoevsky's ethical influence

over the contemporary texts.

This hesitancy with regards to postmodern literary techniques is picked up by Derek Attridge

in his study of Coetzee's novels up to *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003. Of Coetzee's two Dostoevskian

novels, on the surface it is the formal innovation of *Diary* that more distinctly demonstrates the

'aesthetic element ascribed to the postmodern text', such as 'the predilection for "anti-form" over

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[41] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1998) pp.27-33; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971).

form, through the focus on process, textuality, and intertextuality, to the commitment to antinarrative, playfulness, and *jouissance*.'[42] And the distinctly postmodern style of *Diary* has been elsewhere critically recognised: David Atwell calls *Diary* a 'postmodern critique of the modern', whilst James Gourley claims *Diary*'s 'formal codes […] are more productively realised within the context of a postmodern aesthetic'.[43] Yet even prior to the publication of *Diary*, Attridge analyses how, because of 'its use of nonrealist or antirealist devices, its allusiveness, and its metafictional proclivities, Coetzee's fiction is often adduced as an example of "postmodernism."' Attridge, however, claims it would 'be more accurate […] to characterize it as an instance of "later modernism," or perhaps "neomodernism"; Coetzee's work follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth.'[44] Moreover, in discoursing on ambiguous and changeable conceptualisations of modernism and postmodernism, and of the difficulty in categorising Coetzee as either, Attridge lists other Coetzee scholars such as Attwell and Neil Lazarus who too tend to think of Coetzee as more of a modernist than a postmodernist.[45] In particular, Attridge cites Stephen Watson's 'Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee', which claims that 'the modernism which is very obviously his intellectual inheritance' can be identified by 'its quasi-religious, mythic bias, its attempt to restore to the world a quality of being emptied out of it by modern political and technological developments.'[46] Watson's definition of modernism as driven by the impulse to restore the world to a 'quality of being' is easily compatible with Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphysical homesickness, further embellished by its equation with the 'quasi-religious'. For Watson, Attridge and others, Coetzee's divergence from the postmodern literature of the long sixties is correlative with his inheritance of a specifically

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[42] Platt, 'Introduction: postmodernism – rupture, tradition, historical reason?' in McHale & Platt (eds), *Postmodern Literature*, pp.17-24 (p.19). Platt derives his definitions from Ihab Hassan, 'The Culture of Postmodernism', *Theory, Culture and Society* 2.3 (1985) 119-131. Platt is actually commenting on how such techniques are anticipated in literature by both *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, as well as in pictorial art.

[43] Atwell, 'Mastering authority: J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *Social Dynamics* 36.1 (2010) 214–221 (217); James Gourley, 'The Postmodern Truths of J. M. Coetzee' in Chris Andrews & Matt McGuire (eds.), *Post-Conflict Literature: Human Rights, Peace, Justice* (London: Routledge, 2016) pp.83-95 (p.90).

[44] Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005) p.2. Gourley too notes that Coetzee's apartheid-era writing might 'with justification […] be classified as late modernist' (p.90).

[45] Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, p.2 (fn.5).

[46] Stephen Watson, 'Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee', *Research in African Literatures* 17.3 (1986) 370-392 (385).

modernist nostalgia for the world's 'quality of being', for secure metaphysical and ethical foundations.

This nostalgia is ingrained in the semantic configuration of *The Master of Petersburg*. Of the four novels to be analysed, *Master* is the one that most directly summons Dostoevsky's ghost, and it is an act that is paralleled in the novel's crucial final scene in which the fictional Dostoevsky creates an early prototype of Stavrogin from the memory of his deceased son, Pavel. This paralleling of the creation *of* the novel and the central creative act *in* the novel gestures a helical, even Fibonacci-like structure: the novel extends beyond itself only to circle back in. The impasse that results from this gesture underpins both 'Dostoevsky's' and the novel's vexation with its chronological position. Both are forcefully enclosed within their own present, unable to fully revitalise a departed past. Dostoevsky's attempts to recall Pavel can only be achieved through his acceptance of Pavel's 'corruption' by the fictional Sergei Nechaev (which is to say, through the corruption of his memory of Pavel as ethically incorruptible). His conjuring of Stavrogin is enacted when he allows himself to dwell upon the image of Pavel's body in a morgue (*MoP* 241), an image evocative of Holbein's *Christ* and the consternation it causes Prince Myshkin (*Idiot* 218). In order to bring Pavel into his present, Dostoevsky must acquiesce to that part of his mind that fears Christ can die and decay. In the battle for Pavel's soul, played out as the dialogues between himself and Nechaev, he must concede that 'he has lost, and he knows it.' Nechaev, like Smerdyakov, represents the endorsement of the moral relativism of 'everything is permitted', and this version of Dostoevsky 'has lost because, in this debate, he does not believe himself' when he offers moralising sermons in response. 'Everything is collapsing: logic, reason' (*MoP* 201-202).

In the same vein, *Master*'s composition evolves from the vexation over Dostoevsky's passing, the frustration that he cannot be revitalised as he was before. If Nechaev is another embodiment of Smerdyakov's embrace of 'everything is permitted', Pavel represents the range of Dostoevsky's own metaphysical exiles, from Raskolnikov to Ivan Karamazov, caught between the disavowal of ethical principles and the trepidation about amorality. In a scene where Nechaev

repudiates divine grace, he uses *Crime and Punishment*, published three years before the *Master*'s

setting, as the epitome of 'a new age where we are free to think any thought […] – it's what

Raskolnikov said in your own book before he fell ill!' Dostoevsky, in turn, accuses Nechaev of not

knowing 'how to read' (*MoP* 201) Raskolnikov's spiritual angst, reducing such angst to a

psychological aberration from Raskolnikov's clear and single-voiced support of Russian nihilism.

Determining whether Pavel did or did not side with Nechaev's nihilism thus drives the plot, but the

eternal oscillation of the memory of Pavel, claimed and counter-claimed by Dostoevsky and

Nechaev, captures the Zeitgeist of the novel's setting. Pavel's passing, Dostoevsky's grief, and his

exasperation that he cannot bring Pavel back to life run parallel with *Master*'s own position

regarding the historical Dostoevsky. Pavel's passing leaves only Nechaev, in the same way that

modernist metaphysical homesickness makes way for the withdrawal of ethical and metaphysical

vocabulary during postmodernism/poststructuralism. This is the underlying reasoning behind a semi-

fictional, rather than a strictly biographical, portrayal of Dostoevsky. The spectre of Dostoevsky that

stands as the protagonist of *Master* wants to, but cannot, revise the ethical irresoluteness of Pavel,

just as the novel itself seeks a return to questions of ethics but must do so through the shadow of its

immediate postmodern forbears*.*

Furthering this compositional parallel is the fact that the fictional Dostoevsky of the novel is

himself an exile coming back to a home he can no longer fully inhabit. The novel opens with

Dostoevsky returning to St Petersburg in 'October 1969' (*MoP* 1) from Dresden, where the historical

Dostoevsky was living at that time. Perhaps because of the historical Dostoevsky's desire to avoid

gambling debtors, or perhaps to ease his claim over Pavel's posthumous affairs and possessions (and

perhaps to retain an illusory sense of connection with his deceased stepson), the fictional

Dostoevsky attempts to give his name as Isaev, Pavel's surname and the name of his biological

father, to the landlady Anna Sergeyevna and councillor Maximov (who is investigating Pavel's death).

Yet neither Anna nor Maximov takes the bait (*MoP* 4/34). Dostoevsky is thus caught between a futile

desire to feel like he belongs both in Petersburg and in Pavel's life, and the externally confirmed recognition that he does not.

A structural equivalence can therefore be established between the fictional Dostoevsky's familial relations and the timeline laid out by this chapter. In this equivalence, Pavel emerges as the archetypal metaphysically homesick modernist. Like the historical Dostoevsky's own homesick characters (Ivan, Raskolnikov, Stavrogin…etc.) Pavel is a young man in the midst of Russia's crisis of modernisation, forced to choose between the memory of his deceased father Isaev and the burgeoning, pseudo-Nietzschean amorality of Nechaev. A scene in which Dostoevsky and Anna Sergeyevna discuss Isaev brings the parallel to light: Pavel is shown to have 'romanticize[d]' Isaev to the point of making 'a certain cult' (*MoP* 137) of him. Yet Dostoevsky points out that, while alive, Isaev 'was a drunkard, a nobody, a bad husband' (*MoP* 137). It is in fact these failing qualities that prompted the rise of Nechaev and his ilk: the 'sickness of this age of ours', claims Dostoevsky (reiterating the premise of *Demons*), is 'young people turning their backs on their parents, their homes, their upbringing, because they are no longer to their liking! Nothing will satisfy them, it seems, but to be sons and daughters of Stenka Razin or Bakunin' (*MoP* 137-8).

The fictional Dostoevsky's position, therefore, compares with the post-postmodern stance of *The Master of Petersburg*. In his outburst against Isaev, Dostoevsky reveals both his rejection of who Isaev was and his envy of what Isaev represented to Pavel. Pavel, it is implied, infuses Isaev with a sense of nostalgia which belies the values Isaev actually represents: Isaev can thus be read as the security of ontotheological absolutes, no longer present and actively being questioned. Dostoevsky, who tries but fails to assume Isaev's identity, is throughout the novel attempting to resurrect Pavel: he wears Pavel's clothes, inhabits Pavel's lodgings and writes with Pavel's pen. He is thus the post-postmodernist, in a never-guaranteed process of renewing Pavel's own metaphysical homesickness. And because of his awareness of how Pavel may have been corrupted by Nechaev, he must also face Nechaev's own accusations of having been a former brave man. He knows that for Nechaev he can only ever appear to be 'the face of a stranger from the past' (*MoP* 9).

VII

The three other texts to be analysed portray settings more coetaneous with their publication years: *Infinite Jest* (1996) is set mostly in a fabricated 2009, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* (2011) takes place during Afghanistan's factional *mujahideen* wars of the early 1990s, and the Strong Opinions of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008) are dated between 2005 and 2006. This setting on the other side of the postmodern turn from a unified ethical theory permits a more discernible nostalgia for ethical questioning than the structural parallel *Master* establishes between its historical setting and its year of publication. *Diary* is perhaps most ostensible, betraying the 'metaphysical hunger' (*DBY* 138) of its protagonist, C, for a now 'alien […] ideal of spiritual transformation' (*DBY* 135) as both the motivation for most of his essays and the tension of the underlying plot. The nostalgia for the 'ethically better' Dostoevsky is framed by the continual polarisation between C's 'old world' (*DBY* 20), conveying an abundance of 'moral nobility' (*DBY* 131), and the 'thoroughly modern' world of Anya and her partner Alan that by contrast regards such moral nobility as 'alien and antiquated' (*DBY* 137).

Serving as a microcosm for this transition is C's Strong Opinion on Machiavelli (*DBY* 17-18) that tells of the displacement of 'the absolute claims of the Christian ethic' by 'the dualism of modern political culture, which simultaneously upholds absolute and relative standards of value.' It uses the trope of torture to display the predominance of ethical relativism within both the political and socio-cultural discourses of the early 21st century: during a phone-in radio show, 'ordinary members of the public' assert without contradiction that the torture of political detainees (later essays include 'On Al-Qaida' and 'On Guantanamo Bay') is both worthy of condemnation and sometimes politically necessary. The contemporary disposition to infringe upon an absolute moral stance for personal or political benefit, C claims, descends from Machiavellian *necessitá*, which deposed the 'old, pre-Machiavellian position' that held 'moral law as supreme.' Such absolute

positions exist only as residual ideological markers that symbolise, but do not correspond with, the foundations of the modern state: they are now-empty signifiers that have been gradually drained of semantic value via an historical transition towards relativism that began with Machiavelli, reached its apotheosis in Nietzsche (contemporaneous with 'everything is permitted') and, by the time of *Diary*, completely saturates politics ('On Left and Right' / 'On Tony Blair'), economics (Alan's pseudo-Nietzschean neoliberalism) and even language ('On English Usage'). The radio callers' acquiescence with regards to political torture exhibits how 'the quintessence of the Machiavellian', and therefore of the modern, 'has been thoroughly absorbed by the man in the street.'

C's ideological stance against both Western politics and culture mirrors his relationship with Alan and Anya: both can be defined, as he later describes, as 'pessimistic anarchistic quietism'. This self-classification, however, exposes C's fringe position within the dynamic of the world *Diary* presents. It identifies him as apart from 'the man on the street', a role subsequently shown to be more applicable to Alan and Anya. And in this it not only offsets C's ideological antagonism to Machiavellian modernity, a position 'reluctant to compromise moral principles' (*DBY* 125), it also diminishes the validity of his critique.[47] His pessimism for the possibility of change and his desire to withdraw from any kind of political stance abates the potency of his oppositional position to what the novel portrays as a social, cultural, political and ethical ideological dominance. It situates him instead as ideological residue, a half-heard echo of a voice no longer worth listening to. Anya, commenting on the Strong Opinions, suggests that C instead write fiction or comedy: only then will readers 'shut up and listen to you' (*DBY* 55). Elsewhere she compares his essays to lectures 'on a soap box' (*DBY* 73), conjuring an image of outdated, redundant and largely ignored public speakers.

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[47]Attwell's essay on *Diary* argues that C recalls 'premodern' categories 'such as *honour* and *shame* and *the curse*' by way of critiquing 'Enlightenment principles'. Such an argument would seem to overlook that the Machiavellian quintessence that pervades *Diary's* modern setting is itself a way of counteracting such principles. C is claiming that the critique of Enlightenment principles has been accomplished, but that no viable ethical solution has been established to replace those principles. Nevertheless, Attwell's essay makes a gesture not dissimilar to this thesis. By suggesting that 'the premodern is invoked' in *Diary's* postmodern critique of the modern, Attwell in fact reiterates Attridge's difficulty in classifying Coetzee as either a modernist or a postmodernist. For both, the ethical tension in Coetzee manifests as the nostalgia for metaphysical grounding (be that modern, premodern, Enlightenment…etc.) and the awareness that such grounding is irrecoverable. See Attwell, 'Mastering authority', 217.

By self-identifying as both anarchist and quietist, C sets himself against the machinations of the state and its people, and in doing so leaves himself open to disdain at best and ridicule at worst. In the former case, he himself acquiesces to his own irrelevance, claiming his Strong Opinions form a front for his true desire to 'grumble in public […] to take magical revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies' (*DBY* 23). And C's own admission that his nostalgia for universalising moral principles belongs to the realm of fantasy offers evidence of the way *Diary* too presents him as a risible figure. A parallel is established between his longing for a bygone era and his sexual desire for Anya, particularly in his discourse on the metaphysical hunger that animates the ideal of spiritual transformation. It harks back to the 'metaphysical ache' (*DBY* 7) he feels during his first encounters with Anya. The novel minimises C's critique of modern political dualism by comparing it with an old man's wish for youth and virility. The possibility of a world populated by moral principles is suggested to be as unlikely and as carnival as C's sexual union with Anya. And by extension, C's sexual jealousy of Alan can be read as a tacit endorsement of Alan's neoliberal amorality. Alan and Anya's Machiavellian quintessence emerge as the novel's Yeatsian Byzantium, offered a begrudging encomium by C as he and his ethical principles are banished to an era more suitable for old men.

Understanding *Diary*'s plot arrangement in terms of C's pessimistic/quietist withdrawal from modern political culture, a self-imposed reclusiveness made in lament at society's decreased adherence to moral principles, makes apparent how it reiterates the ethical dynamic of contemporary Dostoevskian literature. The tragedy of the modern world, as C sees it, is the abandonment of ethical principles. Yet *Diary* offers only an equivocal loyalty to C. On the one hand, it seemingly advocates his views both by giving paginal priority to his essays and by presenting him as the quasi-protagonist of the story. Yet on the other, *Diary* undermines C's narrative position through Anya's often contrasting point of view, through the ridicule he suffers from Alan, and through the way he both self-presents and is narratively shaped as in opposition with *Diary*'s contemporary society. The novel itself, therefore, is less an endorsement for the return of ethical/moral principles and more a hesitant and self-critical reintroduction of ethical questioning.

C's critical position, set against the dualism of modern political culture that uses necessity to validate amorality, can be read as synonymous with the postmodern turn from ethical/metaphysical vocabulary: such vocabulary, like C himself, seems drained of its semantic weight and can only resonate as antagonistic to the common, the everyday, the 'man on the street'. This is the basis of *Diary*'s post-postmodern ethical position. The novel depicts the amorality of the early 21st century, yet discredits adherence to universalising ethical values and principles as relics of a long-dead past. Like *The Master of Petersburg*, it too must formalise its relationship with 21st-century ethics by and through a circling back, returning to the very question of ethical action only by passing back through postmodern disinterest.

Ultimately, though the interaction between C, Anya and Alan proposes that the diagnosis itself (the willingness to identify the ethical malady of modern political culture for what it is) is the first stage of recovery, *Diary* presents this circling back to ethical questioning as a venture that always walks along its own fault line, risking self-disintegration. Whilst on the one hand, *Diary* reiterates C's despondency regarding the amorality of the modern world, both by presenting Alan (the modern amoral prototype) as a legal and ethical criminal, and by marking Anya's development as a character as a rejection of Alan in favour of a greater acceptance of C's outdated nuances, on the other, its embeddedness in characteristically postmodern narrative techniques, a trait it shares with the other contemporary Dostoevskian novels, affirms its recognition that C's advocation of ethical principles is nostalgic and impractical for 21st-century Western societies.

VIII

Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky* reiterates the reading of the Coetzee novels offered above in that it too exhibits the tendencies of a return to questions of ethics in the wake of postmodernism that this chapter has classified as 'post-postmodern'. It is a novel set in a warzone that exposes the absurdities of war, and it does so by re-presenting the ethical crisis of Dostoevsky's *Crime and*

Punishment in a context that dooms that crisis to an ever-perpetuating failure. Rassoul follows

Raskolnikov in committing a murder and theft early in the narrative and then spending the

remainder of the plot action processing the social and psychological consequences of his crime. Yet

although Rassoul, like his Dostoevskian archetype, seems to teeter throughout upon psychological

collapse (disturbing nightmares, a feeling of isolation, and unwarranted anger towards friends and

strangers are features of both protagonists), he does not parallel Raskolnikov's progression from sin

to guilt to post-scriptural atonement. It is as if Rassoul is already aware from the beginning that his

crime is ethically wrong. Instead, in the context of a warzone, he seeks acknowledgement from

others to confirm his guilt. He kills and steals in the hope that he will be damned for murder and

theft, because such damnation will at least testify to the existence of a counterweight to wartime

amorality. And it is the failure of his society to condemn him that generates Rassoul's psychological

malaise. As he admits to a law clerk (the closest thing he can find to a legal presence in Kabul), it is

not 'guilt' that besets him. He is 'struggling to come to terms' with his crime 'because it hasn't

surprised anyone. And no one understands it.' (*CoD* 199-200)

What isolates Rassoul from the rest of the society he inhabits, then, is that he possesses a

kind of moral compass, an inclination for the difference between right and wrong action. That moral

compass would be validated by the condemnation of Rassoul, and Rassoul could therefore use it to

orient himself within Afghanistan's internecine chaos. Moreover, the novel suggests that Rassoul's

sense of morality is drawn from his immersion in Dostoevsky, a figure from another place and time.

Rassoul wants *Crime and Punishment*'s central message to mean to him in Afghanistan in the 1990s

what it meant to Raskolnikov in the 1860s. As I noted in my introductory comments on the text,

Rassoul claims Dostoevsky was a 'mystic' who 'went beyond individual psychology to dwell on the

metaphysical.' It is this mystic sense of a primordial responsibility for others that Rassoul has

inherited from Dostoevsky which isolates him from his society: his belief is that teaching the

responsibility for others which emanates from Dostoevsky's mysticism 'would decrease the number

of murders' (*CoD* 46). Rassoul's desire to 'give my crime some meaning' (*CoD* 181), therefore, arises

through his internal channelling of Raskolnikov's perspective, a perspective that represents a past era when morality still had a strong enough hold to pull a protagonist through the journey of sin, atonement and subsequent redemption.

In this way, Rahimi layers Rassoul's frustrated wish to replicate Raskolnikov's ethical crises over the particular historical period in Afghanistan that best epitomises postmodernism's turn away from questions of ethics. Throughout, Rassoul finds institutions and ideologies that might once have oriented his life, through an adherence to or divergence from codified, abstract principles, no longer able to serve purpose. Although what Thomas Barfield calls the 'cultural framework of Islam' is still very much evident in *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, through Koran recitals (*CoD* 84-86), mourning prayers (*CoD* 108) and the Islamic concept of *tobah* (*CoD* 146, also called *tawba*, meaning religious repentance), the divine hold over people's ethical capacity is portrayed as tenuous.[48] Outside a mosque, an overheard conversation concerning Adam and Eve asks, 'Who gives a damn about sin when you're hungry?' (*CoD* 148), a question that encapsulates how the novel portrays the asymmetry of the ideal and the practical with regards to religion in a warzone setting. Later, during Rassoul's discussion with the law clerk in which they reject the Karamazovian premise that everything is permitted without God (based on the frequency of atrocities in Afghanistan, despite the prevalence of Islam), Rassoul offers a cynical alternative to Voltaire that summarises *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s critical position on religion: 'if [Allah] exists, it is not to prevent sins but to justify them' (*CoD* 182).

Other ideological apparatuses are treated in a likewise manner. The absence of governmental or legal structures that could systemise actual crime and punishment is symbolised by the Kabul 'Wellayat', the provincial governor's office, where 'everything is in ruins: not only the law courts but also the "surveillance" building and prison' (*CoD* 172). His engagement to Sophia reads as superficial at times, done seemingly to maintain his 'absurd pastiche' of Dostoevsky's novel than for genuine affection, especially in moments where she seems somewhat hallucinatory such as her

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[48] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p.31.

enigmatic disappearance from a prayer room (*CoD* 151) or Rassoul's near obsession with a woman in a sky-blue chador who mysteriously seems to represent both Sophia and a stranger with some connection to his murder of Nana Alia. Meanwhile, national identity has been uprooted by partisanship. Any sense of nationhood or popular unity that may have materialised from Afghanistan's war for independence from the Soviet Union and, later, the communist Afghan government has diffused into disputes between the various *mujahideen* factions, factions that are shown to be willing to compromise any and all principles if it is to their benefit. In Afghanistan, thinks Rassoul, betrayal is 'worse than murder. You can kill, rape steal… the important thing is not […] to betray Allah, your clan, your family, your country, your friend' (*CoD* 101). And though Barfield discourses at length upon how tribal/ethnic difference is an inherent part of Afghanistan's longstanding history, during the *mujahideen* infighting he asserts that 'opportunism could always be counted on to undermine any other "ism" (Islamism, nationalism, socialism, etc)'.[49] It is a position to which Rahimi's work testifies. The mosque, the nation, the tribe, the family unit: all are shown to be susceptible to factional manipulation in the struggle for power over Afghanistan's people and resources. Rassoul's continued claim that he is indifferent to the factional wars generates disbelief amongst those who question him: he even wonders to himself how 'it is possible to live in this war-torn land without belonging to any side' (*CoD* 43). The theoretical union between the quintessence of the Machiavellian and the quintessence of the modern is very much played out in the Afghanistan that *A Curse on Dostoevsky* depicts.

And like with the Coetzee novels already discussed, Rassoul's incapacity to orient himself ethically and receive condemnation for his crime is reflected in the novel's form. The narrative has an oneiric quality to it: it is comprised of shifting perspectives, the disappearance and reappearance of characters without cause and an occasionally imperceptible transition between interior and exterior speech (enabled by Rassoul's inability to speak for much of the novel). The dilapidation or

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[49] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p.253. The first chapter of Barfield's study, 'People and Places', offers an overview of the historical ethnic and tribal divisions within Afghanistan, pp.17-65.

absence of literal buildings, ruined by explosions, mirrors the disorienting effect of the narrative

style. Rassoul meanders through the story the way he (echoing Raskolnikov) meanders through what

is left of Kabul. At times, he ends up back where he started: the opening description of Nana Alia's

murder is reiterated several times, including at the novel's close. The novel's progression at times

reads as a solipsistic event, aligning with the solipsism which (as will be argued in the next chapter) is

integral to Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, but which too echoes in the anachronism of C and the spiritual

angst of *Master*'s Dostoevsky. It is as if Rassoul tries and fails to escape his own thoughts, his

continual musings on the possibility of ethical action inspired by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

but only intelligible 'within the context of his society, his religion.' Towards the end of the book,

Rassoul admits that he desires to sacrifice himself to his fantasies (*CoD* 211), an admittance that

both implicates the larger desire for a conflict-free Afghanistan (one bound by ethical imperatives)

and at the same time accuses Afghanistan's factional belligerents of sacrificing others for their

fantasies of power.

The confounding narrative style, reflective of its subject matter, thus exhibits techniques

commonly associated with postmodern literature: an emphasis on indeterminacy, dispersal and

absence, an awareness of its own textuality, and a playful participation in its own narrative are

components identified as postmodern by Ihab Hassan's inexhaustive definition that are evident in *A

Curse on Dostoevsky*.[50] As a novel, however, it still holds out hope for the possibility of ethical action,

the unity of Afghans under 'a sense of responsibility, deriving from a sense of guilt' (*CoD* 211)

awoken by Dostoevsky and translated to the mysticism of Afghanistan. The final act of the novel

relates how the Porfiry-like Commandant Parwaiz hangs himself with the noose intended for

Rassoul, who is ultimately sentenced to death not for murder, but for the heretical act of bringing

Sophia to a sacred mausoleum. Parwaiz sacrifices himself to dissuade his followers from further acts

of violence against those who have wronged his family, thus attempting to break the cycle of

vengeance that pervades Afghanistan's 'fratricidal chaos' (*CoD* 236). By presenting the reality of

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[50] Hassan, 'The Culture of Postmodernism', 123-124.

ethical action amidst such chaos, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* maintains Rassoul's commitment to Dostoevskian ethics. However, such commitment cannot rely on old tropes of abstract moral principles without confusing itself and ending up back where it started, as evidenced by the cyclical nature of Rassoul's own narrative which ends with him having his own story read back to him and being asked, incredulously, why he did not take Nana Alia's money (*CoD* 250). The novel ends on this note, ostensibly reiterating the insufficiency of ethical imperatives that Rassoul has in vain relied on throughout the narrative's progression.

Nevertheless, Rassoul's cyclical journey could be read as an antidote to *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s failure as a novel. If the end point is exactly the same as the beginning, with no change in the ethical dynamic of Rassoul's Kabul, the novel and its events need not exist. Which is to say, if it can be interpreted as something other than an exercise in the failure of political ethics at a particular historical moment, or a critique of the politics that render ethical action all but impossible to enact, then an alternative impetus must be sought for *A Curse on Dostoevsky* to justify its own existence. Commandant Parwaiz's sacrifice indicates that something has changed between the novel's opening and closing lines. And if the destination is insignificant, as it evidently is, attention turns to the journey. *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s equivocation on this point will form the basis of my reading of its ethical and aesthetic impasse in Chapter 7. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that the novel does not advocate a return to ethical principles, but to questions of ethics. It seeks to explore the possibility of ethical action in a world in which the failure of ideological values and principles is shown at its extremity. It explores the possibility that a person can be either moral or immoral, instead of resigning people to a socially conditioned amorality. God (or nation, or tribe, or family) might not necessarily be dead but is nonetheless ineffective, yet that does not have to mean that everything is permitted. The drive to extend one's power at the expense of others is not, the novel claims, self-justifying. It is this that allows *A Curse on Dostoevsky* to be classified alongside *Master* and *Diary of a Bad Year* as examples of postmodern literature that seek to return ethics to the centre of their respective narratives, defined by this chapter as 'post-postmodern'.

Chapter 4 – Many From One: The Necessary Irrationality of Faith

I

The latter half of the previous chapter summarised the ways in which Coetzee's and Rahimi's texts share, aside from their indebtedness to Dostoevsky, an ethical tension generated from a nostalgia for irrecoverable stable ethical values (comparable with the 'homesickness' of Erdinast-Vulcan's 'metaphysical exiles'), an inclination to reassess questions of ethics in their respective contemporary settings (or, in the case of *Master of Petersburg*, the context of its creation as mirrored by Coetzee's interrogation of the creative act itself), and the awareness (both textual and contextual) that such a reassessment must be tempered by the legacy of postmodernism's abjuration of the ethical. This chapter, therefore, can now turn its attention to the remaining Dostoevskian text to be discussed, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's prominent position in this analysis is due to the way *Infinite Jest* can be comparatively read with his key 1993 nonfiction essay 'E Unibus Pluram', and his interviews leading up to and shortly after the publication of his best-known novel, as well as the aforementioned review of Joseph Frank's *The Miraculous Years*. In these essays and interviews, Wallace articulates the historical transition of literature from Dostoevsky, through literary modernism and postmodernism to his own position as a turn-of-the-century American writer in a way that elucidates both his own fiction and the ethical impulse of the other Dostoevskian texts as described above. He suggests a literary progression not dissimilar from the philosophical progression that begins with Nietzsche's response to German idealism, passes through the metaphysical homesickness of thinkers like Bakhtin and Levinas, refreshes itself in poststructuralism/deconstruction, and then returns to questions of ethics in the manner of Derrida's 'circumfession' (as theorised by Nina Pelikan Straus). Moreover, the treatment of religion and divinity in *Infinite Jest*, in relation to this literary and philosophical progression, reinforces the bond between Dostoevsky, Levinas, Bakhtin and the contemporary Dostoevskian writers. In this way, a

comparison of Wallace's nonfiction and *Infinite Jest* can be used to draw together the various

aspects of Part II of this thesis.

A useful way to approach Wallace's assessment of his literary contemporaries, however, is

to revisit Attridge's introduction to *The Ethics of Reading*, wherein he attempts to broadly demarcate

between literary modernism and postmodernism and considers the difficulty of classifying Coetzee

as either. An important passage from this introduction that seeks to define artistic modernism (with

an eye to identifying Coetzee's modernist tendencies) is worth quoting at length because it neatly

lays out the distinction between modernist and postmodern artists that is elsewhere theorised by

Wallace. Attridge claims that,

> what often gets called (and condemned as) the self-reflectiveness of modernist writing, its
> foregrounding of its own linguistic, figurative, and generic operations, its willed interference with the
> transparency of discourse is, in its effects if not always in its intentions, allied with a new
> apprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available
> to us – not because of an essential ineffability but because of the constraints imposed by that
> discourse, often in its very productivity and proliferation. Since the modernist period proper, there
> have continued to appear works with this kind of responsiveness to the demands of otherness,
> achieved by means which, whatever their specific differences, are clearly related in their general
> strategies.[1]

Attridge's theorisation of modernist literature here is significant in its recalling of Frederic Jameson's

'Modernism and Imperialism' as it was discussed in the Introduction. Both Jameson and Attridge

equate the formal characteristics and common themes of modernist literature and art with a

growing socio-historical awareness of alterity as unascertainable, as something that cannot be

grasped in its totality and reigned within the sphere of the known. Though Attridge does not

speculate as to the causes of this growing awareness to the extent that Jameson does (increasing

industrialisation and reconfigured global awareness at the peak of European imperialism), both

concur that a key concern of modernist art is its confrontation with an alterity that cannot be

expressed via then-dominant modes of understanding, manifested through the impression of

'something missing'.

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[1] Attridge, *The Ethics of Reading*, pp.4-5.

A critical point picked up by both is how this confrontation relays back upon itself and forces the subject into introspection. The approach of alterity has the effect of destabilising the security of the totalising subject's position, a self-revelation crucial for Levinasian ethics. Jameson notes this effect in 'Modernism and Imperialism', using (as observed earlier) the 'increased subjectification and introspective psychologization' of modernist literature as a starting point for his interrogation of the socio-economic conditions of New Imperialism. Likewise, Attridge equates the claims otherness makes upon modernist subjects with the self-reflexiveness and operative foregrounding of typically modernist art and literature. Both are stressing how the confrontation with otherness induced by that particular historical period necessitated a scrutiny of selfhood, of the self's simultaneous separation from and dependence on alterity. Alongside the ethical philosophy of Bakhtin, Levinas and the other metaphysical exiles of this period, philosophy branching out from the phenomenological analysis of subject-object relations, Attridge suggests that the techniques of modernism evolved from an increased responsiveness to otherness. By doing so, he evokes the very structural techniques of Dostoevskian polyphony as I interpreted it in Part I of this thesis, further strengthening the claim that Dostoevsky's threshold position between the pre- and the post-Nietzschean prompted him to anticipate the post-Nietzschean ethical condition.[2]

More apparent in Attridge than in Jameson, however, is the 'apprehension' of otherness characterising modernism, a word that seems deliberately chosen to convey both cognition (or, at least, the recognition of otherness as challenging claims to cognition) and suspicion, even fear. His use of 'effects if not always intentions' further embellishes this second reading of apprehension: it is as if the quote represents modernist subjectivity as a kind of reluctant solipsism, an unaccustomed awareness of the self as separated, even alienated, from otherness.[3] The unity of the self-other

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[2] Moreover, by relating this confrontation with unknowable alterity with the self-scrutinising tendencies of modernist literature and art, Attridge presages the analysis of Dostoevskian aesthetics that I will undertake in Part III.

[3] Recalling fn.7 from the previous chapter further strengthens the parallels between Attridge's and Wallace's reading of modernism. If Wittgenstein can be seen as the cornerstone of Wallace's understanding of modernist subjectivity, then a developing perception of the horrors of solipsism, the hallmark of Wittgenstein for Wallace, would likewise be the hallmark of modernism. In this, both have as antecedents Dostoevsky himself: the reluctant, self-aware solipsism of a subject alienated from otherness is a key attribute of many of Dostoevsky's metaphysical exiles (including Raskolnikov, Stavrogin Versilov and Ivan Karamazov). It's most intense portrayal is arguably the Underground Man, whose 'shameful

hierarchy established by a totalising subjectivity is, by Attridge's suggestion, called into question by a

discursive shift arising in the modernist period. This develops the underlying apprehension,

connoting anxiety, of the modernist subject. Implied in Attridge's description is the sense of

something beyond the control of the subject, a fear related to powerlessness and consequently,

submission. Such fear thus echoes Erdinast-Vulcan's comment, noted in Chapter 2, that the freedom

of the subject following the disintegration of ontotheological absolutes is as terrifying as it is

liberating.

This understanding of modernist subjectivity serves as a starting point for interrogating

Wallace's own literary position on the other side of postmodernism, with regards to his reiteration

of the concerns of modernist subjectivity. One of Wallace's earliest and most influential

commentators, Marshall Boswell, introduces his study with yet another developmental timeline that

charts the path from 'the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century realism', through 'the

postwar critique of modernist aesthetics' and ending with *Infinite Jest*.[4] And Boswell too concludes,

in a manner similar to Attridge on Coetzee, that Wallace straddles the classificatory divide between

postmodernism and 'some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism.'

Wallace's relationship with either movement is ill-defined: he 'proceeds from the assumption that

both modernism and postmodernism are essentially "done"', yet his work 'moves resolutely forward

while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back.'[5]

Boswell's introductory chapter, therefore, attempts to position Wallace's own literary

undertakings with respect to his predecessors by identifying core differences between modernism

and postmodernism, and analysing Wallace's response to both. Using John Barth's postmodern

manifesto 'The Literature of Exhaustion' as a touchstone (and counterpoint to Wallace's own post-

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consciousness' (*NFU* 6) of his underground status and 'thirst' for 'something different, completely different, which I 'cannot ever find' (*NFU* 35) seems to encapsulate modernist apprehension completely. Wittgenstein's own theoretical correlations with Dostoevsky are explored in Brian McGuiness, 'Wittgenstein and Dostoevsky' in Sascha Bru et. al (eds), *Wittgenstein Reading* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013) pp.227-242.

[4] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p.1. Although Boswell does not mention it, the way I present Dostoevsky in this thesis, specifically with regards to his influence over *Infinite Jest*, would make him a pivotal figure in this overturning of 19th-century realism.

[5] Ibid.

postmodern essay 'E Unibus Pluram'), Boswell articulates the philosophical underpinnings of

modernism in similar terms to Erdinast-Vulcan, referencing the cumulative effect of Nietzsche's

'death of God' and 'Darwin's unseating of the Hebraic creation myth' that provoked the severing of

'meaning and certainty […] from their long-held metaphysical grounding.'[6] Accordingly, the

consequences of this severing in both phenomenological philosophy and modernist literature was

the abandonment of 'nineteenth-century "objective" realism in favor of a new valorization of

individual subjective experience.' Hinting at a fundamental component of Wallace's own artistic

vision, Boswell notes that since the modernist turn, the 'new subject' of literature became 'the

individual in isolation, the new agenda the intense tracing of consciousness in all its contingent

manifestations.'[7]

Boswell defines this central feature of modernist literature as 'an expression of crisis,

specifically the crisis of the Word', echoing both the homesickness of Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphysical

exiles and Attridge's apprehension of otherness.[8] Building upon Brian McHale's distinction between

modernism and postmodernism, he marks modernism's 'epistemological' essence; in 'rejecting

Victorian/Edwardian conventions of linear, cause and effect narrative', modernist literature

foregrounds the question of knowing over the analysis of the known. Still, Boswell stresses that this

shift towards epistemology must be understood as a *crisis*. Its consequence is the paradoxical

alliance of subjective experience with a new, 'nontemporal universal' standard, as illustrated by

Joyce's 'mythic method' or Proust's exploration of transcendent memory. It is a consequence that

emerges from 'the absence of objective certainty': in 'valorizing the subjective and provisional

[modernism] also, by extension, announces the loss of transcendent universals.'[9] This is the

paradoxical quality of modernism as Boswell (following Barth) reads it. The subjective is called upon

to stand in for a lost universal because the absence of such transcendent universals destabilises the

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[6] Ibid., p.10.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. Boswell takes 'crisis of the Word' from George Steiner's *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp.87-116.

[9] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p.10.

formerly secure relationship between the knower and the known. The subject is cast adrift, secure

only in its capacity to perceive, from its once-harmonious embeddedness in the world outside itself.

The crisis Boswell refers to is analogous to Erdinast-Vulcan's homesickness: it is the result of a

longing for something irrecoverably lost and an anxiety before changed epistemological

circumstances.

Boswell's brief summary of modernism's central characteristic, which paves the way for his

analysis of Wallace, correlates with Wallace's own stated understanding of the era. It gives fuller

context to Wallace's minor aside in the review of Frank's *Miraculous Years*, mentioned in the

Introduction, that modernism 'elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics – maybe even metaphysics'.

In the absence of any metaphysical grounding for ethical principles, the artistic impetus of

modernism sought instead to portray subjective experience, which manifested as its characteristic

aesthetic innovation. The stream-of-consciousness narrative style is a prime example. The important

point is that Wallace viewed the aesthetic shift of modernism to be a replacement for the linear,

cause-and-effect narrative style of the literature of previous periods. As he remarked in his well-

known interview with Larry McCaffery, modernist writers such as Joyce and Faulkner were

nevertheless 'attempting somehow to be mimetic'.[10] Doing so, however, meant that they had to

create 'temporal dislocations'. What they were trying to mimic was a newfound awareness that

'*experience* is vastly more dislocated and fragmentary […] than novelists usually let on', a narrative

style already anticipated by Dostoevsky's own position on the threshold of the pre- and post-

Nietzschean. It was an artistic impetus that flew in the face of 'one of fiction's big historical

functions': the 'generalization of human experience'. Wallace then connects the heyday of

modernist literature (using Kipling as an example of both a New Imperialist and, chronologically at

least, a modernist) with the 'field day' of poststructural critics whose main line of attack was how

writers were '*presenting* alien cultures instead of "*re-presenting*" them'.[11] In either case, the focus is

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[10] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.38.
[11] Ibid.

on the shift from objective certainty to subjective experience. A transcendent universal based on an isolated perspective reveals, more clearly than the masquerade of objective reality, the alliance of the 'universal' with the cultural dominant. In this way, Wallace theorises that the conditions of poststructural critique arose in response to modernism's inherent crisis.

The central tenets of Wallace's own work, mainly the solipsism of the turn-of-the-millennium American subject and the post-postmodern return to modernist ethical concerns, are most clearly revealed when assessing how Wallace himself perceived literary postmodernism's aesthetic evolution. The transition Wallace conjectures from the way the works of his immediate literary forbears, the postmodern writers of McHale's long sixties such as Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, to his literary contemporaries like Brett Easton Ellis and Mark Leyner is illustrative of how his own departure from the former group, the 'patriarch[s] for [his] parricide', is accomplished through the reintegration of ethical questioning in literature, questioning he accuses the latter group of lacking.[12] Following this conjectured transition allows for the comparison of Wallace's own ethical/aesthetic position with regards to American postmodern literature and the Derridean 'circumfession': the intergenerational gesture of patriarch to parricide constituting Wallace's relationship with 1960s postmodernism is analogous to Derrida's parricide of deconstruction's supposed disregard for ethics. It likewise illustrates how Wallace's writing reiterates a type of Bakhtinian/Levinasian ethical stance, substantiating the legacy Dostoevsky left for the ethics of *Infinite Jest*. The invocation of Dostoevsky's ghost across all four novels, and the way those novels share a post-postmodern trait that seeks to return to ethics through the lens of postmodernism, attests to how situating Wallace within the American literary tradition clarifies the correspondence between all of them.

II

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[12] Ibid., p.48.

Two key works in Wallace's oeuvre offer the most beneficial approach to situating Wallace

accordingly: the essay 'E Unibus Pluram' and the extended interview with McCaffery that

supplements the ideas it puts forth. In both, Wallace isolates American postmodern fiction of the

long sixties as inaugurating a new development for the literary subject, particularly regarding its

relationship with alterity. Wallace's starting point is that, if modernist mimesis had attempted to

represent the fragmented and dislocated subjective experience of the metaphysically homesick

subject, 'what took place in the sixties had the effect of finally demolishing the authority that

mimesis had assumed.'[13] As Boswell elaborates, early postmodernism both directly extends and

subtly critiques the fractured mimesis that characterises modernist literature and art: it shifts the

aesthetic emphasis 'from epistemology to ontology'. Whereas 'modernists sought to approach the

metaphysical via the epistemological, postmodernists examine the ontological ground of modernist

epistemology.'[14] By which Boswell means that early postmodern literature sought to enhance the

way modernism responded to the dislocated reality of disintegrated epistemological or ontological

certainty by interrogating the subject's capacity to know something in its totality. It did so by

questioning the very possibility of a knowing subject. Boswell writes that, for Barth's 'Literature of

Exhaustion' at least, 'the task of the *post*-modernist writer was not to develop additional new

methods of rendering the act of perception but rather to examine the relationship between the

literary method and the reality it sought to depict.' Postmodernism's chief consideration thus

became 'a self-reflexive inquiry into the ontological status of literary inquiry itself.'[15]

Wallace, Boswell argues, having been raised on both early postmodern literature and

twentieth-century philosophy, was aware of how the self-referential quality of such literature, the

way 'it unseats our belief in literature's ability to address directly the world outside itself', followed

on from 'Heidegger's existential critique of metaphysics, ungrounding certainties and producing in

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[13] These are actually McCaffery's words which Wallace concurs with, calling the demolition of mimesis in literature 'our bequest from the early postmodernists and poststructuralist critics.' McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.27.
[14] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p.11.
[15] Ibid., p.12.

the reader both a sense of endless possibility and anxiety, since the text is now grounded in nothing beyond itself.'[16] The possibility manifests as the text's capacity to revel in its own ontology, able to extend beyond itself because it alone is the locus of its call and response. Having recovered from the initial shock of the modernist unmooring from epistemological surety, such fiction, which Wallace refers to as 'Metafiction in the American '60s', found itself 'unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness'.[17] And, although Boswell only mentions it briefly, Wallace devotes much of his essay 'E Unibus Pluram' to identifying the rise of television as the root cause of the transition from fragmented mimesis to reflexivity and self-consciousness in metafictional American literature. Metafiction's prominence in the 1960s, claims Wallace, 'was deeply informed' by how television's progression produced 'the metastasis of self-conscious watching': the cultural phenomenon wherein the average isolated viewer's life is contrasted with the highly stylised, highly fabricated presentation of what an average viewer's life is supposed to look like.[18] American metafiction writers were 'sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of do-ers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers'.[19] Television's *modus operandi* fosters this 'meta-stasis'; it generates a type of voyeuristic reciprocity in which pleasure is generated for both watcher and watched in full awareness of the artifice of a seemingly natural scene. This awareness itself engenders within the viewer a heightened awareness of being watched. The artifice becomes an ideal to be aspired to, which in turn further enhances the watcher/watched dynamic by reinforcing the pleasure of viewing with the satisfaction of not being viewed.

Wallace goes on to link this relationship between television and metafiction with the profusion of irony in American postmodern literature. The self-consciousness produced by 'watching's potent reflexivity' consorts with television's bisensuous tension 'between what's said

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Ibid., pp.12-13. Wallace graduated *summa cum laude* from Amherst in English and philosophy, and briefly studied philosophy at Harvard graduate school.
[17] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p.34.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

and what's seen'.[20] Television presents the early metafictional writer with 'a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the USA saw itself circa 1960', posturing 'lone-gunman westerns, paternalistic sitcoms, and jut-jawed law enforcement' alongside the exposition of 'corporate ascendency, bureaucratic entrenchment, foreign adventurism, racial conflict, secret bombings, assassination, wiretaps, etc.' In doing so, it 'helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world'.[21] Television's inherent capacity for the ironic, coupled with its consumers' enhanced self-awareness in the midst of the cycle of viewership, fosters the use of irony as a means to distinguish the subject from the now readily apparent hypocrisy of an artificially tailored sociocultural or national narrative. With the turn away from mimetic narratives inherent in the modernist antagonism to literary Realism, irony emerged as a fundamental tool for writers to disengage from (and assess their complicity in) a world more constructed by, than reflected in, televisual portrayal. Literary irony, Wallace explained to McCaffery, 'splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities' of notions such as the 'virtuous always triumph' or 'Ward Cleaver is the prototypical fifties father'.[22] It was thus fitting that early metafiction 'aimed its ironic crosshairs at the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative, for these qualities were just what '60s TV seemed to celebrate as distinctively American'. It was primarily through such detached, ironic cynicism that early postmodernism sought to 'co-opt and redeem the pop'. [23]

So much for the possibility of the ungrounded textual subject. However, Boswell also makes mention of the anxiety of postmodern literature as it revels in its own ontology. It is an anxiety that stems from the necessarily solipsistic consequences of an ironic detachment from a given sociocultural narrative. The metaphysical homesickness characterising modernist philosophy and literature may have suffered the anxiety of their estrangement from a totalising grasp on the world.

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[20] Ibid., p.35.
[21] Ibid., p.65, 66.
[22] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.48.
[23] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p.66.

Yet the aesthetic impulse of early postmodernism to embrace, rather than despair for, lost

certainties and convictions could do little to relieve what Boswell calls 'the concomitant sense of

isolation' within its artistic products.[24] For 1960s metafiction, however, the 'still frankly idealistic […]

assumptions *behind* early postmodern irony' were for Wallace enough to counteract the isolating

effects of the absence of objective certainty. It was initially assumed that 'etiology and diagnosis

pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom'.[25] Wallace reiterates this

idea in the McCaffery interview, elaborating on how 'without boundaries and constraints to struggle

against', now that 'the old cinctures and constraints that used to exist […] have been driven off the

field', 'you get this continual avant-garde rush forward'.[26]

However, as both the essay and the interview strive to clarify, although the 'modernists and

early postmodernists […] broke most of the rules' for Wallace's literary contemporaries, such

contemporaries 'tend to forget' what their predecessors were 'forced to remember: the rule-

breaking has got to be for the *sake* of something.'[27] Ironic cynicism 'only has emergency use': the

'rebellious irony' of early metafiction served its artistic purpose by simultaneously showing itself to

be 'socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called "a *critical negation* that would

make it self-evident to everyone that the world was not as it seems"'.[28] Once such hypocrisies have

been debunked, the 'critical and destructive […] ground clearing' of Wallace's 'postmodern

forefathers' ceases to retain such usefulness.[29] This is Wallace's trademark artistic position, the heart

of his idiosyncratic post-postmodernism that manifests as a return to modernist ethical concerns,

albeit under the shadow of the early metafiction that so clearly influenced his work. When the

power to illuminate and explode hypocrisy had been exhausted, 'the rule-breaking, the mere *form* of

renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself'. It leaves literature and art with 'bad language

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[24] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p.13.
[25] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p.66-67.
[26] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.27.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p.66, 67. Wallace is here quoting from Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*.
[29] Ibid., p.67.

poetry and *American Psycho*'s nipple-shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage. Shock stops being a by-product of progress and becomes an end in itself.'[30] The solipsistic tendencies of cynical and ironising detachment develop into a revelling in isolation once their capacity to meaningfully affect the society they stand apart from depreciates. Wallace's diagnosis of the American literary scene at the beginning of the 1990s was rooted in this development. Albeit 'entertaining and effective', the ironising predilection of his contemporaries were 'agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture'.[31]

Singling out Mark Leyner's 1990 novel *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* as 'the far dark frontier of the Fiction of Image', fiction that evolved from early metafiction to represent a '90s world whose defining boundaries have been deformed by electric signal', Wallace identifies the way television itself has co-opted the cynical aesthetic of early postmodernism and put it to commercial use.[32] If the irony of early metafiction was initially used to expose and disrupt television's cycle of viewership, it did so by constructing and affirming within the reader a sense of estrangement from that cycle, an aloofness from the naivete that early television celebrated as quintessentially American. Television's evolution, theorises Wallace, was to re-establish the viewership cycle by making irony itself fundamental to viewing pleasure and establishing the viewer/viewed connection through affirming separation from and superiority over the 'crowd of watchers'.[33] From Pepsi commercials that subtly mock the very concept of commercials, to the emergence of icons of ridicule such as Al Bundy and Homer Simpson, television's own subjects become the targets of irony, whilst the viewer's subject position is consolidated as "in on the joke".

It was a televisual 'solution' to postmodern cynicism that 'entailed a gradual shift from oversincerity to a kind of bad-boy irreverence', and this in turn 'reflected a wider shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of

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[30] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', pp.27-28.
[31] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p.49.
[32] Ibid., p.79, 52.
[33] Ibid., p.58.

real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values.' This is 'what makes television's

hegemony so resistant to critique by the new Fiction of Image'.[34] The work of Leyner et al. is

'doomed to shallowness by its desire to ridicule a TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value

already absorbs all ridicule'.[35] It resolves the problem of being trapped in 'the televisual aura' the

same way 'French poststructuralists "resolve" their hopeless enmeshment in the logos […] by

celebrating it'.[36] There can be no sense of community or genuineness or sincerity, nor can there be

ethical engagement with alterity, in this rearticulation of early postmodernism, as Wallace sees it. It

is a celebration of the detached, cynical and superior subject, without the risk of outrage, censorship

and accusations of anarchism that redeems the 'old postmodern insurgents'. Wallace ends 'E Unibus

Pluram' by critiquing the 'forgettable' and 'hollow' Image Fiction of his American contemporaries.

It is a critique he returns to in his review of *The Miraculous Years*, accusing 'many of the

novelists of our own time' of being 'thematically shallow', 'lightweight' and 'morally impoverished'.

The Frank review advances the dominant concerns of 'E Unibus Pluram' by bookending the historical

transition from 'morally passionate' to 'thematically shallow' fiction. And it is not merely the

happenstance of history, the shift from one particular set of sociocultural values to others, that sets

Dostoevsky on a pedestal in comparison with Wallace's contemporaries. It was more, to borrow

from Coetzee's analogous review, Dostoevsky's 'spiritual courage'. Not only was Dostoevsky a

'genius' in Wallace's eyes: 'he was also brave.' Despite the heavy weight of his faith, Dostoevsky

crafted a narrative form that could respond to the crisis threatening long-held ontotheological

assurance about ethical action. Only thus could Bakhtin and Levinas use Dostoevsky as both

inspiration and guideline for the intersubjective ethics that grew from this crisis. It was Dostoevsky's

courage in confronting and engaging 'unfriendly cultural circumstances' that initiated their

respective theorising of a remedy for modernist metaphysical homesickness.[37]

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[34] Ibid., p.59.
[35] Ibid., p.81.
[36] Ibid., p.76.
[37] 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p.272.

In the lead up to the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace calls for the same courage from American literature and art, for writers and artists to 'have the guts' to engage with their consumers and overcome the spiritual stasis of a rapidly digitising age.[38] For Wallace, the crisis that needed to be conquered was the ethical solipsism of the postmodern subject, the legacy first of the collapse of unifying ethical ideals and later the postmodern/poststructural disavowal of single-entendre narrative that generated metafiction's detached cynicism, which, having waned from its initial revolutionary function, had been co-opted and bent to commercial aims. And, in using Dostoevsky to represent the morally passionate, passionately moral art that he believes his contemporaries should aspire to, Wallace exemplifies Dostoevsky's centrality to his post-postmodern artistic endeavours. It is a necessity of polyphonic ethics that they offer 'no formulas or guarantees' for the success of such endeavours. They do, however, offer 'models […] concrete and alive and terribly instructive.'[39]

III

As comprehensive an essay as 'E Unibus Pluram' is, its scope and projected readership is undeniably targeted at upper-middle class, Generation-X Americans. Wallace admits to McCaffery that he imagines his readership to be 'people more or less like me […] who've been raised with U.S. commercial culture and are engaged with it.'[40] Whilst an immediate strength of the essay is its capacity to hone in on the idiosyncrasies of American life, its diagnosis of contemporary congenital scepticism and its post-postmodern desire to overcome ethical solipsism arguably loses some of its force if extended beyond the U.S.-centric focus and applied to other world literature from different points of the past quarter-century. In a different essay, published shortly after *Infinite Jest*, Wallace

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[38] Ibid., p.274.
[39] Ibid.
[40] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.22.

reiterated that the 'horrors' of 'today's subforties' are 'anomie and solipsism', yet again with an

emphasis on how such horrors created 'a peculiarly American loneliness'.[41]

This is not to say, however, that Wallace's theorisation of subjectivity as it developed from

the modernist period to the turn of the millennium is impertinent to non-American authors and

artists, particularly those who seek to reintroduce ethical questioning in a world portrayed as bereft

of moral guidance. Wallace's parochial Americanism, argues Lucas Thompson, deserves to be

considered as integrated with (as opposed to a departure from) his various global sources of

influence. Thompson's in-depth study traces the 'global dimensions' of Wallace's work to writers

ranging from Kafka to Manuel Puig, and cites 'Joseph Campbell's omnivorous approach to global

culture' as an inspiration and key strategy in Wallace's own work.[42] For Thompson, Wallace's

engagement with world literature ultimately fed back into his 'unusual perspective on US culture

and politics'; it offered him 'an estranged position from which to perceive his native culture, a means

by which to sidestep his own investment within American systems and structures, and instead, view

them from unexpected vantage points.'[43]

From this the suggestion arises that if the conclusions of 'E Unibus Pluram', the anomie of

the subject and need for ethical reassessment, were extracted from their methodology, tracing the

televisual absorption of early metafictional irony, they retain their applicability to the other

Dostoevskian texts. Which is to say, both Coetzee novels and *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, in their own

ways, portray the combination of rapid digitalisation and the emerging sterility of early postmodern

cynicism in all their ethically solipsistic consequences.[44] *Diary of a Bad Year* offers the most

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[41] Wallace, 'Certainly the end of *something* or other, one would have to think' in *Consider the Lobster*, pp.51-59 (p.54). Originally published as 'John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One' in the October 12, 1997 issue of *The New York Observer*.

[42] Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p.243, 216. Thompson is sensitive to the way Wallace also reproduces Campbell's unfortunate trait of 'cherry picking aspects of "primitive" mythology […] that conform to certain pre-existing assumptions'; however, this arguably reinforces the point that Wallace's parochialism was tempered by the way America viewed, and was viewed by, other nationalities and cultures.

[43] Ibid., p.12.

[44] There is, of course, nothing 'digital' about the Kabul portrayed in Rahimi's novel, with the obvious exception of the technologically advanced weapons that caused the destruction of the city's infrastructure. Even so, Afghanistan's *mujahideen* wars were, in a geopolitical sense, direct correlates of increasing economic globalisation that prompted such digitisation. This subject is addressed in depth Zygmunt Bauman's 'Wars of the Globalization Era', *European Journal of Social Theory* 4.1 (2001) 11-28, although he does not mention Afghanistan specifically.

discernible of these portrayals: Anya initially embodies the rejection of spurious values and

consequent cynicism towards C's soapbox lecturing. Meanwhile C, by this reading, represents the

metaphysical homesickness of modernism's ethical crisis, at first an outdated relic in the context of

his portrayal but by the end an important reference point for Anya's regenerated ethical

sensibilities. Alan, on the other hand, is the consequence of unchecked contemporary cynicism, a

detachment longstanding enough to produce self-serving amorality. And the equivocation between

cynicism, self-serving amorality and the ethical crisis of the modernist period is likewise an important

characteristic of *The Master of Petersburg*. Perceiving the Dostoevsky-Pavel-Nechaev dynamic at

play in *Master* as a metaphor for the arguments made in 'E Unibus Pluram' is not as laborious as it

might appear. Especially when considering Wallace's admission that, although his 'literary culture' is

not 'nihilistic, at least not in the radical sense of Turgenev's Bazarov', what separates Russian

nihilism from American congenital scepticism is merely the fact that certain qualities (sentimentality,

naiveté…etc.) are less denounced than actively hated and feared.[45]

Rahimi's Afghanistan presents the sternest obstacle for relating the sociohistorical transition

of subjectivity and ethics outlined by Wallace to the other Dostoevskian works. Nevertheless, there

are points to consider. Chief among which is Rahimi's biography. Though born and raised in Kabul,

Rahimi was granted asylum in France in 1985 whilst still in his early 20s. Having studied literature in

Kabul, Rahimi continued to study in France through the late 1980s and early 1990s, first at Rouen

and later as a cinema and audio-visual doctoral student at the Sorbonne.[46] Presumably, therefore,

Rahimi had at least a moderate knowledge of the theoretical developments of poststructuralism and

its cultural products. And although Rassoul's ill-defined background seems to preclude a similar

foundation in French education, the novel does explain that he entered into higher education in

Leningrad at some point between the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and the fall

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[45] 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p.272.

[46] Gerry Feehily, 'Atiq Rahimi: 'We became trapped in this self-image, until all we knew was war'' (December 2002), *The Independent*, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/atiq-rahimi-we-became-trapped-self-image-until-all-we-knew-was-war-134882.html [accessed February 2021].

of the PDPA (*CoD* 23). It is thus not inconceivable that Rassoul too was aware of Western theoretical

and sociocultural developments.[47] Furthermore, as Barfield explains in depth, during the latter half

of the 20th century Afghanistan was enveloped in an international mix of competing financial and

cultural interests, as successive regimes pursued the country's modernisation with differing levels of

rigour, whilst the attentions of Europe, the USA, the Soviet Union and other Middle Eastern nations

brought Afghans (particularly in Kabul) in contact with a Western interpretation of democracy,

political fascism, communism and religious extremism.[48] As such, the premise that the Kabul

portrayed in *A Curse on Dostoevsky* is burdened by a postmodern sterility analogous to the America

theorised in 'E Unibus Pluram' and detailed in *Infinite Jest* is not entirely without merit.

Crucially, the other contemporary Dostoevskian works seem to share in Wallace's artistic

vision, as outlined in the McCaffery interview. As mentioned in the introductory remarks to *Infinite

Jest*, Wallace started 'from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make

it distinctively hard to be a real human being.' Fiction's 'job', therefore, is both to 'dramatize what it

is that makes it tough' and to 'dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now.'[49] Regardless

of the starting point, the exertion made by what Wallace defines as 'serious fiction' or 'real-art

fiction' remains ethical in nature. It is to 'aggravate [a] sense of entrapment and loneliness and

death in people' in order to 'move people to countenance it', to incite 'any possible human

redemption'.[50] If the individual reader is 'sort of marooned in her own skull,' then fiction's purpose is

> to give her imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is
> suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious
> experience, more like a sort of *generalization* of suffering. [...] We all suffer alone in the real world;
> true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with
> characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is
> nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside.[51]

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[47] See Mikhail Epstein's *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism & Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) for an overview of such developments in the latter days of the Soviet Union and early post-Soviet Russia.
[48] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, in particular pp.195-270.
[49] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview', p.26.
[50] Ibid., p.32.
[51] Ibid., pp.21-22.

The same premise, the same ideals, unify all four works, whether it be the lethargy of postmodern America, the chaos of internecine Kabul, or merely the development of Western social theory and politics culminating in an overarching human indifference to others. All the works identify the distinct difficulty of being human as not necessarily suffering itself, but the isolation of suffering: the solipsism of the subject as the most horrible conclusion. Thus, all turn to ethics in its most basic sense of the axiology of human interaction. And all find the particularities of their respective compositional period to be inhibitory with regards to reliving the isolation of suffering. Dostoevsky emerges as both inspiration and source in assisting these works to overcome such inhibitions, for in his polyphonic structure each contemporary work seems to find precedent for overcoming the relentless suffering of the solipsistic subject. Each text is keen to realise in its own terms what is realised by polyphony: an antidote to the creative rejection of bogus values that typifies Rassoul, Nechaev, Alan and Anya (and something internalised by C), along with a myriad of characters in *Infinite Jest* exemplified by Hal Incandenza. They find in Dostoevsky a methodology for freeing the subject from a solipsistic cage, allowing both character and reader the redemptive nourishment of otherness.

It is, perhaps, only from this premise that the integrity of *Infinite Jest*'s vast complexity can be maintained. The aforementioned characteristics of postmodern literature are evidenced from even a superficial examination of *Infinite Jest*: its emphasis on indeterminacy, dispersal and playful narrative participation are chief characteristics of both its plot and style. The disjointed narrative sequencing in which the opening scene serves as the temporal conclusion of the plot events, the geographic (the amalgamation of the USA, Mexico and Canada into one sovereign nation) and temporal (the subsidisation of calendar years) reconfigurations, the near-constant flow of pop-cultural reference (the final scene is a re-enactment of a scene of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, performed with that very scene being played in the background – *IJ* 980), the disruption of linear reading by the notorious endnotes; all attest to *Infinite Jest*'s embeddedness in the cynical self-

consciousness of postmodernism, drawn from 60s metafiction and accused by Wallace of contemporary sterility.

Providing a structural counterweight to *Infinite* Jest's three main plotlines are three equally integral thematic subject matters, each aligned with a separate plotline but with a much broader reach than the plotlines themselves. The first is the pleasure cycle enacted by the passive reception of television and treated at length in 'E Unibus Pluram'. *Infinite Jest* hyperbolises the cycle of viewership throughout, most clearly through the idea of a film so entertaining it is lethal. More pervasive, however, is the way the novel fuses viewing pleasure with the extremities of bodily pleasure, implying that all televisual entertainment follows pornographic principles.[52] Several minor instances in the novel reinforce the claim that a sexual, purportedly feminine, ideal of beauty is vital for the maintained success of television: an anecdote about the Toronto Skydome in which a disgruntled sports cameraman trained his camera on nearby hotel windows to display fornicating couples across the video scoreboard is an apt example (*IJ* 516). Elsewhere Orin Incandenza re-watches video clips of his kicking footballs and becomes sexually aroused (*IJ* 298). This even more succinctly charts the way *Infinite Jest* parallels viewing passivity with a self-enclosed sexual pleasure: the cycle demand solitariness. And the omnipresence of the correlation between televisual pleasure and masturbatory pleasure is reinforced by the novel's setting within the fabricated Organisation of North American Nations, evoking the onanistic tendencies of a society built around the solitary pursuit of pleasure.

Meanwhile, the ideal of sexualised femininity as the apotheosis of television is embellished through its contrast with the novel's plenitude of corporal grotesquery, in particular, scenes where bodily functions are shown as antithetical to viewing pleasure. One hyperbolic subchapter insertion, unrelated to any plotline, charts the 16-month decline of videophones as consumers were forced to

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[52] D. T. Max notes that prior to *Infinite Jest*, Wallace considered making pornography the subject of his next novel because it 'fit well into Wallace's ongoing areas of inquiry: it linked to advertising – the thing really being sold was the idea that we are all entitled to sexual pleasure, which in turn feeds the secondhand desire that Wallace saw at the root of the American malaise'. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Penguin, 2013) p.123.

consider their own physical appearance before any prospective video call, technologically distorted and so galling to the 'image conscious' (*IJ* 147) that such consumers resorted to wearing polybutylene-resin masks during videophone conversations. Another links the decline of network television to advertising campaigns for pain relief and cosmetic services that focussed on corporeal extremes such as excruciating pain or the nauseating consequences of poor hygiene (*IJ* 410-418).[53] These moments embellish the first of the novel's key themes: televisual culture relies on replicating a self-enclosed and utterly fantastical viewing pleasure for profit.

As such, *Infinite Jest*'s focus on the body is an important tool in disrupting this culture. It is laden with ribald references to bodily functions, from Mario Incandenza's physical deformities to OUS Agent Hugh Steeply's exaggerated and dishevelled transvestic appearance, to the very literal toilet-humour that Wallace occasionally employs. These references function as comic relief to the gravity of the novel. Yet they also connect the rupture of idealised feminine sexuality and viewing pleasure with *Infinite Jest*'s second integral theme: addiction. The grotesque depictions often reach their extremity in the scenes portraying the nadir of drug or alcohol dependency. One addict (*IJ* 299-306) suffers withdrawal-induced diarrhoea in a bathroom stall, whilst towards the end of the novel two addicts on a Dilaudid binge lie immobile in a puddle of their own urine (*IJ* 937). Most horrific of all is the story of a pregnant addict who stillbirths whilst freebasing cocaine. Coming to and confronting the overwhelming guilt of causing her child's death, the woman becomes crazed and refuses to believe the child has died, swaddling its corpse even as it begins to decay (*IJ* 376-378). In this way, the masturbatory tendencies of televisual culture are juxtaposed not only with the crude reality of the human body but with the terrifying and deeply human consequences of addiction, the physical trauma amplifying the often-indescribable psychic anguish. Wallace lays bare the unseen consequences of televisual addiction.

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[53] In *Infinite Jest*'s near-future setting, network television (apart from live sports) has been replaced by 'Interlace', a video-rental agency similar to modern streaming services.

Moreover, psychic anguish itself, beyond the pain of addiction, is *Infinite Jest*'s binding thematic subject. The novel is overshadowed from the beginning by the suicide of Jim Incandenza, the Hamletian patriarch of the novel whose varied and ultimately failed attempts to escape his own mind and connect with others (especially his son Hal) included the creation of the lethal Entertainment; that he engineers his own death by using a microwave to explode his head offers typically grotesque imagery of how severe Jim's mental imprisonment had become.[54] Jim's ghostly presence connects the three plotlines, so unsurprisingly this adumbration darkens each plotline in turn. OUS triple-agent Rémy Marathe met his wife saving her from an attempted suicide, and it is only for her survival that he is willing to betray his single-minded pursuit of his political aims. Elsewhere, the doubling of Hal Incandenza and Kate Gompert, a clinically depressed addict recovering at Ennet House, culminates in the interweaving of their narratives during a specific subsection of *Infinite Jest* about 'this depression issue' (*IJ* 692).[55] The subsection works to distinguish the 'predator-grade depression Kate Gompert always feels' (*IJ* 695) from the 'lowgrade […] *anhedonia* or *simple melancholy*' (*IJ* 692) that Hal, as representative of millennial America's spiritual dilapidation, suffers from. The 'numb emptiness' (*IJ* 995) that typifies Hal's condition is a direct correlate with the American transition from sentiment to ironising cynicism that is explicitly detailed in 'E Unibus Pluram', and its result, the great transcendent horror of 'excluded encagement in the self' (*IJ* 694) is at the heart of Wallace's artistic manifesto and his post-postmodern call to return to the ethical confrontation of the metaphysically homesick, anticipated and inspired by Dostoevskian polyphony.

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[54] As well as his more obvious correspondence with King Hamlet, Jim shares several traits with Fyodor Karamazov. His alcoholism is note-worthy, as his sexual rivalry with his eldest son, Orin, for the same woman, although (like Fyodor) any sexual relationship between Jim and Joelle Van Dyne (the Grushenka figure) is only hinted at. More pertinent is Jim's estrangement from Hal. Like Ivan, Hal is so emotionally disconnected from his father that the unspoken question of how responsible he is for his father's death lingers over him.

[55] D. T. Max writes that 'dozens' of Wallace's characters, including Kate Gompert, 'captur[e] aspects of how he saw himself'. This biographical overlapping is nowhere greater than Hal, whose precocious tennis talent and capacity for lexical absorption come straight from Wallace's own life. Notoriously, Wallace himself suffered from addiction and depression: Ennet House is based upon his own time at Granada House, Boston, in 1989. Max, *Every Love Story*, p.161.

By contrast, however, Gompert wishes for the anhedonic emptiness afflicting Hal as relief from her unnameable form of depression, a 'level of psychic pain wholly incompatible with human life as we know it' (*IJ* 695). Both Hal and Kate are marijuana addicts, yet the cause for their abuse is polarised: it is suggested that smoking marijuana gives Hal's diurnal experience some kind of meaning (*IJ* 853), whilst Gompert smokes to escape the effects of her depression. It is a polarisation that raises the wider question of the sedation of American culture. The implication is that the cynical distancing of millennial America masquerades for the fear of the kind of psychic pain Gompert suffers from: emptiness is preferable to agony, and thus the rejection of sentiment guards against the potential pain of the ethical welcoming of unknowable alterity, the terror that goes hand-in-hand with the liberation of the subject. However, despite the outlined differences between Hal's melancholy and Gompert's clinical depression, they are bound by a common consequence: loneliness. Both are 'lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed' (*IJ* 696), Kate because no one can understand the depth of her suffering, and Hal because he refuses to acquiesce to the kind of sentiment that might be relieved by another's pathos.

Depression, then, is the thematic subject matter that touches upon the self-enclosed pleasure-seeking tendencies of the television cycle and addiction cycle, illuminating how such cycles mirror each other and condemning the American pursuit of pleasure for its eschewal of ethical interaction. The perpetuation of pleasure for profit may rescue the individual from unimaginable psychic pain, but it necessarily generates the anhedonic malaise of self-isolation. For Wallace, pleasure, addiction and depression together form the maladies of the contemporary West that are hyperbolised in *Infinite Jest*'s alternative 'future'. And the most significant component of all three is that they are solipsistic gestures. The novel's response is to marry the outrageous techniques of postmodernism with a push for sentiment, sincerity and ethical awareness. It shuns any call for a return to more traditional values and principles, the stability of either institutionally based deontological ethics or narrative realism, through its commitment to the self-revelling ontology of early metafiction, the awareness of itself as a narrative construct and the cynical distancing from any

potentially manufactured sincerity. The carnivalised portrayal late on in the novel of Hal mistaking a

Narcotics Anonymous meeting for 'one of those men's-issues-Men's-Movement-type Meetings' (*IJ*

804), watching in horror as bearded men reconnect with their 'inner infants' and crawl on all-fours,

projectile weeping and teddy bear in hand, is testament enough to Wallace's distaste for the

maudlin. Yet *Infinite Jest* tempers such cynicism through its maintained awareness of the way many

of its characters despair for something to break them from their solipsistic cage. Hence the highly

caricatured but nevertheless emotive 'professional conversationalist' scene in which Jim attempts to

disguise his way into a genuine conversation with Hal (*IJ* 27-31), prefiguring Hal's inability to

communicate with others at the end of the novel's action. Hence the Union of Hideously and

Improbably Deformed's wearing of face veils to ensure they are taken 'seriously' as people and not

as articulations of their disfigurations. And hence the snippet about Ernest Feaster, a model-train

lover who endures a 17-year struggle with Gompert's type of psychic pain out of devotion to his wife

(*IJ* 697-698).

Emerging most clearly from *Infinite Jest*'s attempts to merge earnestness with the ironic

cynicism of late postmodernism is Don Gately, reformed criminal and recovering addict at Ennet

House who is arguably the novel's main protagonist, considering how his cautious romance with

Orin's former lover / Jim's former muse and star of The Entertainment, Joelle Van Dyne, ties all three

plotlines together. Gately is also associated with many of *Infinite Jest*'s minor subplots, which are

usually to do with either criminal activities to procure drugs or the destructive consequences of

addiction, and it is his desperation to escape both that enable him to embrace the naïve and the

idealistic, to commit to being a moral person in spite of his pessimism that morality is either

beneficial or practical in the world he inhabits. His character in this regard is best displayed by one of

Infinite Jest's more significant climactic moments: using both his immense size and pugnacious

background, Gately defends Ennet House residents from an attack by three Canadians seeking

retribution for the murder of their pet dog (*IJ* 601-619). Gately is shot in the process and later

refuses narcotic painkillers whilst hospitalised for fear it would disrupt his recovery abstinence, proof that his commitment to sincerity can overwhelm his processes of reasoning.

Gately is determined to engage with suffering as an irreplaceable part of being in the world, rather than flee it and revel in the subjective isolation of pursuing pleasure. It is a determination he accumulates via his recovery from substance dependence, despite entering Ennet House without 'much interest or hope about actually staying clean for any length of time' (*IJ* 464). Through persistence alone however, he manages to overcome his instinctive cynicism and stay sober, something he describes, in terms significantly similar to Hal's description of anhedonic American life, as being 'out of this kind of mental cage' (*IJ* 468). If the association the novel puts forward between addiction and the solipsistic tendency of millennial America holds up, the release Gately effects by relinquishing control over managing his addiction and following recovery protocols is framed in ethical terms. In a broad sense, it is an engagement with alterity in a way evocative of the answerability/responsibility towards the unfinalisable Other defining Bakhtinian and Levinasian theory: although Gately succumbs to an externally mandated and inflexible set of rules and regulations, he gestures in an obscure way outside of his own totalisation of the world. Admitting to his disbelief, a consequence of his distinctly postmodern cynicism, in the capacity of such rules to improve his life, he nevertheless suspends his reasoning, even his powers of thought, to embrace an otherness he cannot comprehend. The failure of other Ennet House residents to make a similar gesture towards abandoning the totalising power of their reasoning, and subsequent failure to maintain sobriety, is juxtaposed with Gately's success (*IJ* 177).

IV

Through Wallace's portrayal of Don Gately, the ethical influence of Dostoevskian polyphony over *Infinite Jest* (and by association the other contemporary works), as articulated by the Dostoevsky-inspired, historically modernist dialogic ethics of Levinas and Bakhtin, is given its fullest expression.

The solipsistic effect of Gately's addiction mirrors his novelistic double Hal Incandenza as the two

traverse their respective paths towards the meeting point of the three plotlines, the exhumation of

James Incandenza in the search for The Entertainment's master copy (*IJ* 17/934). In this way, Don's

dependency comes to stand for the pleasure-oriented yet anhedonic, ethically isolated subject that

Wallace claims to be the quintessential millennial American experience. Long-since divorced from

the revelation of an ethical authority, such subjectivity has gradually withdrawn from

epistemological questioning to a kind of interior revelling, a celebration of detachment from the

world that, co-opted by the commercial interests of increasing digitisation, has degenerated into

entrapment within a solipsistic cage, unable to effect sincerity, vulnerability or ethical connection.

Gately thus points towards liberation. His is a journey mandated by the desperation of his

addiction, a desperation akin to how Wallace perceives American society and culture by the 1990s. It

is a desperation that mitigates his pessimism and allows for his passive acceptance of the world

beyond his subjectivity. It allows him to overcome a static sense of himself, a consequence of his

active detachment from the world which necessitates suffering in pursuit of artificial pleasure. As

such he occupies the Bakhtinian centrality of becoming rather than the stagnation of being that

typifies both substance addiction and the televisual pleasure cycle. His capacity to change himself is

marked by an engagement with the unknowable beyond the subject, the as-it-were 'otherwise than

being'. Gately is an example of a renewed belief in the possibility of the human, particularly that

aspect of the human that can overcome the totalising grasp of knowledge and understanding.

D.T. Max's biography of Wallace notes overlapping occurrences demonstrating that

Wallace's source for this particular characteristic of Gately was Dostoevsky. Around the time he was

formulating his review of *The Miraculous Years*, Wallace again singled out his literary

contemporaries for writing fictions that 'reduce to complaints and self-pity.' It was an effect of their

'Hyperc' (or 'hyperconsciousness' as Max clarifies) that 'makes life meaningless'. However, asked

Wallace rhetorically, 'what of will to construct OWN meaning? Not the world that gives us meaning

but vice versa? Dost embodies this'.[56] Hyperconsciousness in this respect is the ironising and cynical

detachment prohibiting an engagement with alterity ultimately responsible for making meaning out

of life, a view of life as a static entity rather than as an event that can only ever be of co-being. That

Dostoevsky, who embodies this sense of life which allowed him to write morally passionate,

passionately moral fiction, is likewise the embodiment of the ideas sprouting Gately, is evidenced by

Gately's prototype, a recovering addict at Granada House with Wallace named by Max as 'Big Craig'.

Regrettably described as 'a lug with an interior life' (by which Max means moral sensitivity), Big Craig

reputedly had 'a sort of Dostoevskian gloss to him, the redeemed criminal, and Dostoevsky was on

Wallace's mind.'[57] Max explains how Wallace perceived his time at Granada House in terms of

Dostoevsky's Siberian penal servitude. It was a period that extricated Wallace from his familiar

academic surroundings and placed him amongst 'inmates on release […] it's just not a crowd I'm

much at home with – […] vivid tattoos, discussions of hard- vs. soft-time, parole boards, gunshot

wounds and Walpole.'[58] It is a simple analogy with Dostoevsky, whose time amongst prisoners later

described as 'the most gifted, the strongest of all our people' (*NDH* 296) sparked an ideological shift

powerful enough to 'destroy[…] the basic assumptions of utopian socialism he had embraced as a

young man.'[59] Like Dostoevsky, who found the reality of the Russian peasantry at odds with its

abstraction and idealisation, Wallace found through interaction with his fellow Granada House

residents a kind of remedy for the over-intellectualising habitat in which he had spent most of his

life.[60] He began to understand the practice of abstraction itself as key to the stasis of

hyperconsciousness. Gately's centrality to *Infinite Jest*'s ethics, a representative of the novel's

strategy for overcoming the solipsism of the age, and his place at the heart of its Dostoevskian

legacy, makes him integral to Wallace's post-postmodern repositioning of Dostoevskian ethics.

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[56] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.209. The writers Wallace identifies are Ellis, Leyner, David Leavitt, Jonathan Franzen and Richard Powers.
[57] Ibid., p.141.
[58] Wallace, Letter to Dale Peterson, December 21, 1989. Quoted in Max, *Every Love Story*, p.139.
[59] Pevear, 'Foreword' to *Notes from a Dead House*, p.xiv.
[60] Both Wallace's parents were academics. By the time he entered Granada House at the age of 27, he had an undergraduate and a master's degree, and was halfway through the first semester of a doctoral programme.

Critical to the ethical message of *Infinite Jest*, therefore, are the scenes involving Gately's

redemption in which the overcoming of interiority, reasoning and abstraction are prioritised, in

particular, his engagement with Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous (AA/NA). Such scenes work to

juxtapose an intellectualising tradition, imbued with the sceptical cynicism that marks postmodern

culture in general, with an uncritical adherence to catchphrases and mantras that verges on cult-like

worship. An endnote scene between Gately and fellow resident Geoffrey Day, noted by Max to be a

variant on Wallace himself, is illuminating; Gately responds to Day's questioning of dogmatic axioms

and subsequent attempt to reason his way out of recovery by invoking 'an axiom about the

inadvisability of all such questions',

> The slogan I've heard that might work here is the slogan *Analysis-Paralysis* […]. For me, the slogan
> means there's no set way to argue intellectual-type stuff about the Program. Surrender To Win, Give
> It Away To Keep It. God As You Understand Him. You can't think about it like an intellectual thing. (*IJ*
> 1002)[61]

Day claims there is 'something totalitarian' (*IJ* 1003) about Gately's response. Yet *Infinite Jest*'s

unarticulated answer would be that the totalising gesture of an institution is indistinguishable in

effect from the totalising gesture of interior reasoning. Both deaden the subject from the

engagement with alterity required for ethical expression, for being as an event of co-being. The

significance of Gately's scepticism before yet willingness to commit to AA's dogmatism is thus

revealed as less to do with the dogma itself and more to do with what it enables: a confrontation

with the limits of totalising knowledge. He commits out of desperation but discovers that it is

effective in helping him abstain, despite the fact that he 'couldn't for the goddamn *life* of him

understand how this thing worked' (*IJ* 468). He allows himself an engagement with the unknown and

the unknowable, which is ultimately what facilitates his release from 'the cage'. This scene and

others like it are some of the more significant episodes in which *Infinite Jest* postulates 'reasoning',

and even linguistic cognition itself, as an impediment to the ethics of alterity.

This fundamental component of Gately, serving as the core of his post-postmodern sincerity,

is again a nod towards Dostoevsky, a nod which allows the curvature of Part II of my thesis to fold

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[61] Max, *Every Love Story*, p.139.

back upon itself. Speaking of the ideological changes Dostoevsky underwent during his Siberian imprisonment, Frank writes of his comparative 'conversion experience', a 'recovery of faith in the common Russian people as, in some sense, the human image of Christ.' It was an aspect of Dostoevsky's 'regeneration' that centred 'primarily on his relations with the people', corresponding with his renunciation of the 'naïvely optimistic glorification of the people' that marked his previous Christianised utopian socialism. This newfound sense of faith, for Dostoevsky, was maintained 'in violation of the evidence of his senses and rational faculties.' It was a faith that 'did not shrink back from the paradoxical, the irrational, the impossible'; that sought 'the saving mark of humanity concealed beneath the hideous exterior.'[62]

The strongest challenge to Gately's adherence to AA, wherein he displays his most cynical and ironising qualities, comes as he confronts its overt dogmatism. Six of the first eleven steps of AA's renowned 12-Step Programme refer either to 'a Power greater than ourselves' or 'God as we understand Him', whilst the twelfth step proposes a 'spiritual awakening' engendered by the successful completion of the other eleven.[63] Gately is not alone amongst the Ennet House addicts in eschewing both the terminology and unabashed religiosity of AA: Gompert satirises the Lord's Prayer by confusing 'temptation' with 'Penn Station' (*IJ* 504), whilst the especially repugnant Randy Lenz hides cocaine in a copy of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (*IJ* 543). Moreover, throughout *Infinite Jest* there are unsubtle mockeries of both established religion (particularly Christianity) and the intricacies of certain types of faith narratives, from the quasi-Romantic 'Old World' values espoused by the aptronymic Coach Schtitt (*IJ* 82), to OUS Chief Rod 'The God' Tine measuring his own penis (*IJ* 549), to the farcical culmination of Eschaton, a Risk-style tennis game in which 'nations' attempt to negotiate their way out of nuclear annihilation. The childish proclivities of some of the game's players lead to all out Armageddon, much to the dismay

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[62] Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.211.
[63] Alcoholics Anonymous, 'The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous', https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA [accessed 16th March, 2021].

of the again unsubtly named Eschaton gamemaster Otis Lord, who 'mew[s] ineffectually for order'

before fleeing the scene (*IJ* 321-342).

Gately, meanwhile, persists with the habits of AA's dogmatic routine without ever losing his

scepticism for religion. It is related how he 'didn't have any God- or J.C.-background' and how

kneeling and praying to a higher power for release from substance dependency 'seemed like the

limpest kind of dickless pap, and he felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee-motions

that he went through faithfully' (*IJ* 466). When he prays, he talks to the ceiling whilst pretending to

retrieve his shoes from under his bed, because 'he had nothing in the way of a like God-concept' and

talking 'to the ceiling was somehow preferable to imagining talking to Nothing' (*IJ* 467). Yet he

endures, citing a cake-baking metaphor that states one need not necessarily understand the process,

one must merely follow the instructions. And so, his incredulity when the cake rises, when he finds

relief from his addiction granted by 'some kind of Higher Power he didn't even believe in' (*IJ* 468), is

telling for the way it portrays *Infinite Jest*'s overriding hostility between faith and reason. The

precondition of Wallace's post-postmodern stance on faith and religion is that it has to run correlate

with the cynicism that denounces it, cynicism that has its base in rational, reasoned, Enlightenment

thought. This is the point of the ironising, occasionally carnival portrayal of religion in the novel. It is

there to screen the necessary irrationality of faith. Faith's most effective moments are instead

secreted by a process that is both anti-solipsistic and anti-institutional: an irrational mindlessness

that does not so much interpellate the subject in an ideological community as it does oblige that

subject to encounter and welcome an unknowable alterity. Rob Short's essay on 'The Religion of

Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest*' traces the interrelation between substance addiction and the

pleasure cycle of American culture in Wallace's writings, and likewise argues that Wallace

'prescribed […] a paradigm of other-directedness' to treat 'the real danger of addiction […] the way

that it turned the addict inward'. This paradigm, Short notes, 'is the ultimate goal of AA's recovery

program: to overcome a toxic and crippling self-centredness in order to live in service of something

larger than the self'. And it correspondingly entails 'a radical shift in self-understanding' that is 'common to all religious worldviews.'[64]

Short's essay is included in a recent collection that exhibits a burgeoning trend in Wallace scholarship interrogating the heavy presence of irrational faith in his work, especially in *Infinite Jest* and the works postdating it. The common theme that links the essays in this collection is the struggle to reconcile an historically rationalised rejection of institutional religion, replete with codified social, ethical and spiritual dictates deadening the processes of becoming integral to subjectivity, with the need for some type of spirituality to alleviate the solipsist and sterile postmodern subject. As these essays note, in Wallace this struggle vacillates before the cynical dismissal of intelligible or coherent pathways to faith and scepticism before the irrational or unknowable. Nevertheless, as Martin Brick notes in his introductory essay to the collection, although Wallace invoked a secular redefinition to traditionally sacral terminology in his writing, both his literary and biographical 'themes […] would suggest that Wallace was always searching for a genuinely fulfilling type of worship.'[65] It is a conclusion Brick reaches by observing how Wallace 'opposed people who were utterly dismissive of religion' and how 'he displayed a concrete interest in moral and ethical issues that aligned him with religious traditions'. His 'concern for axiological matters' and 'attention to moral and ethical issues rang[ing] from the very secular to the overtly religious' allows Brick to position him as straddling 'two worlds – a definitive "voice of a generation" author, but also and old-fashioned moralist in the vein of Dostoevsky.'[66]

Such positioning obviously raises a point of contention because, as has been argued with respect to the other contemporary Dostoevskian texts, Wallace's 'moralism' was anything but old-fashioned: it was very much *du jour* for certain literary approaches of his era. Brick's co-editor, Martin McGowan, makes a similar claim in his own contribution to the collection. Defining Wallace

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[64] Rob Short, ''Came to Believe': The Religion of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest*' in Michael McGowan &. Martin Brick (eds), *David Foster Wallace and Religion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019) pp.13-24 (p.17-18).
[65] Brick, 'Understanding and Seeking Faith: An Introduction to Religion in David Foster Wallace's Life' in *David Foster Wallace and Religion*, pp. 1-12 (2).
[66] Ibid., p.8-9.

as 'against the era of Nietzsche', by which he means what this thesis has termed the post-Nietzschean currents within postmodernism/poststructuralism (as evidenced by Nietzsche's conspicuous influence over Derrida's early texts), McGowan writes that, for Wallace, 'the way to overcome nihilism is to be sincere, to return to a culture of honor and honesty, structure and stability, provided by historical institutions, viz., to look to the *past*'.[67] Again, though it is a legitimate claim that Wallace seeks a solution to the modern condition by looking to the past, the concept that he found that solution in the dictates of historical institutions (the church, the state, the 'nuclear family', the academy…etc.) is not in keeping with the irony and cynicism *Infinite Jest* deploys to explode institutional hypocrisy. McGowan makes a more valid claim, when distinguishing Wallace and Nietzsche, that while 'Nietzsche encouraged a full embrace of the ego […] Wallace advocated a renunciation of the ego and submission to something larger than oneself. In a sense, this puts Wallace's response to nihilism among the post-Kantian but pre-Nietzschean philosophers.'[68] He establishes the same timeline laid out in the introduction to this thesis, except that McGowan overlooks Dostoevsky's prominence to this period and his subsequent influence over Wallace.

Nevertheless, as has been argued in this chapter, a simple comparison of *Infinite Jest*'s ethics, or those of any of the Dostoevskian works, with the Orthodoxy of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels ignores the transition from modernist metaphysical homesickness to ontological interrogation to solipsistic sterility and the requirement to redefine the ethics of the ensuing period. Dostoevsky advocated the irrationality of faith to salvage a moribund God; Wallace sought ethical/spiritual renewal long after that God's demise. As do the other works: whilst the conflict between faith and secularisation is prominent in both *Master of Petersburg* and *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, *Diary* also subtly hints towards a regenerated spirituality. C's musings on the afterlife follow Wallace in gesturing towards the question of the soul 'in an unrecognizable form, unknown to itself' (*DBY* 154). Likewise, Anya, an ostensibly secular figure yet described at the end of C's

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[67] McGowan, '"Not Another Word": Nietzsche, Wallace and the Death of God' in *David Foster Wallace and Religion*, pp.45-68 (p.56).
[68] Ibid., p.55.

underlying narrative as an 'earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty' (*DBY* 190), ends her own

narrative imagining herself angelically accompanying C into an unknowable afterlife (*DBY* 226).

Although it is only shown in glimpses, *Diary* too proposes something akin to irrational spirituality as

crucial to the reconceived ethics of post-postmodernism.[69]

Instead, Ryan Lackey offers the term 'postsecularism' as a way to define Wallace's religious

position. It is a term that can correspondingly be applied to the Coetzee and Rahimi texts. Lackey

explains that the label 'postsecular', with regards to Wallace, means that

> while Wallace's work deploys language and social structures we can recognize as religiously informed,
> it does not advocate a simple return to established forms of religion. His characters who move, or try
> to move, from solipsistic modes of being toward vulnerability and community do not follow
> straightforwardly prodigal paths, and they demonstrate attitudes towards religious activity – prayer,
> offering, worship – that include apathy, confusion and hostility.[70]

In essence, then, the postsecular encapsulates the marriage of postmodern cynicism and the desire

for spirituality. It critiques the Eurocentric Enlightenment reason that precipitated secularism,

informed both by an increased awareness of global spirituality and a poststructural interpretation of

'religious' and 'secular' as mutually co-dependent. As such, it is averse to institutional dogma, but is

simultaneously averse to dogmatic atheism, arguing '[e]xclusive forms of evangelical Christianity can

be as unyielding and totalizing as the secularisation narrative; neither manages to capture the

complexity of religion in its various forms, as social practice and personal experience.'[71] A

postsecular approach alternatively engages with the potential for non-secular forms of 'knowledge',

with the unreasoned and incomprehensible.

A postsecular approach therefore most closely aligns with the metaphysical homesickness of

Bakhtin and Levinas, having first traversed the detached and isolated terrain of postmodern

subjectivity. It is comparable with Derridean circumfession that returns to the need for faith in full

awareness of the absence of any grounds for faith, an ethics stemming neither from secular nor

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[69] The variance between C's and Anya's narrative conclusions, and how they in turn relate to concepts of death and the afterlife, forms part of my close reading of *Diary* in Chapter 8.

[70] Ryan Lackey, 'David Foster Wallace and Postsecularism' in *David Foster Wallace and Religion*, pp.149-162 (p.149-150).

[71] Ibid., p.154. Postsecularism, arguably, need not be restricted to evangelical Christianity but is applicable to all forms of religious authority.

religious authoritativeness but that can nevertheless rescue the subject from solipsistic amorality and/or anhedonia. The postsecular 'knowledge' that Wallace interrogates, that lies hidden beneath the irony, ridicule and grotesquery of *Infinite Jest*, is the confrontation with unknowable alterity transcending the subject, the very inauguration of subjectivity itself in Levinasian terms. Gately's 'faith', in the end, echoes the dual conception of God proposed by Levinas, as explicated in the previous chapter. His God is the absolutely Other as it appears to him. With the typical wry humour and pop-cultural references of postmodernism, an anonymous segment explains that for *Infinite Jest*, 'God – unless you're Charlton Heston, or unhinged, or both – speaks and acts entirely through the vehicle of human beings, if there is a God' (*IJ* 205).

It is the same Levinasian conception of God that forms the religious focus of other characters in *Infinite Jest*, of Rassoul, of C and latterly Anya, and of the fictionalised 'Master' of Petersburg. It takes faith to be the unlimited passivity of an accusative constituting subjectivity and advocates the humility of the self before the unknowable alterity of the Other as the pathway out of the solipsistic sterility and amoral tendencies of the age. *Infinite Jest* is perhaps more forceful than the other Dostoevskian works in its reconceptualising of God as the capacity to welcome alterity in spite of the absence of religious security. Even so, the Levinasian thrust of all the works comes precisely from its equation of ethics, of 'goodness', with a neo-spirituality for the post-Nietzschean age. In *Infinite Jest*, Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous in this sense merely functions as a paradigm of how to escape the mental cage without having to subscribe to an institutional conception of God. Finding a connection, without rationale or thought, with alterity beyond cognition is the ethical in the contemporary works. It is indeed the naïve and unreasoned 'thinking' that compels Mario Incandenza to offer his hand to the spiritually dilapidated Barry Loach in *Infinite* Jest's most prominent ethical scene, the one that directly namechecks *The Brothers Karamazov*. Hearkening back to Dostoevsky in this moment consolidates the position of Wallace's novel and the other contemporary Dostoevskian texts. Dostoevsky, at an historical juncture between German idealism and Nietzsche, relocated the ethical into interhuman relations, and made those relations the new touchstone of faith. And

Wallace, Coetzee and Rahimi, now desperate for a new type of faith in a world so isolated from metaphysical absolutes yet without ethical relations, turn back to Dostoevsky and ally their ethics with his.

The God pitched by these texts works as a transcendence of the subject without metaphysical anchorage. It is reconceived as an impulse, for lack of a better word, within the subject as subject (a passive impulse, prior to and presupposed by that very subjectivity) to extend to and welcome the Other without grasping the Other within the totality of comprehension. It is an anchorage without an anchor, revealing the subject in its purest vulnerability, the untotalisable breach of the infinite alterity of the speaking face. As such, it is a God without authority, without governance. It commands the subject only through subjecting it as subject, as responsible by virtue of its capacity to respond. Dostoevsky's development of the polyphonic novel form caters for its opposition to the authority of a monologic, authoritative voice. The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, as the articulation of the Levinasian Saying, is representative of a reconceived faith that carried over beyond the post-Nietzschean metaphysical homesickness of the modernists to correspond with the postsecularism of the contemporary works.

Part II has striven to establish the religious/ethical position of those works, tracing their arc from Dostoevsky to Bakhtin and Levinas, to postmodernism/poststructuralism and eventually to post-postmodernism/postsecularism. It is left for Part III to examine how the works themselves achieve this position, or at least how they attempt to represent it. Which is to say, to examine how all four Dostoevskian texts, in the words of C, overcome the paradox of learning '*to speak without authority*' (*DBY* 151). Indeed, I acknowledge here C's entreaty to speak without authority, cited from Kierkegaard and hence an immediate betrayal of its own sentiment by necessarily making Kierkegaard into an authority, because of the way it serves as a kind of leitmotif for the second half of my thesis. Exposed by its semantic configuration is an unheralded affinity between 'authority' and 'speaking': 'speaking', in this sense, does not refer to the discursive function of language but to its

cognitive function. Speaking here is naming, is identifying within the realm of the same: the voice of the Other inhibits the freedom of the subject to 'speak' on its own terms. The way C, citing Kierkegaard, uses the verb to 'speak' conjures the homophony of monologism, with all its phonocentric implications of ontotheological presence.

The antonym of 'speaking', as it is here understood, would be 'hearing' or 'listening', because the passive receptance of the voice presupposes the alterity on which discursive ethics are founded. Accordingly, in a grammatical sense, speaking would align with writing, and listening with reading, based on the active/passive correlations between the pairs. And this in turn elucidates the paradox at the heart of speaking without authority: both 'authority' and 'author' stem from the Latin term *auctor* connoting original creation. Speaking (or authoring) thus connotes a subject-driven activity, equating authority with the subject's cognitive mastery of the world beyond it. As such, the concept of speaking *without* authority borders on oxymoronic: to speak is to author and to author is to be authoritative. Yet if speaking's antonyms, hearing/listening and reading, are correlates of the discursive (i.e., post-Nietzschean ethical) function of language, then speaking without authority (by which, I infer, C means the very idea of literary ethics) becomes impossible. To speak without authority is to be silent. Literary ethics manifest only as a breakdown of authority, as a failure of authoring.

This line of enquiry forms the theoretical impetus behind Part III and the methodology of Part IV's close readings of the contemporary texts. Yet, far from diminishing or dismissing the capacity of post-Nietzschean literature to signify ethically, I will question whether the disjunct between, on the one hand speaking, authoring and cognition, and on the other, hearing, reading and the ethical, centres the literary text as the optimal site for the expression of post-Nietzschean ethics. The historical transition from ontotheological absolutes to a Bakhtinian/Levinasian sense of dialogic ethics, anticipated by Dostoevskian polyphony and returned to by post-postmodernism, effected an inherent tension over the role of language in 'expressing' the ethical. It is from this tension that the textuality of the text reclaims literature's ethical significance: being composed of words yet

simultaneously representing the encounter with a singular Other, the text is able to maintain within itself a conditional equivocation between the cognitive and the discursive. It is this which makes literature the most accessible avenue for the welcoming of the Other. Beginning by noting the internal hesitancy over the value of the aesthetic in the theories of both Bakhtin and Levinas, the next two chapters aim to advance Bakhtinian polyphonic theory by arguing that the polyphonic does not represent a departure from the monologic, but instead reveals something inherent within a monologic narrative, an inherent quality that invokes the humility of monologic authority and therefore gestures towards the ethics of literature.

PART III – ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

Chapter 5 - Oscillation, Consummation, Conditionality

I

The pathway charted by this thesis so far has been primarily a demarcation. It has set boundaries and traced lines of division, performing in its own minor, non-topographical and anachronistic way the Berlin Conference so central to the historical transitions I have sought to investigate. Like the very language that forms it, it has been composed of difference, and necessarily so. Such difference has been traced by the preceding chapters in relation to the hesitancy that is at the heart of Dostoevsky's novels, of the philosophies of Bakhtin and Levinas, and of the post-postmodern response to their postmodern antecedents. It was exposed by the turbulence associated with the end of Western modernity that prompted Nietzschean proclamations of the death of God, the despair (and fetish for novelty) of modernism, and the disavowal of metaphysical absolutes that I have thus far characterised as typically postmodern. Yet it is a hesitancy, or vacillation, boundlessly more fundamental than that, one that emerges as the key issue of Western philosophy of at least the past 150 years, and that has always been one of the key issues of philosophy, art and culture both historically and globally. It was assessed in Chapter 1 as the 'twofold nature' of language, the *langue* and *parole* of Saussurean linguistics. If language does not merely reflect but instead constructs the meaning of being, and yet the ethical (as Levinas and Bakhtin would claim) is the discursive breach of cognition, then ethics arises as the linguistic irruption of the linguistic system. There is, therefore, a necessary tension inherent in the very textuality that both defines our singular

being and directs our 'becoming' within the dynamic of co-being, a textuality of which (to deliberately misread Derrida) there is 'no outside'.[1]

The tension between the cognitive and the discursive (i.e., ethical) functions of language is evinced in the works discussed so far as the oscillation between the subjective security of a cognitive totality, the assurance that the subject participates in being in relation to a metaphysical anchorage such as a theological or deontological absolute, and the ethical freedom of the unanchored subject, the freedom to establish an interior cognitive totality in which the subject itself is the participatory centre. This freedom, as has been theorised, is however always already breached by the unknowability of the otherwise than being, and so is subsequently always already at risk of exposure to the Other's potential for malevolence; the lack of subjective security concomitant with such ethical freedom makes it, again recalling Erdinast-Vulcan's words, as terrifying as it is liberating. In Dostoevsky's post-Siberian works, the vacillation manifests as the prevalent triadic, tug-of-war aspect of his plot relationships, wherein one character stands on the threshold of an allegiance to two others, hesitant before the consummation from a transcendent authority that one represents yet fearful of the nihilistic and potentially (or, as is often the case, fully realised) eschatological consequences represented by the other. The previous chapter touched upon this dynamic with regards to Ivan, Alyosha and Smerdyakov, but could have easily substituted that triad with Raskolnikov's oscillation between Sonya and Svidrigailov (and the hesitancy with which he makes his epilogue conversion), with Nastasya Filippovna's between Myshkin and Rogozhin, with Stavrogin's

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[1] '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' / 'there is no outside-text'. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976) p.158. It would be too great a digression to explore the enormous complexity of this infamous quotation. It is important to note for now that what I mean by 'misread' is the claim Derrida's repudiation of the phonocentric metaphysics of presence proposes a linguistic totality that implicates all beings. His close association with Levinas and their comparable understanding of 'trace' argue that Derrida has always held the conviction that no system, linguistic or otherwise, could ever entirely close itself off from external breaching. In some ways this harks back to Edward Baring's refutation that Derrida's early work did not concern itself with theology (and consequently with ethics) referenced in Chapter 3.

between the humanitarian intentions of Stepan Verkhovensky's liberalism and the anarchy of Pyotr's nihilism, or with Arkady's between his biological and legal father.[2]

In the contemporary works, this oscillation develops as the post-postmodern trend laid out in the previous chapter. Rather than waver between distrust for absolute ideals and the fear of moral relativism, the works are able to historically reflect upon and operatively confront the amoral consequences of egoistic nihilism. Impelled to relocate the 'grounding' of the ethical subject within the unlimited accusative-ness of Levinasian Saying, all attest that such grounding cannot compensate for the coherence and security of a now-obsolete metaphysical anchorage. The ethical dynamic of polyphony is necessarily pre-cognitive, and so necessarily elicits a sense of risk and terror at the level of cognition. Yet the strategic retreat of the cognitive subject into isolated cynicism, stripped of the redemptive potential that early postmodernism promised by the pecuniary reach of the digital age, is likewise rejected for its thematic shallowness, for its anaemic attempt to suppress the ethical foundations of subjectivity. And so, the Dostoevskian hesitation is renewed by the post-postmodern tendency to reiterate modernist concerns, arguably with greater urgency than the modernists themselves. More than Ivan or Stavrogin, the contemporary texts recognise the insufficiency of ethical ideals, not only from a generalised position posterior to the totalitarian catastrophes of the 20th century but also attempting to negotiate the active threat of civil war (as the teleological progression of imperialist collapse and its resultant power vacuum), Alan (as the teleological progression of Nechaev, and a microcosm of Western politics), and the horrors of pleasure dependency (as the teleological progression of postmodern irony). Because of this, however, the contemporary texts more keenly feel the nostalgia for those ideals, for a coherent sense of security and justice to guard against the threats contained within them.

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[2] The dyadic/triadic character component of Dostoevsky's novels has received much scholarly attention. I would be remiss not to mention two theories that have influenced my own thinking in this regard. René Girard's *Resurrection From the Underground*, ed. and trans. by James G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), understands the Dostoevskian triad as resulting from the scapegoat mechanism of mimetic desire. Yuri Corrigan's *Riddle of the Self* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017) proposes that Dostoevskian characters fluctuate between the evasion and confrontation of an unknown psychic trauma. Although both theories differ greatly (but not unrecognisably) from my own conclusions vis-à-vis the vacillation of Dostoevsky's characters, an irresolvable vacillation integral to very ethical dynamic of polyphony, such conclusions are in some ways indebted to my reading of both works.

The intention of Part III, which concludes the theoretical arguments of this thesis, is to fully assess not only Dostoevsky's ethical legacy over the contemporary texts, his relevance to present-day ethics, but also his aesthetic legacy, by means of further interrogating this hesitancy. The conception of ethics central to this thesis has been constructed by a comparative reading of two philosophers of language, in the sense that Bakhtin and Levinas theorise the ethical significance of subjectivity as a linguistic construct. Accordingly, this thesis has striven to utilise a concatenation of Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethics in its reading of Dostoevsky's literary texts; that is, as a literary methodology. It thus follows that a consideration of their own respective writings upon literature, and more broadly of art and the aesthetic, may help elucidate the inherent tension of language and offer a pathway for approaching the hesitancy of the chosen literary works. By noting an analogous indecisiveness within the aesthetic theories of Bakhtin and Levinas, I will seek a way of reading the aesthetics of the contemporary works that nevertheless retains their debt to the ethical dynamic of Dostoevskian polyphony. It will not, it should be forewarned, claim to resolve the tension that prompts both the Dostoevskian and post-postmodern hesitancy: that tension, emerging from the simultaneous cognitive and discursive function of language, is by necessity irresolvable. Yet an approach that seeks to understand how this tension between narrative coherence and narrative ethics is maintained is what I will henceforth aim for. I will suggest that it is in fact the very irresolvable tension between the cognitive and discursive function of language that prompts the repositioning of post-Nietzschean ethics within literature itself, as given precedence by an ethical reading of Dostoevskian polyphony which opposes sourcing his ethics in ontotheological absolutes.

Chapter 5 will continue with a comparison of what has so far been defined as post-postmodernism with the rise of academic theories of 'metamodernism.' Though the use of the term metamodernism has its antecedents, the recent years have seen a scholarly tendency to define the social and cultural impetus of the past few decades as engaging with 'the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not

forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism.'[3] Metamodernism, significantly defined as 'an

oscillation between aspects of *both* modernism and postmodernism', will be reviewed in its

convergence with and divergence from post-postmodernism, laying the groundwork for a later

metamodern interpretation of the contemporary texts that complements the coherence/ethics

maintenance.[4] From here, I will parallel metamodern oscillation with the indeterminacy of Bakhtin's

aesthetic position. This will allow for the introduction of 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity',

Bakhtin's early unfinished essay on the architectonics of the character-author relation that has been

conspicuously absent from this thesis so far. Referring back to Erdinast-Vulcan's study of Bakhtin,

the first part will draw out Bakhtin's vacillation between the so-called 'centripetalism' of 'Author and

Hero' and the 'centrifugalism' of *Problems*, a vacillation Erdinast-Vulcan understands through

Bakhtin's aesthetic demarcation of 'rhythm' and 'loophole'. 'Rhythm' is likewise a key term in

Levinas's rare discussions of the aesthetic, and so Chapter 5 will use this to contrast the Bakhtinian

vacillation with the unusual critical hesitancy to pin down Levinas's aesthetic stance. Despite the

seeming condemnation of art in the early essay 'Reality and its Shadow', the exceptions Levinas

made for certain authors is suggestive of a corresponding disunity regarding artistic and literary

practice.

Chapter 6 will begin by arguing that such Bakhtinian/Levinasian inconsistency before the

aesthetic has as its precursor Dostoevsky's own literary apophaticism, his belief in an underlying

moral centre to the chaos of realism and his simultaneous recognition of its inexpressibility. I then

extend this literary apophaticism to Dostoevsky's mistrust of literary expression, concretised in the

adage he took from Fyodor Tiutchev's 'Silentium', 'a thought once uttered is a lie'. I will relate this

poetical line to the significance of silence in Dostoevsky's work, arguing that the contradiction

ingrained in a writer's disbelief that literary art can express truth conveys a way of reading

polyphonic aesthetics as arising from polyphony's ethical dynamic. Focusing in particular on the

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[3] Luke Turner, 'Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction' (January 12, 2015)
http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/01/12/metamodernism-a-brief-introduction/ [accessed 31.3.21].
[4] Ibid.

character of Kirillov in *Demons*, Chapter 6 will expose how Dostoevsky's novels are caught between the necessity of expression and the recognition of its inadequacy. I will then return to 'Reality and its Shadow', reassessing its obscure final sentences in light of Dostoevsky's hesitation before the lie of utterance. I will progress that reassessment to critical readings of Levinas's own writing style. With a nod towards the problem of 'closure' as the 'double refusal' of the metaphysical tradition or its theoretical replacement in Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, I will draw out how this double refusal sheds light on Levinas's conception of the literary, how it can likewise be applied to Bakhtinian aesthetics, and how it contributes to a reading of the polyphonic novel that accounts for both its cognitive and discursive aspects, premising that polyphony is not a novelistic structure distinct from monologism but rather seeks to expose the ethical within the monologic narrative.[5] I will suggest, therefore, that a renewed understanding of literary ethics drawn from the maintenance of this tension is necessary for fully appreciating Dostoevsky's ethical and aesthetic relevance for the contemporary works. Borrowing from Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* yet attempting to apply Attridge's ideas to the practice of writing as well as reading, Chapter 6 will claim Dostoevsky inspired a sense of epistemic humility within the contemporary writers. Rather than the metamodern oscillation that wilfully refuses to advance the modernist indeterminacy, contemporary Dostoevskian literature actively works to both uphold and betray its own authorial mastery. It is this sense of double refusal, less an oscillation than an embrace of contradiction, that is encapsulated by C's paradoxical musings on learning to speak without authority, and that becomes the cornerstone of the close readings I undertake in Part IV.

II

The emergence of the term 'metamodernism' to define the socio-cultural sensibilities of the contemporary West had its watershed moment with the 2010 publication of Timotheus Vermeulen

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[5] Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, p.20.

and Robin van den Akker's 'Notes on metamodernism'.[6] It does, however, have its antecedents at least as far back as 1975: Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's study of 'recent American prose narratives' uses the term as a near synonym of metafiction and thus in a way antithetical to its current denotation.[7] In 2002, Andre Furlani landed closer to its current designation by studying the works of the American writer Guy Davenport. Davenport, Furlani argues, challenges the resignation to and lethargy before Baudrillard's postmodern condition, and so for Furlani the term 'post-modernist' as a repudiation of modernism is ill-fitting. *Meta*-modern, in the sense of '*after* yet *by means of* modernism' is claimed as a more appropriate term for writers like Davenport, who 'seek with the help of modernism to get over and beyond it.'[8]

Vermeulen and van den Akker resituate metamodernism as 'historically beyond (post) modernism', although their use of the prefix 'meta' is simultaneously meant to signify a 'structure of feeling' that 'should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism' and 'ontologically between (post) modernism'. The disconcerting use of parentheses is deliberate, intended to display 'the apparent rise of another modernism […] characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment' and thus unable either to affirm or abandon 'post' as an epithet. The metamodern theorists note how a 'new generation' of artists 'increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche', expressing instead an '(often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity'. Prompted by 'the alleged demise of "the" postmodern', yet barred from an uncomplicated return to the 'fanatic and/or naïve […] modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals', this recent conceptualisation of metamodernism

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[6] Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2:1 (2010). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677?needAccess=true [accessed 25.3.21]. There are no citable page numbers in the digital version.
[7] Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, 'The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives', *Journal of American Studies* 9.1 (1975) 69-83.
[8] Andre Furlani, 'Postmodern and after: Guy Davenport', *Contemporary Literature* 43.4 (2002) 709- 735 (713). Furlani's use of metamodern in this way echoes the definition of post-postmodernism given by this thesis. The difference is that Davenport and those who share his 'metamodern' strategies (Denise Levertov, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan are three names mentioned by Furlani) all came to prominence during McHale's long sixties. Their metamodernism thus arises as an alternative to early postmodernism, rather than responding to that postmodernism's later stagnation in the manner of Wallace, Coetzee and Rahimi. However, such chronological distinctions are of course insubstantial at best, and would likely succumb to sustained interrogation.

works to actively 'negotiate […] between the modern and the postmodern'. Caught between 'a

modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all', metamodernism

> oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity […]. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.[9]

As such, it occupies a position of 'informed naivety' or 'pragmatic idealism'.[10] Its studious approach

to politics, culture and art is one that is based in establishing sincere ideals, if not absolute

categories, of goodness, morality and justice. Yet it must also be held in check by a typically

postmodern scepticism as to whether such ideals can form a societal base. It commits to a

teleological sense of historical progress that it necessarily accepts as inauthentic, an updated Kantian

negative idealism that is aware of its own artifice.[11]

That metamodernism continues to seek 'what it never expects to find' (to be understood as

a unifying socio-ethical ideal to replace the ontological and epistemological security of transcendent

absolutes) attests to the late-postmodern stasis that similarly perturbs Wallace, Coetzee and

Rahimi.[12] Metamodernism in this respect coincides with the post-postmodern awareness of and

desire to depart from the thematically shallow and ontologically solipsist contemporary subjectivity,

the return to the modernist search for ethical grounding in the absence of absolutes. Unsurprisingly,

a 'metamodern sensibility' has been discerned in Wallace's works by Luke Turner in his introduction

to Vermeulen and van den Akker's 'Notes on metamodernism' webzine.[13] Likewise David James and

Urmila Seshagiri's study of specifically literary metamodernism lists Coetzee as one of its

practitioners.[14] One could project that Rahimi, were his works better known in academic circles,

would be similarly included.

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[9] Vermeulen & van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism'.
[10] In this respect, the 'pragmatic spirituality' Robert Bolger identifies in the works of David Foster Wallace can be considered as a metamodern approach to faith and religion. See Bolger, 'A Less "Bullshitty" Way to Live' in *David Foster Wallace and Religion*, pp.25-44. Bolger's essay naturally shares affinities with the other essays in McGowan and Brick's collection, discussed towards the end of the previous chapter.
[11] Vermeulen & van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism'.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Turner, 'A Brief Introduction'.
[14] David James & Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution', *PMLA* 129.1 (2014) 87-100.

It is, however, worth briefly detailing the divergence between metamodernism and post-postmodernism (as understood by this thesis) as well as their convergence. Though similar, they are not interchangeable. For one metamodernism's emphasis on the fervency of its oscillation between enthusiasm and irony is in contrast with the hesitancy before ethical grounding portrayed in the contemporary Dostoevskian works. Typified by Turner's rallying cry to 'go forth and oscillate', metamodernism seems to endorse a whole-hearted, fanatic embrace of ideals such as sincerity, hope and totality, which is then to be ravaged with equal fervency by the legacy of postmodern cynicism.[15] At one point Vermeulen and van den Akker describe this oscillation as a 'tension' but then immediately retract and choose instead the term 'double-bind'; elsewhere, Vermeulen denies that metamodernism implies 'a compromise' or 'a balance', claiming instead that 'meta intimates a constant repositioning: [...] an at times vehemently moving back and forth.'[16]

Such vehemence, however, feels discordant with the particularities of the post-postmodern works here studied, which remain consistent in their unwillingness to wholeheartedly embrace unequivocal ideals. Mario Incandenza, for instance, represents *Infinite Jest*'s strongest endorsement of what Wallace calls single-entendre principles: he is the novel's ethical exemplar, unable to lie (*IJ* 249) or be insincere (*IJ* 772), and the only one with whom his spiritually dilapidated brother, Hal, feels an emotional connection (*IJ* 316). It is, of course, his graceful intervention that marks the conclusion to the novel's Karamazovian episode. Yet, as mentioned previously, his benevolence in that instance comes about due to his misunderstanding of the contextual subtlety. And, aside from his physical deformities, questions remain as to whether Mario can be claimed as a metamodern gesture towards hopeful purity. His constant smile is described as 'involuntary' (*IJ* 314), presumably an uncontrollable consequence of his physical aberration. His capacity to deduce Hal's internal suffering, it is mentioned, derives from his inarticulate sense of a change in the nature of their

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[15] Turner, 'The Metamodernism Manifesto' (2011). http://www.metamodernism.org/ [accessed 31.3.21].
[16] Vermeulen et al., 'TANK Magazine interviews Timotheus Vermeulen' (February 23, 2012) http://www.metamodernism.com/2012/02/23/tank-interviews-timotheus-vermeulen-about-metamodernism/ [accessed 31.3.2021]. This interview is abridged.

relationship, and his awareness that he himself 'never changes' (*IJ* 590): his inability to emotionally

and/or spiritually change in some ways reduces his ability to ethically signify. Hal at one point calls

him 'Panglossian' (*IJ* 772), pointing towards the metamodern naïve optimism he embodies, yet later

chides him for his refusal to become angry or upset with anyone. In words that echo Wallace's

interview with McCaffrey, Hal tells Mario to be 'a fucking human *being* for once […]. You can get hurt

and mad at people […]. It's called being a person.' (*IJ* 784). Hal thus insinuates that Mario is more of

'a big poster of some smiley-faced guy' (*IJ* 784) than an individually answerable consciousness within

a once-occurrent moment of being. Significantly, a conversation with Mario is elsewhere described

as 'like trying to talk to a rock' (*IJ* 759), paralleling him with the novel's notorious opening scene in

which Hal is unable to converse with others.[17] This juxtaposition of Hal and Mario as equally

inexpressive proposes that both are vulnerable to the solipsistic cage, and that the novel itself, far

from vehemently oscillating between Mario's naïve enthusiasm and Hal's cynicism, can neither

advocate nor condemn either position. It instead works to accommodate both in the precarious

tension rejected by Vermeulen and van den Akker.

This tension is affirmed by the other characters of *Infinite Jest* who may be offered in

replacement of Mario as the metamodern ethical ideal of the book, the polarity to counter the

cynicism Hal embodies as well as the self-serving amorality of numerous other characters. As has

already been discussed with reference to Don Gately, no other character or event within *Infinite Jest*

asserts Mario's sincerity, benevolence or responsibility for others without showing a hesitancy, a

fear of vulnerability and desire for an external presence to assure them of their course of action.

Characters from the world of addiction and depression who arguably show the metamodern

predilection for single-entendre principles, such as Joelle van Dyne and Bruce Green, generally

comport themselves with either apathy or apprehension before others, whilst the students at

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[17] I offer a detailed reading of Hal's communicatory incapacity, especially in the opening scene, during my close reading of *Infinite Jest* in Chapter 7.

Enfield Tennis Academy must consistently negotiate their camaraderie with the ultra-competitiveness required for sporting success.

And this is a trait that extends to the other Dostoevskian texts, likewise hindering their easy classification as metamodern. C's anarchistic pessimistic quietism instinctively deters enthusiasm or hope, and as such he cannot represent one half of the polarity that Anya would oscillate between. Nor does Anya actually oscillate; she transitions from Alan's pseudo-Nietzschean amorality to something more akin to an ethical sensibility but can never fully endorse the ideals typified by C, which are in any case portrayed as redundant. The lack of an ethical centre, even one vacated and then returned to, is also a condition of *The Master of Petersburg*: Attridge notes early in his chapter on the novel that it 'offers no […] firm political or moral footholds.'[18] Attridge goes on to contrast *Master*'s setting with the context of its composition during the demise of South African apartheid, arguing that Coetzee chose 'to view revolutionary activism through the eyes of a dedicated conservative', allowing 'neither position to carry the day.'[19] Regardless of its political backstory, *Master*'s methodology in this sense is characteristic of all the post-postmodern texts. To finish the tetrad, *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s civil war setting undoubtedly hinders metamodernism's conscious embrace of optimism by exhibiting the potentially devastating ramifications of overt fanaticism. Even a pragmatic or informed naivety would seem inappropriate amongst the Kabul ruins. If anything, the most ostensibly virtuous characters, Sophia and Razmodin, border on fantastical, swiftly entering and departing from Rassoul's interior narrative to either spark his conscience or redefine his principles. The focus of the plot rarely swerves from Rassoul's own indeterminacy over the possibility of an ethical society. Commandant Parwaiz, on the other hand, actively seeks to end the chaos of war yet must himself be complicit in it in order to succeed.

In a 2018 keynote workshop speech as part of Liverpool's 'Writing on the Wall' festival, Rahimi related his creative process in terms of 'the experience of exile'. Exile, stated Rahimi, 'cannot

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[18] Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, p.116.
[19] Ibid., p.119.

be written' but instead 'lived as a primordial experience, which is revealed and shows me on the only path, which is that of creation.' Rahimi, who was himself a political exile, declared that he could no longer separate exile from either his 'identity or creation', but added that a type of exile, stemming from the initial separation from the mother, 'is intrinsic to being human.' Rahimi puts forward exile as the 'foundational experience' of all religion, and claims faith is superfluous to such experience. Creativity inevitably goes 'in search of the promised land or in search of lost paradise'.[20]

Rahimi's understanding of exilic writing resonates with the post-postmodern aesthetic. The position of the exile varies from metamodernism's oscillation, recalling as it does the 'exilic constellation' (Bakhtin, Levinas, Bergson and Merleau-Ponty) that share in Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphysical homesickness. Post-postmodernism is not the alternation between the domestic and the foreign, between the security of the subject within a totality (internal or external) and the irruption of unknowable alterity but is instead the permanence of the exilic state brought to the fore by the dissolution of metaphysical absolutes. The promise of religion, monotheistic religion at least, is its resolution of the exilic nature of human experience. Its absence (and the absence of an onto-epistemological alternative) is precisely the modernist tension revisited by the post-postmodernists. It is defined by the ever-present anguish of a loss that cannot be regained, a loss which ultimately relates back to the retheorisation of ethics from the cognitive security of ontotheology to the unknowable alterity faced by the discursive subject. And though Vermeulen and van den Akker accept the 'inevitable failure' of the metamodern venture, their pragmatic idealism that 'moves for the sake of moving' is antithetical to the irresolution of the post-postmodern works.[21] Movement, even of a futile or Pyrrhic kind, demands resolution. Modernist metaphysical homesickness is, after all, a sickness. The positivity that the metamodernists hope to inspire, the enthusiasm of 'go forth

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[20] Atiq Rahimi, 'Writing Exile', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23.2 (2019) 215-219 (217-218).

[21] Vermeulen & van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism'. That Vermeulen and van den Akker acknowledge metamodernism's 'inevitable failure' offers perhaps their closest convergence with my understanding of post-postmodernism. As I will argue for the remainder of Parts III and IV, the embrace of 'failure' is the inevitable consequence of theorising the ethical within the discursive function of language. This in turn advocates literature itself as an ideal locus for portraying post-Nietzschean ethics, able to maintain within a conditional tension both cognition and discourse. 'Notes on metamodernism', however, does not develop literature as the site of metamodernism's inevitable failure, instead detailing 'Neo-Romantic' film as the 'resignification' of Romanticism.

and oscillate', seeks to either downplay or overcome the irresolvable nature of post-postmodern affliction.

This difference between metamodernism and post-postmodernism likely stems in the former's ambiguity over what is meant by 'modernism'. Though it is notoriously difficult to define in any and all cases, this thesis has equated 'modernism' to a specific historical period between the 1880s and the beginning of McHale's 'long sixties'. Modernists, in this sense, are the first responders to the so-called post-Nietzschean era centred round, amongst other things, the apotheosis and subsequent decline of Western imperialism, the waning of traditional philosophical and ethical absolutes, and the socio-cultural responses to global warfare. Yet Vermeulen and van den Akker use modernism interchangeably with 'modernity' and the 'modern': the idealism, naivety, unity and totality they claim form one side of the metamodern oscillation are more readily associated with the pre-Nietzschean than the post-Nietzschean. By this reading, the metamodern fluctuation would indeed bypass the distinctly *modernist* metaphysical homesickness, bouncing between idealism and cynicism without consideration of how one became the other. Quite how the narrow period here called modernist, responding to pre-Nietzschean values but responded to by early postmodernism, fits in with the metamodern chronology is left unexplained. Still, it is noteworthy that 'Notes on metamodernism' rejects out of hand 'the syntactically correct but semantically meaningless term post-postmodernism.'[22] The definition of post-postmodernism used by this thesis undoubtedly differs from most other critical uses of the appellation, including Wallace's own in 'E Unibus Pluram'. It should be evident, however, that the precise conflation of syntactic correctness and semantic meaninglessness, the algebraic cancelling out of subexpressions, makes the post-postmodern reiteration of modernist concerns an apt term for the contemporary Dostoevskian works.

Accordingly, the clarity academic discourse has sought since the emergence of metamodernism is still forthcoming. David James and Urmila Seshagiri's early continuation of metamodern theory worked to locate it specifically within the narrow historical period of

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[22] Ibid.

modernism mentioned above. Noting the 'growing number of contemporary novelists [who] place a

conception of modernism as revolution at the heart of their fictions', they define a specifically

literary conception of metamodernism as 'contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-

conscious relationships with modernist literature.'[23] Yet, though on the surface this seems closer to

post-postmodernism than Vermeulen, van den Akker and Turner, James and Seshagiri are keen to

focus more on the 'innovative energies' of 'modernist style', as opposed to the peculiar

philosophical sensibility of exile.[24] Though they do touch on the association of 'formal principles' and

'ethicopolitical imperatives' in literature, their study gives greater precedence to the former at the

expense of the latter, claiming 'contemporary literature 'responds to modernism as an aesthetic

venture'.[25] A 2018 issue of the journal *English Studies* devoted to metamodernism similarly attempts

to assess 'the perceived resurfacing of Modernism in contemporary literature' based on the 'clashing

interpretations' of the term 'which can ultimately be traced back to the definitions offered by

Vermeulen and Van den Akker on the one hand and James and Seshagiri on the other.'[26] However

the essays within the issue seem similarly ambivalent regarding a definition for metamodernism:

Nick Bently's study of David Mitchell and Zadie Smith insists it is 'more accurate to see

metamodernism as a category within the postmodern, rather than offering a clear break with it.'[27]

If, therefore, Vermeulen and van den Akker believe 'post-postmodern' to be too broad, too

fluid or too absurd a term, such difficulties clearly also arise by their use of metamodern.

Nevertheless, metamodern studies have value both in attempting to define a response to

postmodernism that seeks a return to concerns prior to its heyday and in explicating the necessary

equivocation of that search. Postmodernism styles itself as a departure from all that came before it,

and so any extension beyond and/or egress from postmodernism must always account for its

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[23] James & Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism', 87-88.
[24] Ibid., 93.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Dennis Kersten & Usha Wilbers, 'Introduction: Metamodernism', *English Studies* 99.7 (2018) 719-722 (719/721).
[27] Nick Bentley, 'Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith's *NW*, and the Metamodern', *English Studies* 99:7 (2018) 723-743 (725). A similar assessment is offered by Martin Paul Eve's study of Wallace's debt to Thomas Pynchon. See 'Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of 'Metamodernism'', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 1.1 (2012) 7–25.

inherent cynical reach, must always be in a sense drawn back into its sphere. Post-postmodernism,

in the sense it is used here, shares such equivocation: the desire for metaphysical anchorage may be

a condition of modernism, but the awareness that such anchorage is irretrievable is a trait shared by

modernism and that which comes after it. Metamodernism has been discussed at length here not

only to further clarify the post-postmodern position of the contemporary Dostoevskians, but also to

re-emphasise the hesitancy of that position via contrast with metamodern oscillation.

III

It is perhaps ironic that the need to investigate the similarities and differences of post-

postmodernism and metamodernism could itself be seen as both a post-postmodern and a

metamodern gesture. The vehement swinging between poles, on the one hand the endorsement of

unifying social and ethical values corresponding with the cognitive grasp of language, on the other

the cynical rejection of unity representing the irruption of the Other's voice, is at odds with the

intrinsic tension of the Dostoevskian works that summon the remnants of a long-dead past, invoke a

presence that is also an absence. Nevertheless, both movements are allied in their desire to rectify

the subjective isolation and consequent potential for amorality that they mutually associate with

postmodernism. And both seek to move beyond or overcome postmodernism, provisionally at least,

by passing back through it to a time when a secure subjective position in relation to a totality,

anchored by a unifying ideal, was not dismissed out of hand as anachronistic.

Emblematic of this desire is the reintroduction within metamodern discourse of the concept

of the 'Grand Narrative', the interconnected collection of stories that works to situate those subjects

who subscribe to it in relation to an ideological centre. Grand narratives function in establishing

communities via a shared set of expectations, goals and ideals: the paradigms of faith and ethics set

forth in sacred texts, for example, contribute to the grand narrative of religious institutions, and so

to identify as 'Jewish' or 'Sikh' is to act in accordance with a narrative ideal of Judaism or Sikhism.

Similar narratives are integral to the ideologies of family, nationhood, law…etc., and it is the

deconstruction of the ideological centres of such narratives, and the subsequent negation of their

power, that marks the post-Nietzschean age from its modernist conceptions through to the present

day. Despite the ethical impetus behind the repudiation of totalising absolutes, the ensuing

displacement of self-identity, particularly an identity relative to a community, is the primary issue

metamodernism (and, to an extent, post-postmodernism) seeks to address. It is in this spirit that

Vermeulen proclaims grand narratives to be 'as necessary as they are problematic', whilst Turner

calls for metamodernism to explore 'the potential for grand narratives and universal truths'.[28]

One such extended study is Andrew Corsa's 2018 essay 'Grand Narratives, Metamodernism,

and Global Ethics'. Corsa's essay is pertinent to this chapter not only for its explicit focus on the

ethical dimension of the metamodern project, but also for its adoption of Bakhtinian polyphony to

answer the ethical demands of the present day. Like the metamodernists before him, Corsa

recognises the contemporary 'need for grand narratives in order to face global crises'.[29] Furthering

the sociologist Aaran Gare's work on the climate crisis, Corsa argues that a characteristically

postmodern stance against the unity of a grand narrative is detrimental to humanity's newly

emerged 'common goals': countering the threat of extinction.[30] And though he recognises the call

for 'a new postmodern grand narrative' to be 'problematic', precisely 'because the postmodern

condition is characterized in terms of the rejection of grand narratives', Corsa nonetheless proposes

an identifiably metamodern choice 'to act and think as if humanity could and will progress toward

great ends.' In spite of the 'chaotic nature' of late postmodernism, the metamodernists must

'choose to live according to grand narratives that describe humanity collectively moving toward a far

better world.'[31]

[28] Vermeulen et al., 'TANK Magazine interview'; Turner, 'A Brief Introduction'.
[29] Andrew J. Corsa, 'Grand Narratives, Metamodernism, and Global Ethics', *Cosmos and History* 14.3 (2018) 241-272 (247).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 250/256.

Corsa therefore recruits Bakhtin to overcome the problematic aspect of grand narratives within a postmodern age that rejects them. Noting how Gare sources traditional grand narratives in the heroic epic, claimed as 'monologic' in that 'they only allow for the unquestionable validity of a single, unitary perspective', Corsa instead supports the creation and embrace of 'a narrative that gives "a place to the diversity of contending voices and perspectives" and construes all people as "conscious, active subjects" of the narrative.'[32] A grand narrative in this sense would not unify its subjects around a centralised set of ideals and/or values but would instead exist in a constant process of renewal and readaptation to account for the diversity of those it subjects. As opposed to the interpellation of an ideological dominance, the polyphonic grand narrative could only be adhered to by conscious subjective choice and would thus somehow incorporate the potentially competing contributions of a range of idiosyncratic individuals and cultures. Those embracing polyphonic grand narratives thereby commit 'to live out whatever revised and changed narrative they have created after listening to the challenges posed by those who create and embrace alternative worldviews.'[33]

Of course, the very concept of a polyphonic grand narrative is rife with contradiction, to which Corsa and metamodernism in general willingly admit. Not least of which is the possibility that an awareness of the artificial nature of any grand narrative, one that cannot anchor its subjects to a universally accepted premise, risks disaffecting those who are not that narrative's primary beneficiaries. Though Corsa and Gare would likely argue that every person is a primary beneficiary of the survival of the planet, not every instance that calls for revived grand narratives does so in the face of an extinction-level event. In almost all cases, perhaps including the climate crisis, a grand narrative will be associated with a position of power, with hierarchy and the benefit for some over others. Furthermore, even with regards to climate change the idea of collective action to the mutual benefit of all involved (including one's own benefit) is antithetical to the answerability for the other

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[32] Ibid., 259-260. Corsa is here quoting from Gare's 'Narratives and the Ethics and Politics of Environmentalism', *Theory & Science* 2.1 (2001).

[33] Corsa, 'Grand Narratives', 263.

that defines Bakhtinian polyphonic ethics. In both a Bakhtinian and Levinasian sense, the subject always already has one responsibility more than all the others. It can never demand responsibility from another. Corsa reveals the discrepancies in his use of Bakhtin when, concluding the essay, he contends that 'we morally *ought* to do that which enables us to effectively address […] a plethora of global crises and political issues'.[34] Despite the humanitarian principles of his argument, soliciting the moral 'ought' in the process of championing his so-called 'polyphonic' grand narrative goes against the entire premise of Bakhtinian ethics and their manifestation as a theory on Dostoevsky's narrative. Anything we 'ought' to ethically do discloses a definition of the ethical long since renounced by Bakhtin.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse the relative merits of a polyphonic grand narrative, however. The more substantial importance of Corsa's essay lies in its attempts to conflate what has been so far argued to be two opposing and irreconcilable positions. Split in chronological terms between the pre- and post-Nietzschean (albeit recognising the insufficiency of a simple chronological split), classifications of the former branch out from the cognitive aspect of language itself and include the security of an ideological totality that represses unknowable otherness, the stabilising yet deadening of being, and the finalisation of the subject in relation to absolute metaphysical values. Meanwhile classifications of the latter, extending from the discursive aspect of language, concern a polyphonic understanding of the ethical with the potential to rescue the metaphysically unmoored subject from solipsism by sourcing ethical grounding in the pre-discursive responsibility inaugurated through responding to the Other's call. The historical transition drawn out in the previous chapters effectively concerns the negotiation of these two polarities, how despair for the loss of the former contended with revelling in the freedom of the latter, and how that freedom was ultimately found wanting in terms of inspiring ethical interaction.

The metamodernism discussed above extends this negotiation by consciously oscillating between the two polarities. However, though Corsa's essay styles itself as metamodern it is

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[34] Ibid., 267.

premised not on an oscillation but on the co-maintenance of both positions. A 'polyphonic grand narrative' incorporates both the pre- and post-Nietzschean, the cognitive and the discursive, the monologic and the ethical. It seeks not to bounce between them but to keep hold of both simultaneously and, significantly, uses Bakhtin to do so. And even though Corsa's premise may disintegrate on closer inspection, my central concern in this chapter is that it is always supposed to. The attempt to reconcile the cognitive and the discursive in terms of practical or pragmatic activity entails the effacement of either function of language: the solipsism of the liberated subject or the finalisation of the totalised subject. Whether knowingly or not, Corsa's 'metamodernism' reiterates the renowned tension between Bakhtin's early ethical and aesthetic theories, one most accessible via a comparison of *Problems* and *Philosophy of the Act* with his early 1920s extended essay, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity'. The pull between the polyphonic and subjective adherence to a grand narrative, understood in 'Author and Hero' as the 'consummation' of the subject by a transcendent authorial figure, is critical to understanding Bakhtinian aesthetics in terms of his metaphysical homesickness, as well as understanding how post-postmodern texts can be distinguished from metamodernism.

IV

This thesis has so far avoided an analysis of 'Author and Hero' primarily because the conclusions drawn by 'Author and Hero' present as incompatible with a Levinasian ethical understanding of Dostoevskian polyphony (assisted by *Philosophy of the Act*). This is not to say that there are no commonalities between 'Author and Hero' and *Problems*, or that one represents a dramatic theoretical break from the other. The two texts, as well as *Philosophy of the Act*, were initially drafted around the same time, the interwar zenith of literary and artistic modernism in Europe and, for Bakhtin in particular, the cultural and artistic intensity that grew from the Russian Revolution, Civil War and rise of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, Bakhtin's thought during this period evolved

from similar starting points and followed similar trajectories. Holquist's introduction, for example,

notes that 'Author and Hero' too demonstrates Bakhtin's independence from neo-Kantianism 'by

resistance to the idea of an all-encompassing oneness'.[35] Bakhtinian architectonics still comprise the

central theoretical framework of 'Author and Hero': the ordering of 'living subjects […] into

categories of "I" and "another"' provides the 'conceptual armature' for this essay as it does for

contemporaneous and later texts.[36] And Bakhtin's understanding of the unfinalisability of the subject

is consistent here as elsewhere. In order to 'live and act', he writes, 'I need to be open for myself

[….] I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be' (*AA* 13).

Yet though 'Author and Hero' concerns itself in the first instance with the axiology of being

within the architectonics of subjectivity, its 'major topic' is the treatment of 'aesthetics […] as a

subset of architectonics.'[37] It is the treatment of the aesthetic relationship between writer and

character that distinguishes 'Author and Hero' from *Philosophy of the Act* and *Problems*. Dostoevsky

is treated in the latter as the creator of a new type of novel form that departs from the traditional

unity of an authorial ideal and the characters relative to it. What distinguishes the polyphonic from

its monologic forebears is the unfinalisability of its heroes, the 'unclosedness' and 'indeterminancy'

(*PDP* 53) of the characters. As I discoursed upon in Chapter 1, in monologism 'the hero is closed and

his semantic boundaries strictly defined.' The hero cannot 'exceed the limits of his own character […]

without violating the author's monologic design concerning him' (*PDP* 52).

The aesthetic activity studied in 'Author and Hero' concerns precisely this 'rigid framework'

(*PDP* 52) constituted by a unifying, authorial field of vision, the way 'parts are shaped into wholes'.[38]

This precisely is the 'consummation' of the hero that defines aesthetics in Bakhtin's essay. The

author

> is the bearer and sustainer of the intently active unity of a consummated whole (the whole of a hero
> and the whole of a work) which is transgredient to each and every one of its particular moments […].
> The hero cannot live by this whole, he cannot be guided by it in his own lived experiences and actions,
> for it is a whole that descends upon him – is bestowed upon him as a gift – from another active

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[35] Holquist, 'Introduction' to *Art and Answerability*, p.xv.
[36] Ibid., p.x.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

consciousness: from the creative consciousness of an author. The author's consciousness […] *encompasses* the consciousness and world of a hero – [it] encompasses and *consummates* the consciousness of a hero by supplying those moments which are in principle transgredient to the hero's consciousness […]. The author not only sees and knows everything seen and known by each hero individually and by all the heroes collectively, but he also sees and knows *more* than they do'. (*AA* 12)

The 'specifically aesthetic moment' (*AA* 67) is constituted only by consummation in this sense. The antagonism, therefore, between an authorial framework that is 'rigid' in *Problems* but 'a gift' in 'Author and Hero' is the modernist tension in Bakhtin that Corsa's metamodernism stumbles upon. Whilst the author's 'exclusive field of vision' (*PDP* 48), what 'Author and Hero' terms the '*excess* of the author's seeing' (*AA* 12), may leave 'only pure self-consciousness in its totality' (*PDP* 48) with all its Levinasian connotations, Holquist remarks how 'Author and Hero' makes it clear that 'not all totalizing strategies are inherently bad' in Bakhtin's work of this period. He points out that this 'will perhaps come as something of a surprise to casual readers of *Rabelais and His World*', a chronologically later work than 'Author and Hero' or *Problems*.[39] Such thinking likewise impels Emerson and Morson to define both works as 'a decisive break' or 'a watershed', the expression of formulations Bakhtin later 'abandoned'.[40]

Erdinast-Vulcan, however, argues against the idea of an evolution in Bakhtin's theory. Her critical attention is focused on the earlier texts because they more overtly reveal the modernist metaphysical homesickness that the initial Western reception of Bakhtin, which focused on his later works, was unable to appreciate.[41] Erdinast-Vulcan instead works to expose the two competing impulses of Bakhtin's philosophical writings, which she terms the 'centripetal' and the 'centrifugal' and claims to be equatable with Bakhtin's advocation of both the unfinalisable subject and the finalised/consummated hero. One section of Holquist's introduction to 'Author and Hero' details Kant's theoretical importance to Bakhtin; aside from the rejection of formal ethical principles already discussed, Bakhtin's work sought to extend Kantian transcendental idealism in maintaining

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[39] Ibid., p.xxiv.

[40] Morson &. Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, p.7.

[41] As Erdinast-Vulcan notes, this inability was mostly due to the translations of Bakhtin's later works (such as *Rabelais* and *The Dialogic Imagination*) being published before translations of his earlier essays. The thinker Erdinast-Vulcan references is Julie Kristeva, whose readings of Bakhtin (alongside Lacan and Foucault) in texts such as *Desire and Language* presented the Russian as 'a poststructuralist *avant la lettre*'. *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.43.

its relation between the mental and the physical as likewise 'defining the knowing subject as maker of sense out of the otherwise inchoate matter of the world.' It produced, according to Holquist, an 'obsession with perception as an act of *authoring*' in the essay, an interpretation of 'the individual subject […] as similar to the artist who seeks to render what is *not* an artwork in itself (independent of the artist's activity) into something that *is* […] a conceptual whole'.[42]

It is this type of approach to 'Author and Hero' that Erdinast-Vulcan picks up on. Though ostensibly a theory of aesthetics, she notes how the essay 'evolves into a treatise on human subjectivity in blatant disregard of ontological distinctions [and] conceptual boundary lines' between the fictional and the real. Bakhtin's 'aesthetic theory seems to blend into a philosophical theory of the subject, and vice versa'. As such, the essay 'relegates itself to the safety of aesthetic theory and reads like an apologia for authorial omniscience'.[43] Within the architectonics of existence, the centrifugal subject requires centripetal anchorage, and obtains it via the consummation of an authorial, authoritative otherness. This anchorage is not depicted in 'Author and Hero' in terms of the illimitable, pre-cognitive answerability for the Other that emerges from an ethical reading of Dostoevskian polyphony. Although, as this thesis has been arguing, this may be how such anchorage resolves itself through Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky, a comparative reading of *Problems* and 'Author and Hero' suggests that such a resolution was perhaps subconsciously conceived by Bakhtin. If 'Author and Hero' is indeed an apologia for authorial omniscience, the figure of the author stands in for the metaphysical grounding that the post-Nietzschean era abjures. Rejecting the 'epistemological consciousness' of science and philosophical idealism that reduces the event of being to 'purely theoretical cognition' (*AA* 88), Bakhtin nevertheless upholds the 'loving and value-positing […] aesthetic consciousness', a state wherein two separate consciousnesses meet and form a 'lovingly *consummated* […] *lived* unity' (*AA* 89). In this sense, Bakhtin seems to invest the aesthetic with the significance of both the pre- and post-Nietzschean conceptions of subjectivity.

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[42] Holquist, 'Introduction' to *Art and Answerability*, p.xvi.
[43] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.26-27.

If viewed as an aesthetic thesis, Erdinast-Vulcan claims, 'Author and Hero' thus reads as 'oddly anachronistic'. Read as a theory of subjectivity, however, it is 'a profoundly disturbing work', lacking a consideration of 'the potential costs of subjectifying ourselves in and through the eyes of the internalized other, who may be less than benevolent'. Unlike Levinas, who understands subjectivity as substitution for the Other to be 'initially hostage', a 'utopian and, for an I, inhuman condition' (*EI* 100), Bakhtinian subjectivity in 'Author and Hero' seems almost naively premised on the promise of 'loving' consummation in the eyes of another, a similar naïve premise I accused of ontotheological readings of Dostoevsky such as Barineau or Friesen in my Introduction. In theory, it is the kind of naiveté that would appeal to a metamodernist like Corsa, except that Corsa's 'polyphonic' grand narrative leans on a concept almost entirely absent from 'Author and Hero'. Levinasian subjectivity, manifested in the polyphonic novel by reading it as an archetype of Saying, is initiated by the pre-discursive call of the Other, the otherwise-than-being that is always already subordinate to being and to the grasp of cognition. Meanwhile, the architectonics of being laid out in 'Author and Hero' require the full participation of unfinalised being, whom through consummation from another achieves 'a form of axiological validation and […] a sense of coherence that is not available to the subject from within.' As Erdinast-Vulcan points out, the centripetal 'operative force' of the essay 'could not be easily reconciled with familiar Bakhtinian tags that […] made him so congenial to Western readers in the thoroughly secular climate of postmodernity: polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia'.[44]

Erdinast-Vulcan correctly recognises that Bakhtin's 'highly problematic' aesthetic conception of subjectivity 'can only be assuaged within a religious frame of reference', in which 'God is the ultimate other' that consummates the necessarily centrifugal, unfinalisable subject. This is the starting point for her conception of Bakhtin as a metaphysical exile. Despite Bakhtin's claims his 'inquiry' is 'strictly secular' (*AA* 149), 'Author and Hero' implicitly conflates authorial and divine authority throughout, and in some cases explicitly. In a section that discusses the subject's

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[44] Ibid., p.33.

'axiological position', Bakhtin writes that 'the hero's meaning-governed attitude in being', the 'interior place which he occupies in the unitary and unique event of being', is in itself 'isolated out of the event of being' until it is 'consummated aesthetically' (*AA* 138). And he later claims that in 'an absolute axiological void, no utterance is possible, nor is consciousness possible', in the same way that 'outside God, outside the bounds of trust in absolute otherness, self-consciousness and self-utterance are impossible' (*AA* 144). Erdinast-Vulcan points to precisely this kind of rhetoric to declare that 'the aesthetic conceptualization of the subject […] requires authorial grounding from without', has the 'need for a master narrative and a master narrator.'[45]

Part II of my thesis explored the retention of religious discourse within ostensibly secular theory as a symptom of Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphysical homesickness, reading it alongside the resurgence of such discourse in the contemporary Dostoevskian works. The polarity between the centrifugal, polyphonic subject and the consummated, centripetal aesthetic subject, however, seems on the one hand to advance this symptom but on the other threatens to overwhelm it. The futility of yet need for metaphysical anchorage definitive of modernism, and echoed by the post-postmodern, prompted a conception of subjectivity 'grounded' by an illimitable responsibility for the Other. The aesthetics of 'Author and Hero', however, remain structured by a transgredient authorial figure, subsuming alterity within a master narrative. It resembles the monologism that Dostoevsky's post-Nietzschean 'abdication of authorial jurisdiction' serves as a departure from.[46] It is as if Bakhtin, though accepting the need to retheorise the divine relation in secular terms, still wants to maintain the façade of an Auctor Mundi. God-as-Other, understood as the consummation necessary from the architectonics of being, is expressed in terms equatable with divine authority, and so proposed as an aesthetic theory to avoid implications of regressivity or anachronism. 'Author and Hero' does not necessarily propose a grand narrative for being. Yet it can be seen as applying a grand narrative to the realm of art and literature.

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[45] Ibid., p.33-35.
[46] Ibid., p.36.

This, henceforth, must be the basis of my thesis's reading of Dostoevsky and his contemporary iterations. Whilst the centripetal and centrifugal dynamic of Bakhtinian aesthetics/poetics 'is *not* [...] a question of alternating and distinct "phases"' in his work, an early-career theoretical 'pendulum movement' reminiscent of metamodern oscillation, when read together these competing impulses produce a 'tensile relation [...] which generate[s] both the ambivalence and the energy' of post-postmodern literature and art, a tension that stands its ground before the metamodern desire for resolution.[47] It is the self-same tension that allows Bakhtin on the one hand to champion the ethical unfinalisability of the polyphonic hero, yet on the other to consider *Problems* a 'morally flawed' work for its inability to openly address 'the main questions' about which Dostoevsky himself agonised, 'the existence of God'.[48] The relocation of the modernist profound equivocation over subjectivity to aesthetic theory therefore must become the sole focus of the remainder of this chapter and beyond. That Bakhtin sought to reconceive of the ontotheological moorings of subjectivity as an aesthetic theory, yet concurrently developed an aesthetic theory elucidating the immediacy of once-occurrent being constituting discursive ethics, brings the aesthetic to the forefront of interrogations into post-postmodern ethics. Why, it must be asked, does the focus shift from God to art? Why is the God incognito best sought for in the literary? The next step, understandably focusing on literature, will begin by substituting the centripetal and centrifugal vectors of the Bakhtinian subject with their aesthetic equivalents: the 'rhythm' of the textual whole and the 'loophole' that disrupts it. This will set the stage for a comparative reading of 'rhythm' in Bakhtin and Levinas, and ultimately for an analysis in Chapter 6 of the way Dostoevsky serves as a precursor for their respective aesthetic theories, as well as for their ethical ones.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Sergei Bocharov, 'Conversations with Bakhtin', trans. Stephen Blackwell, *PLMA* 109 (1994) 1009-1024. Quoted in Erdinast-Vulan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.45.

Bakhtin devotes an extended section of 'Author and Hero' (*AA* 112-132) to the concept of rhythm.

As elsewhere, the boundary lines between aesthetic theory and ethical philosophy are blurred.

Rhythm is initially juxtaposed with the 'lived experiences' (*AA* 117) of the ethically free subject,

which parallels it with the consummation of an aesthetic whole. Using the concept of biography as

an allegory for all aesthetic creation, Bakhtin writes that,

> insofar as I find precisely *myself* in a given lived experience, insofar as I do not renounce it as *my own* within the unique unity of my own life, I connect it with the future […]; as long as I am the one living in it, it does not exist in full. This brings us directly to the problem of *rhythm*. (*AA* 117)

That problem is resolved by 'the axiological ordering of what is inwardly given or present-on-hand',

the instance of 'the inward course of action' being 'secured, determined, lovingly consolidated and

measured by a *rhythm*' which 'is accomplished only by the self-activity of another soul, within the

encompassing meaning-and-value context of this other soul' (*AA* 117). Bakhtin's description of

rhythm accordingly resonates with the centripetal stasis of the consummated subject, one secured

and consolidated by a loving authorial figure. Indeed, Erdinast-Vulcan notes how, for Bakhtin, the

concept of rhythm is 'a synonym for the narrative pattern […] established and ratified only

retrospectively from a position of transgredience through the containing, aestheticizing gaze of the

authorial other.'[49] From a narrative perspective, therefore, rhythm is surely the central structural

activity of monologism. The characters of the monologic novel are biographically finalised, remaining

'ethically passive in rhythm', an 'established social order […] clothed in the axiological flesh of the

other' (i.e., the author) and submitting 'rightfully to the sway of rhythm' (*AA* 121).[50]

Countering the 'aestheticization' of the subject within narrative consummation is that

subject's internal unfinalisability, its unique answerability within its once-occurrent moment of

being. Narratively theorising the former as 'rhythm', Erdinast-Vulcan offers the Bakhtinian term

'loophole' for the manifestation of subjective unfinalisability within literature and art. Marking the

'inverse relation between the degree of narrative coherence (rhythm) in our self-perception and our

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[49] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.37.
[50] Such ethical passivity is not the passivity of Levinasian ethics, which is the pre-discursive foundation for the kind of lived experience that rhythm subdues. It is more akin to the passivity of the individual within a totalising hierarchy, the way 'singular beings' are 'integrated into a whole […] in which this singularity vanishes' (*TI* 59).

freedom of choice and action', the 'ethical subject' must break out of its passivity '[i]n order to live',

must 'always slip out through a "loophole," transgress the boundaries of the narrative frame.'[51]

Loophole is a rarer term than rhythm in 'Author and Hero', but its infrequent appearances confirm

Erdinast-Vulcan's designation. The hero's 'inner self activity […] exceeds both nature and the world: I

always have an outlet along the line of my experience of myself in the act of the world'. This is the

always available 'loophole […] through which I can save myself from being no more than a natural

given' (*AA* 40).

The 'ethical subject […] must reach out through loopholes […] in order to act.' It does so

'[a]gainst the gift of aesthetic wholeness, that integral rhythm of life, which is granted by the author

other'.[52] Again the boundaries between life and art are obscured but, if the focus is narrowed on

literature, the loophole of the ethical subject has all the hallmarks of the independent

consciousnesses within novelistic polyphony. An extended quotation from 'Author and Hero'

elaborates this reading. 'Artistic vision', writes Bakhtin, 'presents us with the *whole* hero, measured

in full'. In this respect, the rhythmic (i.e., monologic) hero 'must be dead for us, formally dead', just

as in real life 'death is the form of the aesthetic consummation of the individual.' A life lived from

start to finish and able to be assessed and appreciated only from an exterior vantage point is both

ethically dumb and aesthetically pure. Unfiltered rhythm 'takes possession of a life that *has been*

lived', so that in art 'this lived-out life is saved, justified and consummated in [the] eternal memory'

of the text. If, however,

> the meaning that impels the hero's life fascinates and absorbs us *as* meaning, i.e., if we are fascinated
> with its being imposed as a task to be accomplished, and not with its individual givenness in the
> interior being of the hero, then the achievement of form and rhythm is rendered difficult. For in that
> case the hero's life strives to break through form and rhythm; it strives to acquire the significance of
> authoritative meaning […]. An artistically convincing consummation becomes impossible: the hero's
> soul is transposed from the category of the *other* to the category of the *I*'. (*AA* 131-132)

The distortion of monologic rhythm is described in terms utterly analogous to Dostoevsky's

creation of '*free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with

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[51] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.38.
[52] Ibid., p.63.

him and even rebelling against him' (*PDP* 6). The consummation of the hero in the 'traditional novel'

produces 'the usual objectified image of a hero' which, far from resembling the loving bestowal of a

gift, is tantamount to the fettering of 'voiceless slaves' (*PDP* 7, 6). Loophole words are constituent

components of polyphonic characters; the term itself is given greater weight in *Problems* than in

'Author and Hero'. A loophole is there described as 'the retention for oneself of the possibility for

altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words', and a character's retention of a loophole

during its 'confessional self-definition' is 'widespread' (*PDP* 233) in Dostoevsky. To an extent,

Dostoevsky is proposed as the creator of a novelistic style in which loophole is as significant as

rhythm. Guided by the principle to 'never use for objectifying or finalizing another's consciousness

anything that might be inaccessible to that consciousness', Dostoevsky objectified 'the entire realm

of the author's creative subjectivity'. He moved 'his own form […] deeper and further' into his

aesthetic construct, 'so far that it can no longer find expression in style or tone'. In this way, the

polyphonic 'hero' is just as much an 'ideologist' as its author, and the 'consciousness of the

ideologist, with all its passionate seriousness, with all its loopholes […] enters so fundamentally into

the content of Dostoevsky's novel that direct, unmediated monologic ideologism can no longer

determine its artistic form' (*PDP* 278).[53] This, then, is the abdication of authorial jurisdiction that

Dostoevsky formulated in anticipation of the modernist consciousness of the post-Nietzschean

world. In ethical terms it is the artistic manifestation of the Levinasian breach of totality, enacted by

the voice of the Other and substituting metaphysical anchorage with the pre-discursivity of Saying

that inaugurates subjectivity. In aesthetic terms, it is a novelistic style that allows for and endorses

the loopholes a character may use to break free from its rhythmically objectified image.

It is safe to assume that Bakhtin did not conceive of muted enslavement as a gift that could

be lovingly bestowed. The contradictions of that precise idea are the very focus of Dostoevsky's 'The

Grand Inquisitor', noted by Bakhtin for 'the deep essential relevance of its dialogic form' (*PDP* 279).

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[53] The quotes from page 278 come from Appendix I of this edition of *Problems*, which contains notes from Bakhtin's 1929 text that were not included in the 1963 reworking.

The irreconcilable contrast between these two figurations of an aesthetic hero develops from the

same homesickness and hesitancy before the conception of subjectivity confronted by modernism

and returned to by post-postmodernism. As mentioned above, it can ultimately be reduced to the

competing function of language, as both the source of knowledge and the conduit for the

unknowable, which pre-exists but is exposed by the post-Nietzschean aversion of absolute, totalising

structures. And any attempt to assess the ethics of the post-Nietzschean artistic climate, either

Dostoevsky's anticipation of it or the contemporary Dostoevskians' response to it, must account for

both fields of the polarity in a way more substantial than the rapid oscillation between them. Only

this way can polyphony be considered both a small-scale Copernican revolution (*PDP* 49) and

morally flawed. To ignore one side is to ensnare the hero in a solipsistic cage, cynically detached

from ethical engagement with alterity; to ignore the other is to abandon the hero in a redundant

past, present it as an anachronism. The contrast must be accounted for, and accounted for as

irreconcilable. Reconciling the tension produces merely the absurdity of loving enslavement, the gift

of voicelessness, or the equally absurd polyphonic grand narrative. Post-Nietzschean art can

therefore be seen, in Erdinast Vulcan's term, as a 'tug-of-war' between consummation and

unfinalisability, traditional and revolutionary, centripetal and centrifugal, rhythm and loophole, the

God of presence and the God incognito, the freedom of living and metaphysical grounding.[54] It is a

game that neither side can win. As such, the rope remains continually taut.

VI

This is the stance that can be taken into a review of Levinas's theories of art, particularly when

assessing his own use of 'rhythm' comparatively with Bakhtin's. Contrasting rhythm with loophole in

Bakhtinian aesthetics serves to remind that a 'loophole' is only ever a gap within a pre-established

structure: an archer can fire an arrow through a loophole but is still protected by the rest of the

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[54] Erdinast-Vulcan, *Between Philosophy and Literature*, p.15.

castle stone. It was noted earlier that the aesthetically pure life, in the sense of 'traditional' (or, pre-Nietzschean) aesthetics, was ethically dumb, if not a voiceless slave then a life lived to completion, a life both passed and past, only appraisable from an external vantage point. It stands to reason, therefore, that an ethically pure life would be aesthetically dumb, the impossible condition of a loophole without a surrounding bastion or curtain wall. And if rhythm can be aligned with the cognitive function of language (placing loophole with its discursive function), the aesthetically dumb would, paradoxically, be purely discursive. Which is to say, it would be aligned solely with the condition of discursivity, necessarily pre-discursive, and presupposing the cognitive function of language. It would involve only the senselessness of the Saying without the Said, an untraced and untraceable Saying that would be as 'voiceless' as the aesthetically consummated subject of the traditional, monologic novel. Being must necessarily resolve the otherwise than being within itself. This is 'the price that manifestation demands' (*OTB* 6). So, therefore, must art.

Totality and Infinity is by no means an aesthetic study. Nor can one read it as a work of ethical philosophy that is suggestive of literary theory, in the way Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero' and *Problems* say as much about ethics as they do about literature. Nevertheless, there are moments in Levinas's first major text that reveal an ostensibly negative estimation of art and literature in relation to the ethical. In a section concerning the disparity between the 'ethical relation' and 'every relation one could call mystical, where events other than that of the presentation of the original being come to overwhelm or sublimate the pure sincerity of this presentation' (*TI* 202), Levinas presents the ethical relation as straightforward, resisting alteration, fusion or evasion. He writes,

> To poetic activity – where influences arise unbeknown to us out of this nonetheless conscious activity, to envelop it and beguile it as a rhythm, and where action is borne along by the very work it has given rise to […] – is opposed the language that at each instant dispels the charm of rhythm and prevents initiative from becoming a role. Discourse is rupture and commencement, breaking of rhythm which enraptures and transports the interlocutors – prose. (*TI* 203)[55]

The terminology used here differs from Bakhtin (remembering anyway that both are in translation), yet the concepts appear to correspond, particularly with regards to the contrast between the

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[55] This section of *Totality and Infinity* is discussed by Robbins in *Altered Reading*, p.78-79, wherein she claims it is typical of the work's 'gesture of exclusion of poetry'.

'rhythm' of poetic activity and the discursive breaking of rhythm. Though Levinas terms such rupture 'prose', it seems clear that he is referring to the ethical function of language as antagonistic to the activity of 'poetry', by which it can be inferred Levinas means all art. In another section of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the maintenance of the ethical relation as a refusal 'to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me. I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or damnation that would be enacted in spite of me' (*TI* 79). Levinas here, as Jill Robbins recognises, is conflating aesthetic terms ('role', 'drama', 'figure', 'author') with the hierarchy of institutional religion, with the participation of the individual in a totalising religious narrative. In doing so, he verges on applying the same correlation between monologic author and Auctor Mundi that is so central to 'Author and Hero', albeit portraying that relation in more ostensibly negative terms. This is likely why Robbins argues that, for Levinas, 'aesthetic terms denote (and substitute for) a loss of agency, a self-dispossession: the muse speaks *through* us; poetic delirium tears us away *from* ourselves'. Her phrasing here is easily as applicable to Bakhtin as to Levinas.[56]

Yet although Levinas seems to share Bakhtin's theory on the relation between art and a dialogic understanding of ethics, he has not traditionally been thought to share Bakhtin's equivocation over the role art plays in the ethical life of the subject. Robbins's *Altered Reading*, which remains one of the most significant studies of Levinas and literature, throughout reminds its readers that, with regards to the possibility that the ethical relation can be realised poetically, Levinas hovers somewhere between 'grave doubts' and 'outright dismissal'.[57] This is again hinted at in *Totality and Infinity* by Levinas's 'denigration of rhetoric', a word that has the same function as 'rhythm' in its antagonism towards the discursive (ethical) function of language.[58] Rhetoric is condemned as 'ruse, emprise and exploitation' (*TI* 72) in its resistance of discourse, and so 'to face

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[56] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.51.
[57] Ibid., p.82.
[58] In Chapter 8, I will give extended focus to the way C in *Diary* presents Tolstoy as master of rhetoric, and thus as the quintessential monologic author, thus lending further weight to the conflation of rhetoric and rhythm that I propose here.

the Other, in a veritable conversation' is to 'renounce the psychagogy, demagogy, pedagogy [that] rhetoric involves' (*TI* 70). More substantial than the suggestiveness of *Totality and Infinity*, however, is the earlier essay 'Reality and Its Shadow' (1948), which details 'everything that Levinas finds bad about art.'[59] 'Reality and Its Shadow' indeed opens with the line '[i]t is generally, dogmatically, admitted that the function of art is expression, and that artistic expression rests on cognition' (*LR* 130), which in itself exposes the distinction Levinas finds between the cognitive and discursive functions of language, and identifies which side of that divide he believes the aesthetic resides.

The specificities of 'Reality and Its Shadow' are too technical to be justifiably assessed in this short aside, and the full implications of the essay will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Sufficient for now, however, is to say that its intention is to provide a phenomenological account of the artistic image. Levinas establishes a duality between the 'reality' of being and its image: the image in this sense is neither a conduit to reality *per se* nor pure representation. Instead, reality would be 'not only what it is, what is disclosed to be in truth, but would also be its double, its shadow, its image'. There is a simultaneity of being and its representation (a philosophical approach stretching at least as far back as Platonic 'Form' and 'Matter', and central to Kantian *noumena* and *phenomena*) to the extent that every person and object both 'is what it is and […] is a stranger to itself […]. We will say that the thing is itself and is its image.' (*LR* 135). Levinas's prose is, here as elsewhere, necessarily disconcerting, but the fundamental point is that the perception of an object or a person is not commensurate with the object/person itself. This is crucial to Levinasian ethics in any case, because the breach of the subject's cognitive totality originates from a point within the Other that cannot be perceived. An image, therefore, 'is an allegory of being' (*LR* 135). There is 'an essential doubling of reality by its image' (*LR* 136).

If this is the case in every cognitive instance, Levinas argues, then the artistic image serves to render the shadow of an object divorced from its reality, its *noumenon*, the so-called 'Ding an sich'. The elements that make up an artistic image, he writes, 'do not serve as symbols, and in the absence

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[59] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.xxi.

of the object they do not force its presence, but by their presence insist on its absence. They occupy

its place fully to mark its removal' (*LR* 136). The ethical life of any and all beings capable of revealing

their own interiority, capable of disrupting an externally imposed consummation or participation, is

severed by the artist who creates the artistic image, whose intent is to go beyond 'common

perception' and attest 'to the dignity of the artistic imagination, which sets itself up as knowledge of

the absolute' (*LR* 130). The 'most perfect image', therefore, offers an 'insurmountable caricature

[that] manifests in its stupidness as an idol […]. To say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every

image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue' (*LR* 137). And for

Levinas, rhythm is the means via which the 'musicality' of an image achieves its ends. Music

becomes a paradigm for all aesthetic categories in the way that it 'realizes the pure

deconceptualization of reality' (*LR* 133).[60] All 'aesthetic' endeavours work to free sensation from

conception, to suspend being by entrapping the listener/spectator in the passivity of sensation. One

cannot 'understand' a musical note as a concept: it does not reveal an inner essence but stands as

pure image. As such, the artwork-consumer dynamic is disengaged from the reality of being.

So, while their respective understanding of rhythm in art differs in its application, Bakhtin

and Levinas converge in associating 'aesthetic' rhythm with something more akin to the

anaesthetising of ethical being, numbing the ethical life either to comfort it or deaden it. And whilst

Levinas reads the musicality of the image for its inducement of ethical passivity in an audience, when

he extends that reading to literary creation, the parallels between the Levinasian denigration of

rhetoric and a traditional novel's voiceless enslavement of its characters becomes stark:

> That the characters in a book are committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts and the same
> thoughts is not simply due to the contingent fact of the narrative, which is exterior to those
> characters. They can be narrated because their being resembles itself, doubles itself and immobilizes.
> […] The characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished, it
> still goes on, but makes no headway. A novel shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom. Life
> solicits the novelist when it seems to him as if it were already something out of a book. Something
> somehow completed arises in it, as though a whole set of facts were immobilized and formed a series.
> (*LR* 139)

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[60] *Cf*. Robbins, *Altered Reading*, pp.85-86 for a further elaboration of 'rhythm' in 'Reality and Its Shadow'.

The vocabulary and tone of the description here could be easily slipped into a paragraph of *Problems* that describes the monologic novel, from which polyphony diverges. A notable difference between the two works, in fact, is merely that in *Problems* Bakhtin stops short of the hostility towards art that Levinas goes on to show in 'Reality and Its Shadow'. Towards the end of the essay, Levinas is forceful in his critique of the passive luxury enjoyed by consumers of art, whom he claims employ 'not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility', to such an extent that there is 'something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment' (*LR* 142). A reader of Bakhtin's early works, like Erdinast-Vulcan, may well point out that the equivocation between 'Author and Hero' and *Problems* over the role of art within ethics would impede the latter text from making a similar condemnation.

Yet extracting a single-voiced disregard of the aesthetic from 'Reality and Its Shadow', and then applying that to Levinas's entire oeuvre, is not only reductive of Levinas's theoretical complexity, but it also disregards the prevailing opposition of dialogic ethics towards unitary positions. If Levinas's close friend and fellow author Maurice Blanchot is to be believed when he wrote that Levinas 'mistrusts poems and poetic activity', he should be believed only with an emphasis on the nature of mistrust.[61] To mistrust something is to seek reasons for trusting, to be in search of answers and/or solutions, and to be then compelled to search elsewhere. Although Robbins spends much of *Altered Reading* detailing Levinas's aversion to the rhetorical or poetical within art (as it is understood in 'Reality and Its Shadow), she importantly ends her monograph with a list of possible exceptions to that aversion, including Blanchot and, as was explored earlier, Dostoevsky. And she prefaces that list with a rejoinder to the rest of the book,

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[61] Maurice Blanchot, 'Knowledge of the Unknown' in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) pp.49-58 (p.53). Referenced by Gerald L. Bruns, 'The concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings' in Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp.206-233 (p.207). Bruns's essay offers a concise summary of Levinas's own equivocation over the relationship between art and ethics: his argument that 'Levinasian aesthetics is an aesthetics of darkness rather than of light' (p.214) accords with my own position, albeit with a difference lexicon. A similar, and equally corresponding, argument is put forward by Michael Fagenblatt's recent introduction to his (and Arthur Cools's) edited collection *Levinas and Literature: New Directions* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2021) pp.ix-xxii. Moreover, both these essays refer to the way Levinas has traditionally been seen as adversarial to the aesthetic, a tradition they (and I) dispute. Both Fagenblatt and Cools are discussed in Chapter 6.

> if poetry is not what Levinas takes it to be, namely, something that is aesthetic, that is, something that is phenomenally available as cognition, and something that seeks to revert to participation, then poetry may not be an abdication of responsibility but may draw close to what Levinas calls the ethical.[62]

Chapter 6 will open up this sense of the conditional in Levinas, beginning with the closing paragraph of 'Reality and Its Shadow' that, Robbins recognises, suggests 'an aesthetics […] based neither on perception nor cognition' but then dismisses as 'another story'.[63] Without such conditional thinking, without telling that other story, Levinas's singular rejection of rhythm would stand in contrast with Bakhtin's endorsement of it in 'Author and Hero', and in accord with *Problems*. Yet, as I have noted above, Bakhtin does not reject loophole in favour of rhythm or vice-versa. He saw the equal and competing necessity of both in any theory of literature and ethics. Levinas's antagonism towards the aesthetic is in this sense an aversion to the singular association of art and rhythm. Bakhtin, presumably, would also make such a singular rejection: his endorsement of aesthetic subjectivity can only be considered valid alongside his endorsement of ethical subjectivity, of the polyphonic.

What develops from this parallel between Bakhtin and Levinas, therefore, is a view of the aesthetic and ethical that maintains itself specifically in the conditional tense. Robbins begins her rejoinder with 'if poetry' in a manner that suggests the endorsement of a different type of poetry. And, to an extent Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will follow this suggestion by seeking particular qualities of Dostoevskian and contemporary Dostoevskian texts that accord with this sense of difference from the authorial rhythm which provokes Levinas's antagonism. Yet it is a difference that is in actuality elided by the very textual composition of the literary work: Robbins's 'if poetry' can stand alone without needing resolution, without shifting from the conditional to the actual. The argument I will put forward in Chapter 6 is that 'poetry' (i.e., literature) always already contains within itself the distinction signified by the on-the-one-hand / on-the-other-hand implications of Robbins's 'if'. As representative of both cognition and discourse, the literary work provides a pathway to a post-

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[62] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, p.127.
[63] Ibid., p.90.

Nietzschean sense of the ethical through the ways it can both succeed and fail as an aesthetic creation, through the loopholes embedded within its rhythm.

Chapter 6 will take up Coetzee's challenge of learning to speak without authority by shifting focus from the division between ethics and aesthetics, and the metamodern oscillation it engenders, to its maintenance within Dostoevsky and the contemporary Dostoevskians. I begin by outlining how the Bakhtinian and Levinasian vacillation over art, literature and ethics was anticipated by Dostoevsky himself. The novelistic polyphony that Dostoevsky developed sprung from his own dissatisfaction with literature as an art form: Dostoevsky was a writer who distrusted writing in the same way that he was a post-Nietzschean ethicist who could not relinquish his Orthodox faith. He was thus compelled to negotiate in his polyphonic creations the same tense relation, the same threshold position, between the ethical and the cognitive, the freely speaking and the consummated, the rhythm and the loophole, that is apparent in modernist and post-postmodernist theory and cultural product. To draw this tension out, I will focus on the importance of silence in Dostoevsky by touching on two key scenes in the later works: Christ's silence before the Grand Inquisitor and Kirillov's suicide. The chapter will relate those silences to a wider cognitive silence in the polyphonic works, arguing that such silence must therefore be seen as key to the maintenance of ethics and art within the polyphonic novel.

Silence, I will argue, is how Dostoevsky's authorial abdication maintains a cognitive docility, an 'epistemic humility', without having absolutely nothing to say. Picking up on recent readings of Levinas that reassess his position on art, Chapter 6 will seek to show that Dostoevsky's legacy for the post-postmodern texts is based in epistemic humility, the duality of cognitive and ethical language in art. His post-Nietzschean ethical legacy consists of the abdication of authorial authority, but his post-Nietzschean artistic legacy demands that he expresses the inexpressible. His marriage of the two thus proposes an advancement of Bakhtin's initial demarcation between polyphony and monologism. I will suggest instead that Dostoevsky's polyphony manifests as the ethical instance within the monologism of his art.

Chapter 6 - Failed Writing: The Polyphonic within Monologism

The previous chapter sought to elucidate how the fundamental duality of language has left a legacy of indeterminateness over the relationship between art and ethics for the post-postmodernists. Using metamodern oscillation as a counterweight, it traversed its way backwards to show how such indeterminateness crosses over Bakhtin's early texts. I also hinted at its expression in Levinas's theories of art, which will be further elaborated on in this chapter. Within the Platonic tradition, art is conceived of as an arresting of the motion of being, the capturing of an essence that extends beyond mere realism to speak to a universal truth, and thus becomes the apotheosis of cognition. It is from within this tradition that Bakhtinian consummation operates, particularly in 'Author and Hero' which perceives the author in theological terms, making the aesthetic a supplement or substitute for the divine. Likewise, 'Reality and Its Shadow' (along with other Levinasian treatises on art) sets itself up in opposition to this tradition, thereby seeing the aesthetic as necessarily unethical. The contemporary texts, therefore, based within and portraying a secularised time and place, are left uncertain as to how they relate to an ethics outside of authorial consummation. They are hesitant, knowing that to 'speak without authority' is an oxymoronic command: one either speaks with authority or one is silent.

In order to expound Dostoevsky's aesthetic legacy for contemporary Dostoevskian literature, therefore, it is required that I traverse back one step further, to Dostoevsky's polyphonic works themselves. By recruiting critical responses to Dostoevsky that in themselves intimate this internal threshold position of his art, and by analysing Dostoevsky's own professed artistic credo in the essay 'Mr -bov and the Question of Art', I will offer a reading of Dostoevskian polyphony which takes the irreconcilable yet mutually dependent nature of the ethical and the aesthetic, the rhythm and the loophole, into account. This reading, I will claim, gives equal weight to the third of the three terms in 'contemporary Dostoevskian *literature*'. Literature's aptitude to signify cognitively through artistic monologism and to polyphonically expose cognition's failure before the unknowable alterity of the

Other, and to maintain both within the conditionality of reading, is the reason for its emergence as the site of dialogic ethics.

I

The breadth of critical discussion over Dostoevsky's literary vision and aesthetic approach is vast. A library's worth of biographies, monographs, journal articles, book chapters, academic reviews and weblogs have been devoted to the subject, all offering slightly different yet often interdependent approaches. Bakhtin's *Problems*, and the frequent references to Dostoevsky in his other works, stand as slightly more acclaimed examples of scholarship concerning Dostoevskian aesthetics. But it must be remembered that even the contemporary Dostoevskian texts (and numerous other re-adaptions in literature, film, television, graphic novels, visual art and music) are, in their own way, also contributions to the field. To list them all, let alone summarise them, would be a thesis in its own right. And this of course is not to mention Dostoevsky's own writings on the subject, in his fictional works, journal articles, in *A Writer's Diary* and his correspondence.[1] This short subsection, therefore, cannot claim to have considered such a vast debate in its fullness. Nor can it claim to offer any great contribution to that debate. Instead, it seeks to briefly propose an approach to Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels that focuses on the same hesitancy before life and art, ethics and aesthetics, cognition and discourse, that have been central to this chapter so far. This hesitancy, less an oscillation than a structuring tension, is critical to assessing Dostoevsky's artistic (as complementing his ethical) influence over the contemporary works.

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[1] *Cf.,* Robert Louis Jackson, 'Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality and Its Representation in Art' in *Close Encounters: Essays on Russian Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013) pp.239-260. This chapter of Jackson's book, which will be discussed below, originally appeared in the 1966 monograph *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form*. It does not deeply engage with the breadth of scholarship that exists on Dostoevsky. It does, however, provide an excellent condensation of Dostoevsky's own writings on his art. As such, I shall use it as typifying a 'standard' or 'benchmark' reading of Dostoevskian aesthetics, particularly for the way it portrays Dostoevsky as 'permanently at the crossroads of realism and philosophical idealism' (260).

A useful entry point, however, is to return once more to Dostoevsky's epistolary preference to 'remain with Christ rather than with the truth' if given proof that the truth was outside Christ. In the Introduction, this quote was used to show how Dostoevsky's writings have critically been associated with his Orthodoxy, evidence of his moral and aesthetic practice of separating 'faith from reason' and emblematic of the disjunction between Dostoevskian and contemporary ethics that prompted my initial investigations. The phrase re-emerged as Chapter 3 charted Nina Pelikan Straus's timeline from Dostoevsky to Derrida's 'circumfession': Straus saw it as an articulation of the 'unfinalizable' or 'impossible' faith that seeped into Derrida's own later works. The contraposition of 'Christ' and 'truth' was thus read by Chapter 3 as symbolic of the definitive split within historical, literary and philosophical modernism, wherein truth no longer coincided with an absolute or transcendental ideal, and where an equivocation before Christ and truth was the condition of the post-Nietzschean subject, a condition which post-postmodernism sought to reinitiate. There is, however, another approach to Dostoevsky's infamous expression, one that seeks to account both for an adherence to faith over reason and for the confrontation with secular ethics demanded by the post-Nietzschean world. This approach reads Dostoevsky's preference for Christ over truth as an aesthetic statement, one that exposes the aforementioned structuring tension of his work.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Dostoevsky's letter to his benefactress sees him profess both the strength and the simplicity of his faith in the midst of his greatest spiritual distress. The 'truth' of his faith, he claims 'becomes evident in unhappiness'. Only as a 'child of disbelief and doubt', undergoing the 'terrible torture' of a 'thirst for faith' does a 'clear, sacred' and 'simple' credence arise that 'nothing' is, nor can ever be, 'more perfect than Christ'. Furthermore,

> if someone proved to me that Christ is outside truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.

For all their notoriety, the complexity of Dostoevsky's remarks continues to puzzle the academics who study his life and work. As recently as 2018, John Givens opened his chapter on Dostoevsky's 'negative Christology' with the letter, claiming that it fully displayed 'the writer's love of hyperbole and contradiction, his use of assertion through negation [...] and perhaps most of all, his reluctance

to make a straightforward, earnest declaration of faith'. Such things, Givens writes, undoubtedly

became key components of Dostoevsky's 'future artistic methods.'[2]

Givens thus notes that the statement prohibits an unproblematic Christocentric reading of

the post-Siberian novels themselves. Implying the same mistaken critical tendency touched upon in

the Introduction, he writes that 'a declaration of faith in a Christ "outside the truth" is hardly an

affirmation of the Christian profession of Dostoevsky's native Orthodoxy, for if Christ is not the truth,

then what becomes of Orthodoxy?' Instead, Dostoevsky's words raise the possibility of 'a tacit

admission of a possible atheism on the writer's part', or perhaps his 'using unbelief as a paradoxical

way of affirming belief, by making a negative formulation serve a positive end'. Ultimately, Givens

concedes, Dostoevsky's 'symbol of faith' may be 'meant to present an unresolvable contradiction,

allowing for both possibilities at once, faith and unbelief, like the metaphysical gambits of the

writer's later works'.[3] Givens goes on to develop a reading of 'negative' faith in *Demons* and *The

Brothers Karamazov*, in which the oscillation between belief and atheism refreshes a paradoxical,

somewhat Kierkegaardian type of faith that is accessible only through disbelief. His analysis finds a

home between the terrible torture and simple credo of Dostoevsky's own path through Orthodoxy.

However, the suggestion that Dostoevsky's statement symbolises an unresolvable contradiction that

allows for both possibilities at once, opens the door for a reading of it that coheres with the

aesthetic tension of the metaphysically homesick theorists.

This becomes more apparent as Givens describes such theological paradoxes as key to

Dostoevsky's 'literary apophaticism'.[4] Apophatic theology is an understanding of God produced by

negative reflection, premised on the assumption that the divine is beyond cognition and so can only

be theorised in terms of what it is not. It is, as Givens briefly notes, closely related to 'the

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[2] John Givens, *The Image of Christ in Russian Literature: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov, Pasternak* (De Kalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018) p.40.
[3] Ibid., p.40-41. It should be noted that this reading Dostoevsky's Christian faith is not uncommon amongst scholarship concerning him, even if such scholarship nevertheless seeks to read him as a distinctively Christian author. I am thinking here of Rowan William's *Language, Faith and Fiction* in particular.
[4] Ibid., p.49.

prominence of hesychasm in the Russian Church.'[5] The rest of Givens's chapter argues convincingly that the type of faith portrayed by *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* is best understood as apophatic. Yet, in terms of 'literary apophaticism', a perspective of the polyphonic novel as itself on the threshold of expression and the inexpressible, and so driven to express the inexpressibility of the inexpressible, at once allowing for both expression and its absence (or, its loophole), is arguably how Dostoevsky reconciles his own spirituality and the paradox of post-Nietzschean faith within an aesthetic theory. It is specifically literature that allows such apophaticism to be realised. Through the structural precedence for Levinasian Saying given by the polyphonic work, and then through its immediate subordination to the Said constituting the machinations of plot and dialogue, the text is able to tolerate that threshold within itself. Part II argued that the unknowability of the Other that founds dialogic ethics reintegrates transcendence in secular terms. This God-incognito is hidden, as it were, between the lines of the aesthetic text.

For what Givens's chapter exemplifies, in its use of 'Christ rather than the truth' to initiate a reading of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian works, is an apparent critical tendency to, on the one hand, underappreciate the conditional nature of Dostoevsky's statement and, on the other, recognise that the author's choice is by necessity made '*in reality*'. If this phrasing can be extrapolated from the context of the letter and manipulated into an aesthetic theory, it may be said that while reality imposes a preference, art can contain the equivocation between Christ and truth within the conditional. The 'if' of Dostoevsky's letter, philosophically paralleled by Ivan Karamazov's '*if* God is dead', might free the individually active and answerable subject from consummated quietus *in reality*, but through polyphony the aesthetic and the ethical subject can be simultaneously embraced and held in check. The conditional need not be made actual and, as such, the statement can then be read as proposing two versions of Christ, one where Christ and 'truth' are synonymous and one

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[5] Ibid., p.49. Givens also here notes that Dostoevsky scholars 'over the last twenty years have recognized the importance and applicability of apophatic theology' in Dostoevsky's works. He does not offer a specific study, but names Carol Apollonio, Tatyana Katsakina and Olga Meerson as examples. For a succinct summary of Dostoevsky's dramatization of hesychasm and apophaticism, see Sarah Hudspith, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness: A New Perspective on Unity and Brotherhood* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004) pp.142-147.

where they are antonymous. Within the confines of the former, equatable with the metamodern

polarity represented by the Grand Narrative, the consummated subject is analogous with 'truth', or

logos, secure in the narratives of self and world relayed back to it by and through the authorial

other. The confines of the latter, however, disintegrate the *logos*: the subject stands on unstable

ground, whilst the truth of Christ and of the world is beyond expression. Dostoevsky's preference for

Christ over truth is hereby rendered as a preference for the inexpressible, the apophatic, rather than

the aesthetically expressible, the uncertain over the surety of consummation. However, the choice

must be made unconditionally. Art, meanwhile, can encapsulate both Christs.

The notion that two types of Christ can be read in Dostoevsky's statement (not necessarily in

accordance with his own values and beliefs, but rather when assessing his influence over post-

Nietzschean Dostoevskians) has its correspondence in the 'two kinds of reality' that Robert Jackson

finds in his fiction. This almost-Platonic conceptualisation argues that beneath 'an apparent,

everyday reality', Dostoevsky's fiction proposes 'a real or underlying reality that is visible to the artist

but hidden to the formless and unforming glance.'[6] Jackson, whose renowned academic career

included several detailed studies of Dostoevsky's artistic process, characterises Dostoevsky's

literature as a balance between the depiction of the everyday reality, what he (quoting *A Writer's

Diary*) calls 'mere realism', and the collation of those depictions to yield 'an inner, organizing idea, a

moral idea.'[7] He develops this reading of Dostoevsky's literary intentions from an analysis of

references to art within the novels, as well as from his non-fictional writing; for example, he draws

attention to two *Diary* articles in which Dostoevsky expresses dissatisfaction with realism for its own

sake. In an 1873 entry on Ilya Repin, Dostoevsky refutes the possibility that reality can be depicted

'as it is': 'reality such as this does not exist […] because the essence of things is inaccessible to man'

(*WD* 55). Five years later, he proclaimed himself 'awfully fond of realism in art' but denounced 'some

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[6] Jackson, 'Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality', p.241. See for comparison Deborah A. Martinsen's chapter on Dostoevsky's liars, which contends that Dostoevsky 'articulates a Platonic vision of the world in which the mimetic obfuscates the metaphysical: human constructions hide the ultimate unity of all human beings.' *Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Exposure* (Colombus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003) p.33.
[7] Jackson, 'Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality', p.247.

of our contemporary realists' for having '*no moral center* in their paintings' (*WD* 372). Jackson uses

several such declarations to advance the 'philosophically idealist understructure' of Dostoevsky's

fiction.[8]

And Jackson, whose chapter seeks only an analysis of Dostoevsky's own work,

understandably relates that idealist underlying structure to 'the transcendent reality of the universal

Christian ideal', particularly in the post-Siberian works where 'the Christian religious emphasis of his

thought is most pronounced.'[9] The 'chaotic' and 'disfigured' aspect of Dostoevsky's realism is, in this

sense, illustrative of the 'deformation' of an ideal norm, namely 'the moral-esthetic shape of man-

created in the image of God.' As such, what Dostoevsky 'values' about literary or artistic realism is

precisely its 'cognitive function'. Jackson uses 'cognitive' in a divergent but not unrelated sense to its

use in this thesis thus far: if the 'most immediate action' of 'true realism' is to capture 'social reality

in movement', then 'in its deeper action artistic cognition approaches religious revelation.' Here

Jackson pointedly makes the same distinction between the ethical (the everyday, the unfinalisable)

and the cognitive (the consummated, the totalising) function of both language and art that

permeates Bakhtinian and Levinasian ethical/aesthetic theory.[10] His sole focus on Dostoevsky's

idealist undercurrent, understood as the consummation of the subject in the image of God, allows

him to either bypass or downplay the ethical significance of 'mere realism' in Dostoevsky's

polyphony.

And this ultimately makes for a neat contrast with the seeming singular focus of Levinas's

'Reality and Its Shadow', a contrast that comes to the fore when Jackson writes that the 'unselected

and unilluminated truth of detail' in Dostoevsky's realism 'is caricature or, simply, ugliness.'[11] The

use of 'caricature' is noteworthy for, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it is in such terms that

Levinas describes the stupidness of an idol attesting to the dignity of the artistic imagination, which

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[8] Ibid., p.258.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p.247/249.
[11] Ibid., p.245.

sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute. Jackson's study of Dostoevsky seems to concur in its assessment of the role of the artist with 'Reality and Its Shadow': the artist must suppress the ceaseless chaos of the diurnal to present an underlying, binding and eternal truth. They differ only in their valuation of that artistic endeavour. What constitutes for Jackson the inner, organising moral ideal of Dostoevsky's work is precisely the disparity between art and ethics for Levinas. The artistic cognition that approaches religious revelation spawns 'a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life' (*LR* 138). That Levinas and Jackson can express diametric meanings by their use of the word 'caricature' points to the duality of language that can be contained within the aesthetic: both meanings of caricature are held within the conditionality of the literary text, whether it be the unilluminated truth of detail that for Levinas denotes the ethical, or the cognition of philosophical idealism that Levinas deems derisory.

Jackson's chapter is paradigmatic of the Western reception of Dostoevsky's literary method. Nevertheless, I have thus far worked extensively in this thesis to demonstrate a reading of Dostoevskian polyphony that accords with Levinasian responsibility. Neither approach, it appears, can have merit independently of the other. Dostoevsky's work is neither pure musical rhythm nor so beset with loopholes that it lacks cohesion, nor can it be said to offer a proto-metamodern oscillation between two extremes. Such an oscillation would in any case not be in keeping with the interdependence of character articulations within the polyphonic novel. Dostoevsky's work must instead exist under the stress of simultaneous rhythm and loophole, ethics and aesthetics, able to inspire post-Nietzschean ethics whilst offering a refuge for the metaphysically homesick. Only this way can it be seen as advancing the duality of linguistic function within dialogic ethics, emerging from the collapse of metaphysical absolutes, that is so central to his relevance for the contemporary works.

And Dostoevsky's technique for maintaining this literary existence is best hinted at in his 1861 polemic against the utilitarian aesthetics of the radical poet and critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov, 'Mr

'–bov and the Question of Art'.[12] After a long preamble in which, in typical Dostoevskian fashion, he occupies pro-and-contra positions regarding utilitarianism, Dostoevsky offers one of the closest things he wrote to a literary manifesto, a statement of method with which his subsequent works could be read.

Pertinently enough, he begins his own approach to art by expressing a sentiment reminiscent of 'Author and Hero'. Artistic talent, he claims, extends beyond the simple exhibition of factual reality:

> One can know a fact, one can see it a hundred times oneself and still fail to get the same impression as when someone else, a man with special gifts, stands beside you and points out that fact to you, explains it to you in his own words and makes you look at it through his eyes. (*QoA* 118)

Despite offering little more than an aside to his overall argument, this passage expounds the authorial excess of seeing that effectuates consummation in Bakhtin's early work. It is thus noteworthy that Dostoevsky wrote this type of advocation for authorial consummation in the years preceding his composition of *Notes from Underground*, the pre-cursor for the fully polyphonic post-Siberian novels.[13] It is again indicative that his novels present an equivocation between the subjective metaphysical security and ethical freedom of his characters.

'Question of Art' takes this equivocation further by contrasting the everyday life, the 'mere realism', utilitarian art seeks to serve with the 'independent, inseparable [and] organic life' of art '*without any conditions*' (*QoA* 124). While it would be an error to compare Levinasian ethics with utilitarianism (and its offshoot, Dobrolyubov's Russian nihilism that is Dostoevsky's true target in this essay), which seeks to totalise the individual within a structure of practical utility, both are akin in the sense that they conceive of the subject as free from metaphysical subjection: Bazarov would presumably reject transcendent authorial authority along with everything else. Dostoevsky's understanding of art is that it develops alongside but distinct from the individual's 'historic life' (*QoA* 135), by which he means the diurnal cares of once-occurrent, unfinalisable being. Moreover, this

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[12] This essay appears in *Dostoevsky's Occasional Writings*, pp.86-137. The article was originally published in the journal *Vremya*, which Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail co-edited.

[13] 'The hero of "Notes from Underground" is the first hero-ideologist in Dostoevsky's work […] Dostoevsky's hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him.' *Problems* 59.

distinct reality inhabited by art holds most value when the historical life is most dissonant.

Dostoevsky writes that,

> the need for beauty is felt more strongly when men are at variance with reality, in a state of disharmony, in conflict, that is to say, when they are *most* of *all alive* […] it is then that they are overcome by a most natural desire for everything that is harmonious and for tranquillity, since in beauty there is both harmony and tranquillity. (*QoA* 125)

In this passage, Dostoevsky not only elaborates upon the two versions of reality found in his fiction.

He also postulates the idea that the aesthetic can substitute for the loss of metaphysical anchorage,

can provide a shelter for the homesick. 'In his search for beauty,' Dostoevsky argues, 'man has lived

and suffered' (*QoA* 128). True beauty is consistent in its contemporaneity, is enduringly 'useful' in a

utilitarian sense, 'because it is beauty, because a constant need for beauty and its highest ideal

resides in mankind' (*QoA* 136).

It is precisely this sentiment that Erdinast-Vulcan diagnoses in Bakhtin's simultaneous

endorsement of dialogic ethics and authorial consummation, and that she suggests is consistent with

the 'exilic constellation' she critiques which includes Levinas. And corresponding with this common

sentiment is that, for both Dostoevsky and the modernist philosophers here mentioned, the pull

between the ethical and the aesthetic is irresolvable. The historic life and the highest ideal are never

identical. 'Question of Art' makes a point of referring to the individual's 'need', 'desire' and 'search'

for the 'true' reality that art permits a glimpse of. It is this that makes art always already

'*contemporary and real*' (*QoA* 130) for Dostoevsky. The unfinalisable and unknowable path traversed

by the once-occurrent individual in being will, for as long as being remains in process, need

tempering by an artifice of coherence and cognition, and so 'art has always been inseparable from

man, has always responded to his needs and ideals […] it was born with man, it developed next to

his historic life and died together with his historic life.' (*QoA* 135).

Consequently, the 'true' reality aspired to by art is fundamentally unattainable, and thus

artistically inexpressible. If the God of Dostoevsky's fiction is rendered apophatically, so too is the

ideal striven for by the aesthetic, and herein lies the fundamental ineffableness of Dostoevsky's

artistic vision, one that is as applicable to sacred as to secular readings, as portended by the

irresolvable conditional of 'Christ over truth' and subsequent possibility of locating two types of Christ, and two types of reality, in his polyphonic fiction. By premising an understanding of art as fundamentally ineffable, Dostoevsky relocates the angst of metaphysical homesickness to the literary: the pull between cognition and ethics is 'resolved' (i.e., maintained in the conditional tense) as literary apophaticism, here rendered as the dual capacity of language. In maintaining his fondness for mere realism but simultaneously invoking an 'aesthetics of transcendence' within his works, Dostoevsky makes an impossible demand of art: it must, via cognitive means, express the incognisable. 'A single man cannot divine fully the eternal and universal ideal, were he Shakespeare himself' (*QoA* 136). Nevertheless, that is the task Dostoevsky sets himself. Yet it is art and literature's capacity to maintain that impossibility which, for Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin and Levinas, and for the contemporary Dostoevskians, makes it interchangeable with religion and the spiritual. Jackson, who uses this aporia in Dostoevsky's work to account for the 'fantastic' elements of his realism, writes that the 'inaccessibility to man of ultimate reality, the lofty and sublime world which is revealed to Zosima, is the tragic fact of man's earthly existence'. However, 'in the final analysis, [Dostoevsky] believes it is the artist [...] who comes closest to divining this universal ideal, to disclosing the idea (the ideal) of reality.'[14] If Jackson's analysis can be progressed from its Christocentric basis to account for contemporary Dostoevskian literature, it positions the author as an ideal conduit for the translation of the God-of-presence to the God incognito, to the irresolvable tension of cognition and discourse that is a necessary correlate of the transition from ontotheological to dialogic ethics. Levinas and Dostoevsky might appear to fundamentally differ in their understanding of aesthetics and ethics, but both seem to concur up front that the secular consummation of the individual, akin

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[14] Jackson, 'Dostoevsky's Concept of Reality', p.259. See also: 'The fantastic [in Dostoevsky's late writing] is precisely ultimate reality in the philosophical or religious sense', p.258. For a brief introduction to Dostoevsky's 'fantastic realism', see Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, pp.298-316. It is from this chapter of Frank's abridged biography that I borrow the term 'aesthetics of transcendence'. The section too notes the parallels between art and religion in Dostoevsky, focusing on Dostoevsky's reverence for the icon in Russian Orthodoxy. The 'images of art', Frank writes, 'have traditionally provided the objects of religious reverence because man has a need to worship something entirely transcending the bounds of human life.' (p.307). It must also be mentioned that an extended study of 'fantastic realism' and its vacillation between art and life is provided by Malcolm Jones's *Dostoevsky After Bakhtin*. Explaining the extent to which Jones's study influenced the approach set forth here has, unfortunately, proven beyond the bounds of this subsection.

to the totalising impulse of nihilistic utilitarianism, is as unrealisable as it is unethical. That which connects the individual to the world beyond it, in life as in art, must both remain within and exceed the bounds of cognition.

In reality, Christ is with truth or Christ is outside of truth. In reality, the subject could be assured of its place in the world within the confines of a transcendent authority, existing within a cognisable nexus of self and not-self designed and guaranteed by an Auctor Mundi. Or, equally real, the subject experiences its once-occurrent moment in being as perpetual becoming, negotiating the world beyond it via the grasp of cognition, which in turn reflects back upon the subject to manifest self-awareness, yet with that cognition always already breached by the immediate responsibility of response to an unknowable alterity. In reality, both conditions are true. And, in reality, both conditions are in conflict with each other. It is a conflict that, in reality, demands from the subject a single-voiced preference, which for the post-Nietzschean means either the anachronism of consummation or the solipsism of the ethical. And it entraps those who cannot utter their preference in a continual oscillation between the naivety of centripetal grand narratives and centrifugal cynicism.

Both conditions are likewise true in art, but in art they need not depart from the conditional, and this is why an understanding of the divine in secular terms, in the terms of dialogic ethics, finds its home in the conditionality of literature. In art, one need not utter a preference for a Christ with truth or a Christ outside of truth. One can inhabit both realities at once, instead of being compelled to oscillate between the two. And if aesthetic consummation is the epitome of cognition within the Platonic tradition, Dostoevsky's polyphony, with its roots in Menippean satire and its demonstrable ethical significance to post-Nietzschean writers and thinkers of the modernist and post-postmodern eras, finds a way to depart from that tradition even whilst its attestation to an underlying moral reality remains within it. At the vanguard of modernism, on the border between the pre- and post-Nietzschean, Dostoevsky's abdication of monologic, authorial authority critically developed an art

form that could allow for two types of Christ, two types of reality: mere realism, with all its post-Nietzschean ethical implications, and an underlying but inaccessible reality glimpsed by the artist. And, because inaccessible, inexpressible. Yet a lack of expression is itself a form of expression. Such is the apophatic nature of transcendence that carried over from Dostoevsky's Orthodox heritage, with its hesychastic emphasis, to his literature. To discover Dostoevsky's aesthetic legacy within the secular texts is to read his novels in the conditional tense. To read his novels in the conditional tense is to read literature as the site of the necessary equivocation over cognition and discourse following from the post-Nietzschean demand that dialogic ethics replace ontotheological absolutes.

II

The critical recognition of multiple voices in Dostoevsky's novels predates Bakhtin.[15] Bakhtin was merely one of the first to attribute structural significance to that multiplicity, and the first to theorise a literary methodology out of it. He notes early on in *Problems* that, from the viewpoint of 'some monologic canon for the proper construction of novels, Dostoevsky's world may seem a chaos', less a polyphony than a cacophony consisting of 'some sort of conglomerate of disparate materials and incompatible principles for shaping them' (*PDP* 8). As the critical appreciation of Bakhtin's study developed, so too did an appreciation for how Dostoevsky employed that conglomerate of voices and noises. It stands to reason, therefore, that the role of silence in Dostoevsky's works has been given less critical attention. Instances, however, in which both the thematic and ethical importance of Dostoevskian silence has been studied have tended to recognise the fundamental ineffableness of Dostoevsky's artistic vision.

One such example is a subsection of Malcom Jones's monograph on Dostoevsky's 'religious experience', which argues that a close study of *The Brothers Karamazov* reveals silence to be 'a

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[15] The best reference point for this is actually the opening chapter of *Problems* itself. It develops the theory of polyphony by refuting and advancing prior studies which give emphasis to the significance of voice in Dostoevsky.

major organizing principle of the novel's narrative.'[16] Jones's reading likewise sources such a theory

in the hesychastic impetus of Orthodox apophaticism, and its usefulness for this chapter arises in its

linking of 'Jesus's silent kiss in 'The Grand Inquisitor'' with the influential 1830 poem 'Silentium!' by

Fyodor Tiutchev.[17] Jones claims that whilst Dostoevsky was devising the ideas and themes of *The*

Brothers Karamazov, he was 'seriously reflecting' on Tiutchev's poem, particularly on 'the key line

[…]: 'a thought once uttered is a lie.'' Jones goes on to cite a variant of the 1876 *A Writer's Diary*

article 'Two Suicides', in which that key line of Tiutchev's appears,

> The truth is that reality is profounder than any attempt by human fantasy or imagination to grasp it
> […]. Everything flows and has its being, but you will never succeed in pinning anything down in
> concepts or words – it immediately becomes a falsehood. 'A thought once uttered is a lie.'[18]

Using this variant from Dostoevsky's *Diary*, Jones extrapolates the essential significance of Tiutchev's

line for Dostoevsky's own authorial vision: his works must battle to portray the underlying reality of

existence in a language suited only to mere realism. The line makes an aphorism of the 'fundamental

question about the capacity of language ever to do justice to the complexity and profundity of

reality, ever to convey the true meaning of life.'[19] The utterance, here understood as the cognitive

function of language, is necessarily a betrayal of the 'truth […] of all higher reality', which Jones

admits is not solely a divine truth but an affirmation that 'there is a truth beyond the range of

human language and human understanding.'[20] The parallel between the utterance in this respect

and the necessary betrayal of the Saying by the Said in Levinasian theory is conspicuous, as is the

indistinction between an apophatic theology and the secularity of Levinasian ethics. If the Levinasian

ethics of Dostoevskian polyphony, polyphony as the articulation of Saying, are therefore to be

registered aesthetically, they must be so registered in the instances where narrative betrays itself,

where cognition breaks down and refuses to cross the threshold between the truth of thought and

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[16] Jones, *Religious Experience*, p.140. This subsection is a reworking of his essay 'Silence in The Brothers Karamazov' in *Die Brüder Karamazov: Dostojewskijs letzter Roman in heutiger Sicht*, ed. H-J. Gerigk (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1997), pp. 29-45.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Quoted in Jones, *Religious Experience*, p.141. *Cf. WD* 226, in which, curiously, the reference to Tiutchev and the emphasis on 'concepts or words' is absent. Its removal, and the corresponding 'redaction' of the phrase from other Dostoevsky's drafts, is the starting point for Jason Cieply's 'The Silent Side of Polyphony', discussed below.

[19] Jones, *Religious Experience*, p.140.

[20] Ibid., p.141.

the lie of utterance.[21] By registering the ethical significance of these instances, Dostoevsky's

aesthetic legacy for the contemporary Dostoevskians becomes apparent.

Jones reads Christ's silence in 'The Grand Inquisitor' as emblematic of all such moments in

Dostoevsky's later works that recognise the ineffableness of a higher spiritual or ethical truth.[22] It is a

silence that tellingly originates in Ivan who, as mentioned in the previous chapters, typifies the

modernist metaphysical homesickness that post-postmodernism returns to. The loss of a

metaphysical foundation for truth is precisely what renders it inexpressible, because the translation

of ontotheological ethics to discursive ethics relies on the bifurcation of the ethical and cognitive,

the Saying and the Said. Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero' makes it clear that the ontotheological security

of the subject is contingent upon authorial (i.e., narrative) consummation. A dialogic understanding

of ethics offers no such security (because it is premised in the unknowable alterity of the Other). As

such, the harmony between narrative and ethics is disrupted (the basis of Levinas's repudiation of

art), and so Ivan's spiritual torment can thus just as easily be read as an aesthetic crisis as it can an

ethical one: 'The Grand Inquisitor' is, after all, a type of poetry (*BK* 246). And by this reading, the

cold-blooded and unethical logic of the Grand Inquisitor, a near-perfect expression of 'the visage of

being that shows itself in war [that] is fixed in the concept of totality' (*TI* 21), is in an aesthetic sense

both the rendering of voiceless slaves and the finalising of being by a loving and value-positing

aesthetic consciousness. It is no accident that the Grand Inquisitor believes himself to be working

towards 'the universal happiness of mankind' (*BK* 257), nor that Ivan insists the Grand Inquisitor 'still

loved mankind all his life' (*BK* 261). In Bakhtinian terms, if the Grand Inquisitor's political

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[21] Of course, the 'thought' that Tiutchev refers to, by my understanding, would be pre-cognitive. It would be the unlimited 'accusative-ness' of the ethical subject, the condition for cognitive thought. Levinas would find no distinction between cognitive thought and cognitive utterance: both would belong to the realm of the Said.

[22] Jones's subsection also recognises 'a dialectic of silences at work in the deep structure of Dostoevsky's novels'. On the one hand there is '*molchanie*', a silence of 'closure […] prohibitions and taboos'. Christ's silence, on the other hand, is '*tishina*', the 'silence of openness […] accomplished only through spiritual tranquillity, *hesychia*, which relates to the unsayable.' For the purposes of assessing the ethics of polyphonic narrative, I have only focused here on the latter type. It is worth mentioning, however, that *molchanie*, which is both 'the silence of chaos and non-existence' and also 'underlies scientific classification and rational thought' would be equatable with the voiceless enslavement or muted plasticity of traditional conceptions of art in Bakhtinian and Levinasian aesthetic theory. That Jones reads both types of silence in Dostoevsky is indicative of the tension between the ethical (as discourse) and the aesthetic (as cognition) in his work. *Religious Experience*, p.146.

totalitarianism could be reenvisaged as an aesthetic gesture, he would be the quintessential monologic author.

Ivan's authorial stance, meanwhile, is more reminiscent of Dostoevsky's own in that it maintains an irresolvable tension between the totality of narrative coherence and the ethics of narrative silence: the conditional tense of remaining with either Christ or truth. When Christ 'approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him', the Inquisitor himself is silenced. He spares Christ the stake and sends him away with little explanation. The ethical force of Christ's gesture is found in its incoherence. Ivan declares that the silent kiss is Christ's 'whole answer' to the Inquisitor, a phrase that itself could be read to mean inconsequential or momentously important (and comparable to Dostoevsky's own remark the '*the whole novel* is an answer' to Ivan's legend, mentioned in Chapter 2). The kiss 'burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea', a state which Alyosha correctly diagnoses to be descriptive of Ivan himself as well as of the Inquisitor (*BK* 262). Christ's silence is portrayed as the 'articulation' of the ineffability of Zosima's responsibility for all, a Levinasian understanding of the inexpressibility of ethical Saying, and subsequently 'plagiarised' (*BK* 263) by Alyosha as he negotiates life outside the monastery. It interrupts the coherence of the Grand Inquisitor's logical argument, expressly manifesting as the irruption of all coherence that marks primordial responsibility for the Other. As Jones notes, other such silences also permeate the novel, from the inexplicable love and forgiveness for all that overwhelms Alyosha as he hears the miracle of Cana read over the Elder Zosima's body (*BK* 362), to the literal break in narrative (signified by an ellipsis) that stays Dmitri's hand as he waits to murder his father (*BK* 393). And they too can be found at certain parts of Dostoevsky's other post-Siberian works. Myshkin's epileptic fit, described in Chapter 2 as representative of polyphony's ethical dynamic, could be read as an example. As could Lyamshin's frenzy in the wake of Shatov's murder (*Demons* 605) or the generally chaotic interior monologues of Raskolnikov and the Underground Man. In all such cases, and more besides, a definitive incoherence arises within the narrative's most crucial ethical moments. Reading this incoherence as a consequence of the relocation of ethics from the

metaphysical security of ontotheological absolutes to the terrifying liberation of dialogic ethics allows for an understanding of narrative ethics that must negotiate a linguistic contradiction: to express is unethical, to be ethical is inexpressible.

Although Jones's perception that such ineffable or incoherent moments form a major organising principle of Dostoevsky's mature works may seem at variance with the multiplicity of voices comprising Bakhtinian polyphony, he hints that silence is in fact integral to the polyphonic structure. The ambiguity of silence, he writes, offers 'no better example of Bakhtin's "discourse with a loophole", for it is always possible to deny the other's interpretation of one's silence.'[23] Whilst such phrasing makes it appear that silence enables a kind of evasion of the responsibility associated with the polyphonic form, Jones goes on to clarify that Dostoevsky's musings on 'Silentium!', from his 'Two Suicides', are explicitly linked to 'what Bakhtin has called unfinalizability'.[24] Jones is thus reiterating that silence here stands for the incapacity of the uttered thought to do justice to the once-occurrent moment of becoming, instead of representing the absence of thought or speech. The polyphonic plurality of independent discourses is therefore how 'silence' manifests itself within the Dostoevskian novel: silence in this respect comes to the fore as the polyphonic refusal of a definitive or authoritative voice. It is on such terms that Jason Cieply, using Jones's study as a reference point, compares the role of silence in Dostoevsky and Bakhtin. His distinctive approach is to assess the instances in which Dostoevsky referred to 'Silentium!' in unpublished drafts but then omitted those references from finished works, culminating in Dmitri's eventual misquotation in the later sections of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Noting such instances in *A Writer's Diary* articles (including 'Two Suicides'), correspondences and draft notebooks for *The Adolescent*, Cieply infers from Dostoevsky's redactions a conscious commitment to fully interrogating the paradox of Tiutchev's poem encapsulated by its famous line. Cieply determines that an unfiltered quotation of 'Silentium!' would for Dostoevsky amount to a betrayal of the poem's message. Dostoevsky thus removed the allusions to 'Silentium!'

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[23] Jones, *Religious Experience*, p.140.
[24] Ibid., p.141.

'in an effort to capture that inexpressible inner thought valued by Tiutchev, not with the violence of the finalizing, monologic utterance but in muted form, with a chorus of words and self-conscious omissions.'[25]

The concept of self-conscious omissions is particularly valuable when assessing how Dostoevsky maintains the tension between aesthetic expression and the inexpressibility of ethical transcendence. It points to Cieply's wider argument that Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels knowingly experiment with inexpressibility, with authorial silence, in order to bridge the gap between the cognitive and ethical function of language. Dostoevskian ethics, in all their Levinasian implications, reject out of hand the authoritative, finalising, monologic word, yet Dostoevskian aesthetics must in turn suppress that ethical negation in order to produce anything other than a blank page. In this sense, Bakhtin's initial premise that novelistic polyphony is essentially opposed to monologism must be advanced. If the ethical dynamic of polyphony articulates the inarticulateness of Levinasian Saying, as was argued in Chapter 2, then following Levinas it must always already be reduced to the coherence of the Said. Continuing the analogy, it stands to reason that ethical polyphony must always already be reduced to aesthetic monologism. That which is ethical about Saying cannot come to pass in and of itself, separate from and disregarding the Said that it presupposes. Likewise, Dostoevskian polyphony, in its purest form as Saying, cannot express itself independently of the authoritative utterance of authorial monologism. Instead of standing apart from the monologic, the polyphonic must be understood as monologism's ethical trace. The multiplicity of independent voices and consciousnesses are rendered as the breach of the monologic totality, and this breach is most fully enacted at moments when the failure of the monologic utterance is most prominent.

This, then, is at the heart of the advancement of Bakhtin that I propose in this chapter. In Chapter 2, I referenced how in *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas stresses that the 'linguistic system' and 'ontology' are 'the price that manifestation demands' (*OTB* 6) and that the idea of the 'beyond

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[25] Jason Cieply, 'The Silent Side of Polyphony: On the Disappearances of "Silentium!" from the Drafts of Dostoevskii and Bakhtin', *Slavic Review* 75.3 (2016) 678-701 (681).

being' is only 'posited in doxic theses' (*OTB* 7). Yet, Levinas writes, Saying 'glimmers in the

amphibology of *being* and *beings*' (*OTB* 7), by which he means the necessary ambiguity arising from

the dual functions of language for cognition and discourse. It is through such glimmering that the

ethical weight of polyphony is evinced. The monologic, which reached its apotheosis in the totality of

German idealism, is accordingly comparable with linguistic cognition. The polyphonic novel,

therefore, is not in and of itself distinct from authorial monologism, as can be inferred from the

terms Bakhtin uses.[26] Instead, it is by reading polyphonic ethics as embedded within the monologic

novel that its equation with Levinasian Saying is most coherent. It is the deliberate portrayal of the

failure of monologic authority, a failure tantamount to a reoriented narrative which gives voice to a

plurality of independent consciousnesses, that best acknowledges the post-Nietzschean hesitancy

before cognition and discourse. The polyphonic is monologism that reveals its own shortcomings:

polyphony glimmers in the amphibology of pre-cognitive thought and the uttered lie, of the

necessary subordination of Saying to Said.

And this in turn identifies literature as the most pertinent site for post-Nietzschean ethics,

for it is the capacity of the literary text to both signify cognitively and render a failure of signification

that permits it to retain such conditional hesitancy. Silence is one example of such rendering,

perhaps its most effective, but is not necessarily the only means by which Dostoevskian polyphony

reveals itself. Chapter 2 touched upon the altered meanings of repeated words in the mouths of

other characters. Cieply calls further attention to 'such rhetorical devices as garrulous chatter,

discursive evasion, Aesopian language, paradoxes, and witticisms [which] may represent, serve in

place of, or call attention to real silences, when withholding speech becomes impossible.'[27] Such

devices are indeed an integral component of Dostoevsky's work, especially his post-Siberian novels

and stories. It is how they retain their unique vitality, a vitality arising from Dostoevsky's 'efforts to

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[26] Early on in *Problems*, Bakhtin hails Dostoevsky's polyphony as 'a fundamentally new novelistic genre', with an 'orientation of the narrative […] quite different than in novels of the monologic type' (*PDP* 7). He further claims that 'all the elements of novelistic structure in Dostoevsky are profoundly original' (*PDP* 8).
[27] Cieply, 'The Silent Side of Polyphony', 681.

establish a silent poetics' in light of 'a developing, modern sensitivity to the impurities of authorial voice.'[28] Which is to say, the distinct ways in which Dostoevsky traces polyphony within monologism is how he maintains the tension between ethical 'truth' and the lie of utterance, how he maintains the conditional tense of his novels. Interpreting Tiutchev's line 'in aesthetic terms', Dostoevsky's foremost concern 'is not silence as the complete absence of speech but recreating the effect of silence with words. Divided and disseminated in the paradox, partially hidden at the boundary of the said and the unsaid in the half-word and the unfinished utterance, Dostoevskii's idea is positioned to escape the singularity and finality' that is, in ethical terms, 'deadening.'[29]

III

Before moving on to assert that the same such hesitation before the expression of ethical transcendence is in fact central to both Levinas's philosophy and aesthetic theory, refuting the ostensible hostility of 'Reality and Its Shadow' towards the aesthetic, it is worth corroborating Dostoevsky's self-conscious abnegation of authorial jurisdiction, the debasement of his own monologic authority via the tracing of polyphonic silence, with a brief remark on Kirillov in *Demons*. Dostoevsky may have once noted to himself that '*Stavrogin is everything*' to the novel, yet to view Kirillov in terms of the aesthetic/ethical tension of his polyphonic creations is to glimpse at his strongest ideal of authorial monologism and its most critical ethical failure.[30] At one point in *Demons*, Shatov, who not only serves as a mouthpiece for Dostoevsky's cherished Slavophilism but is also one of the novel's Levinasian ethical examples, intuits as much when he cries 'Kirillov! If… if you

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[28] Ibid., 682.

[29] Ibid., 686. Cieply's essay makes a convincing case that this very same hesitation is at the heart of Bakhtin's own theories of polyphony and dialogism, and he concurs with this thesis in proposing an ethical impetus behind this dialogic desire 'to speak affirmatively of the other without compromising [the other's] inner word' (682). Intriguingly enough, he alludes to Bakhtin's own reference to 'Silentium!' in 'Author and Hero', pointing out that Bakhtin's essay too was 'unpublished' for many years after its initial composition. Although Cieply's essay delves into Bakhtinian apophatic mysticism too deeply to permit a prolonged engagement with it here, it must be said that the way Cieply reads Bakhtin's polyphony accords with my own understanding, developed from Erdinast-Vulcan's theories of the centripetal and centrifugal interchanges of both 'Author and Hero' and *Problems*.

[30] Note dated August 16, 1870. Quoted in Pevear's Introduction to *Demons*, p.xii.

could renounce your terrible fantasies and drop your atheistic ravings … oh, what a man you'd be, Kirillov!' (*Demons* 571). The strength of Kirillov's ideological conviction marks him out not merely in *Demons*, particularly when contrasted with the metaphysical vacillation of Stavrogin (portending Ivan Karamazov), but amongst all of Dostoevsky's major post-Siberian characters. Outside of the inexorable clarity of Dostoevsky's most spiritually fortified (and so moribund) characters, such as the Elder Zosima, Makar Dolgoruky or the converted Stepan Verkhovensky, Kirillov is perhaps the most committed to a definitive idea.

Yet that idea, as Shatov implies, is to overcome the primordial state of being in the accusative case. The desire that drives Kirillov is to literalise the theoretical 'man-god' (*Demons* 238), an anthropotheistic inversion of Christ that overcomes the fear of death and pain.[31] In a discussion with the narrator of *Demons*, Kirillov identifies faith as the last impediment to the triumph of the human spirit:

> God is the pain of the fear of death. He who overcomes pain and fear will himself become God. Then there will be a new life, a new man, everything new … Then history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God to […] the physical changing of the earth and man. Man will be God and will change physically. (*Demons* 115)

Kirillov's wish to rid the world of faith, however, departs from the anarchical and self-serving nihilism of Pyotr Verkhovensky. Indeed, Shatov is a more appropriate novelistic double for him. Both can be said to endorse altruistic theories. Whereas Shatov's pan-Slavism seeks to reconcile humanity within a universal brotherhood inspired by Russian Orthodoxy, Kirillov offers himself as a sacrifice to free mankind from the terror of God (encapsulated by both the fear of pain and the dread of an afterlife). His plan, therefore, is to commit suicide for an ideological cause, to make himself a 'secular saint' by expressing 'the highest capacity of humankind's self-will.'[32]

Kirillov's portrayal is most glaringly a hyperbolisation of the inhuman consequences of a utopian vision of humanity based on the supremacy of reason. This is the basis of Liputin's elated

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[31] It should be noted that Kirillov's theorisation of the 'man-god' is fundamentally different from Levinas's, as explored in Chapter 3. Kirillov's is the unity of theological immanence and transcendence on a secular plane; for Levinas, the impossibility of such unity is precisely where divinity resides.

[32] Frank, *A Writer in His Time*, p.654-5.

mockery of Kirillov's theories, which he falsely equates with 'the newest principle of universal destruction for the sake of good final goals' (*Demons* 94), more infamously articulated by Shigalyov's 'unlimited despotism' (*Demons* 402). And this is how he is read both by Pevear, whose editorial endnotes source his man-god theory in 'German idealist philosophy' (*Demons* 722, en.13), and by Frank, who cites the post-Hegelian secular humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach as an inspiration. Their readings would be consistent with Bakhtin's own view on German Idealism: Kirillov would be yet another Dostoevskian example of the totalising impulse of ideological monologism that polyphony departs from, a warning for amoral nihilism that results from the absence of ethical transcendence along with Raskolnikov, Ippolit, Pyotr Verkhovensky and Smerdyakov.

Yet it is worth noting that Kirillov himself does not identify with such classification. Refuting Liputin, he pointedly asserts, 'I don't reason about these points that are done with. I can't stand reasoning. I never want to reason…' (*Demons* 95). Moreover, the traits he shares with Dostoevsky's ethical exemplars, such as Prince Myshkin's 'love of children, […] ecstatic affirmation of life [and] eschatological apprehension', make it difficult to single out Kirillov as one of the novel's most ostentatious ideological enemies in the manner of Pyotr Verkhovensky.[33] There is instead a second way to read Kirillov, one that aligns with a perspective of him as the epitome of ideological monologism yet is paradoxically antipodal to it. To read Kirillov as an allegory for the author, specifically for Dostoevsky himself, is to read his ideological single-mindedness as committed to substantiating true authorial polyphony. Apperceiving Kirillov's theory of humanity in terms of an author's relation to its characters could hence allow for an interpretation of his suicide as the ultimate renunciation of authorial authority. Kirillov too wants to rescue 'humanity' from its voiceless enslavement by the bonds of religious sensibility. His altruism demands that he efface himself for his characters, to let them speak for themselves rather than be spoken for by an exterior authority.

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[33] Ibid., p.655.

However, although his theory is intended to benefit others, it does so only through an eradication of the unknowable other that constitutes ethical transcendence. In this respect, Kirillov confuses Dostoevsky's own desire to uphold the independence of his characters' voices with the eradication of the metaphysical grounding necessary for human coherence and communion. He understands the metaphysical only in terms of fear, pain and death, and so reasonably cannot conceive why its absence would invoke homesickness: what Kirillov's theory lacks is the transition from an absolute, authoritative transcendence to a secular/post-Nietzschean one that retains the relation between being and otherwise than being necessary for subjective anchorage. Both ethically (as an ideological monologist) and aesthetically (as a polyphonic author), Kirillov is too resolutely committed to a solitary idea. It is an idea that strives to overcome the necessary accusative-ness of being. The man-god tries to embody both singular being and becoming in one instance, to unite meaning and being, to embody both the cognitive and ethical function of language in the same once-occurrent moment.

This is why Kirillov inevitably fails. And his failure is first and foremost a failure of expression. Whilst alive, Kirillov is marked by a faltering coherence, and it is here that his allegorical resemblance to Dostoevsky is most acute. The translator's notes accompanying Pevear's introduction comments on how Kirillov 'does not speak in a naturally low-class or careless manner. His speech is very deliberate, but precisely agrammatical. Language seems to be dying out in him. The result is totally unnatural in Russian.'[34] And this aspect is noted in the text. When Kirillov is introduced, the narrator declares that he 'spoke abruptly and somehow ungrammatically, somehow strangely shuffling his words' (*Demons* 91), and later asks him 'why do you speak Russian not quite correctly?' (*Demons* 116). Before he fulfils his authorial effacement, Kirillov, like his creator, is caught between the desire for ethical truth and the necessity of coherence, the lie of utterance. As such, he remains in the conditional tense that constitutes the polyphonic work, sharing Dostoevsky's own hesitation over the efficacy of language.

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[34] Pevear, 'Foreword' to *Demons*, p.xxiii.

Subsequently, Kirillov's suicide is both tragic and bordering on wordless. Read as in instantiation of the authorial effacement constituting polyphony, it serves as an example of true polyphony's necessary incoherence as it moves beyond the conditional. Hysterically laughing, mixing broken Russian with French, biting the finger of Pyotr Verkhovensky and continually screaming 'now' until pulling the trigger, his suicide embodies the crucial unintelligibility of ethics without words: in dying he enacts the physical change he foresees in a godless world, a physical incapacity to speak or to be. As an allegory for the author, Kirillov is the extremity of authorial polyphony, and this is why he has got absolutely nothing to say. His final moments articulate the Levinasian Saying without reduction to the Said. It is an unfeasible possibility outside of death. Ultimately, Kirillov's failure to metamorphose into the man-god is the truest example of the polyphonic trace that must be tempered by monologic coherence, the ethical subordinated to but integral for the aesthetic. He stands by this reading for a polyphony that manifests as the ineffable within the monologic, rather than a theoretically impossible extrication of monologism and polyphony.

IV

A significant component of Cieply's argument concerning silence and polyphony is how it dovetails with the 'dialectic of silence and speech [which] is the play that underlies all philosophy' in Derridean deconstruction.[35] Cieply's essay makes a gesture similar to Nina Pelikan Straus's review of 'Circumfession': both seek to read the referential chain of difference that leads to affirmation in terms of apophatic theology, and both use Bakhtin's writings on Dostoevsky to aid that reading. Though Cieply notes that Derrida 'rejects the apophatic doctrine of mystic union with God as implying a hyperessentiality', he points out that deconstruction 'shares with negative theology a sense that the word God, so far as it may be understood to signify "meaning" or "truth," is not a

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[35] Cieply, 'The Silent Side of Polyphony', 701.

produced end of negative practices but a productive origin.'[36] Which is to say, 'God' is not an

exterior essence for Derridean deconstruction which can signify only the unknowability of a

transcendent truth. What can instead be defined as God for Derrida is the way the endless play of

negation that produces signification itself escapes the totalisation or finalisation of textuality that

concretises being. Akin to the conflation of God and Saying in Levinas, theological transcendence is

'revealed' by the absence or silence of positive affirmation, by the trace (a word as significant to

Levinas as it is to Derrida) of negation that escapes signification.

That Cieply, like Straus, uses Dostoevskian polyphony to open up an association between

aesthetic creation and the incomprehensibility of 'divine' transcendence in poststructural theory can

be paired with the theoretical affinities between Derrida and Levinas touched upon in Chapter 3.

This in turn bridges the distance between polyphonic 'silence' and Levinasian aesthetic theory.

Towards the end of Chapter 5, I discoursed upon the overtly critical tone of 'Reality and Its Shadow'

towards a conception of the aesthetic that claimed the artist sought to divorce the artistic image

from the interiority of being, to set up the artistic imagination as 'knowledge of the absolute'. Even

so, it was recognised that Levinas's early essay, and his other writings on the subject, offered

moments of ambivalence that prevented inferring his single-voiced denunciation of art, something

which Jill Robbins picked up on in *Altered Reading*. Robbins, as acknowledged earlier, prefaced her

list of 'exceptions' with a conditional statement suggesting that an alternate understanding of the

aesthetic, one not premised on cognition, might draw closer to the ethical in Levinasian terms.

As was discussed during the reassessment of Dostoevsky's writings, a conditional

understanding of the aesthetic is precisely where the interchange between cognition and ethics,

rhythm and loophole, occurs. And, as Robbins recognises, 'Reality and Its Shadow' ends by

prefiguring such conditionality. Implying that his essay on art gave greater focus to classical and pre-

Renaissance figures, Levinas concludes,

> Modern literature, disparaged for its intellectualism (which, none the less goes back to Shakespeare,
> the Moliere of Don Juan, Goethe, Dostoyevsky) certainly manifests a more and more clear awareness

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[36] Ibid., 690.

of this fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry. In this intellectualism the artist refuses to be only an artist [...] because he needs to interpret his myths himself. Perhaps the doubts that, since the renaissance, the alleged death of God has put in souls have compromised for the artist the reality of the henceforth inconsistent models, have imposed on him the onus of finding his models anew in the heart of his production itself, and made him believe he had a mission to be creator and revealer.' (*LR* 143)

This extended quotation does several things, not least of which is placing itself within the context of polyphonic tension by referencing the 'fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry'. Such a line would not look out of place in either Jones's subsection or Cieply's article. It draws attention to Levinas's early recognition of the potential for art to accord with his understanding of the ethical, even at the end of an essay which at times shows open hostility towards the aesthetic. Levinas's theory of art can be placed correspondingly with his philosophy. As a philosopher, he styles himself as antagonistic to 'the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.' The casualties of *Totality and Infinity*'s philosophical Ragnarök include Heraclitus, Plato, Kant and Hegel.[37] If Levinas's ethical philosophy can serve as a departure from the history of Westen philosophy, therefore, it stands to reason that such philosophy could, perhaps even must, have artistic counterparts.

And such counterparts would in theory emerge in 'modern literature', corresponding to the period of modernist literature and art beset by the metaphysical homesickness induced by 'the alleged death of God.'[38] The fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry can here be said to relate to an equation between the immanent truth of reality and its representation, the basis of the claim made by the artistic imagination for knowledge of the absolute. The metaphysical grounding that had once anchored the artist to the coherence of the world around it under the banner of absolute categories of Truth and Beauty, which it consequently sought to depict as that reality's 'shadow', offered since the Nietzschean death of God only an 'inconsistent' model. The basis of Levinasian ethics, which built upon the Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology that itself was fundamentally post-Nietzschean, is the same as the basis for 'modern literature' that must find

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[37] As will be mentioned below, however, Levinas's critique of art in 'Reality and Its Shadow' is effectively Platonic, fearing along with Plato the power of art to replicate Form without being Form.

[38] Levinas's use of 'alleged' here, I would claim, relates to his reconceptualisation of the divine in accordance with the ethics of alterity that I expanded upon in Chapter 3. The deceased god is the ontotheological God-of-presence.

'models anew in the heart of the production itself'.[39] Levinas's typically obscure phrasing here allows for an interpretation that complements Cieply's reading of Derrida and Bakhtin: the artists that must establish themselves as creators and 'revealers' (rather than the revelation of a Creator), and so must turn to the process of creation itself, evince an understanding of artistic transcendence as embedded within the textuality of the text, Derrida's pure negation, Cieply's polyphonic silence and Levinas's necessarily betrayed Saying. Levinas finishes 'Reality and Its Shadow' by refusing to delve into 'the 'logic' of the philosophical exegesis of art' for the sake of brevity, claiming such an investigation 'would have to introduce the perspective of the relation with the other without which being could not be told in its reality' (*LR* 143). His ending implies that the ethical text, for Levinas, is precisely that which abandons old models (in which the artist knows the absolute) and instead focuses on the irreconcilability of cognition and the transcendence of ethical alterity.

And Dostoevsky is rightly named as a progenitor of such modern literature. His polyphony stems from Menippean satire, departing from Platonic or Aristotelian *mimesis* precisely because it is already intertwined with the perspective of the relation of the other. As such, it corresponds with his position on the threshold of the pre- and post-Nietzschean: although the grounds for an Orthodox reading of his novels is evident (even if such a reading is framed in terms of apophatic theology), the development of the polyphonic structure in which precedence is given to the unknowable alterity of the Other, at the expense of monologic authority, accords with the historical transition from ontotheological to dialogic ethics. The Nietzschean death of God (i.e., the God-of-presence) relocates the ethical to the equivocation between cognition and discourse, the way the ethical instance inaugurated by the responsibility of response must always already be subordinated to the

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[39] 'The exploration of the notions of intentionality, intersubjectivity, consciousness and life-world, embodiment, and values, as they are dealt with by Nietzsche and phenomenologists from both an ontological and an epistemological perspective will shed light on crucial contemporary philosophical problems. Philosophers are still struggling with founding ethics and values in a world that is now secular and devoid of its past transcendent realm of certainty, and therefore have trouble finding criteria to arbitrate between mundane, political, and religious worldviews.' Élodie Boublil & Christine Daigle, 'Introduction' to Boublil & Daigle (eds), *Nietzsche and Phenomenology: Power, Life, Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) pp.1-10 (p.4). By claiming phenomenology as fundamentally post-Nietzschean, I am not suggesting that Nietzschean and Husserlian thought are necessarily akin, but that both stem from the same historical and philosophical context.

linguistic system and to ontology. Dostoevsky's importance to Levinasian, Bakhtinian and

contemporary Dostoevskian ethics is thus explained by the way the polyphonic structure allows for

that equivocation by maintaining the conditionality of Saying and Said within its textuality, within

the way the polyphonic disrupts the artifice of monologic coherence.

It is in the light of the disquieting ending to 'Reality and Its Shadow' that Levinas's

appreciation for a certain type of art, and especially a certain type of literature, can be sought. And

this search is both augmented and enriched by the comparatively recent publication of Levinas's

prison notebooks and unpublished conference papers, essays and literary drafts.[40] Though the

inédits themselves have not at the time of writing been translated into English, their publication has

deepened a critical understanding of Levinas's philosophy, his experiences as a prisoner of war, and

the development of his thought from his early engagement with Husserl and Heidegger through to

the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. Particularly with regards to Levinas's theories on art, the

inclusion amongst these posthumous notes of Levinas's own forays into poetry (written in Russian)

and the fragments of two novels has demanded a reassessment of the longstanding belief, based

primarily off 'Reality and Its Shadow', that Levinasian ethics are antithetical to art.

A 2020 collection of essays on Levinas and literature takes the attempted literary creations

of the *inédits* as its starting point for precisely this kind of reassessment. Its co-editor, Michael

Fagenblatt, introduces the collection by noting that in 'Reality and Its Shadow', and elsewhere in his

published work, Levinas 'adopts a cautious, even critical approach to literature which he conceives,

like all art, in terms of the work's "formal structure of completion".' This critical approach, as has

been explained, 'is essentially Platonic, reiterating the old suspicion of pleasures roused by mimetic

idols.'[41] Yet the publication of the *inédits*, for Fagenblatt, confirms a suspicion that

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[40] These *inédits* (unpublished writings) were part of the archive entrusted by Levinas's son Michael to L'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC). IMEC, in partnership with Grasset Publishing, published them in three volumes in 2009, 2011 and 2013. See https://www.imec-archives.com/qui-sommes-nous/communiques-de-presse/emmanuel-levinas-eros-litterature-et-philosophie for the press release of the third volume, which briefly summarises the production history.
[41] Michael Fagenblatt, 'Levinas and Literature, A Marvellous Hypocrisy', 'Introduction' to Fagenblatt and Arthur Cools (eds.), *Levinas and Literature: New Directions* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH: Berlin, 2020) pp.ix-xxii (p.xiii). The quotation is from 'Reality and Its Shadow' (*cf. LR* 131).

> literature provided Levinas with a third way of *enacting* the unique *sens* of the Other. More precisely, as both Levinas's aborted novels and his literary exemplars suggest, the advantage of literature consists not so much in *showing* the moral sense of the other—since its truth is strictly "invisible", falling outside the limits of consciousness, beyond empathy and intuition— but in attesting to the formidable difficulty of discerning this sense. It is as if literature affords a way of tracing the sense of goodness under the conditions of its absence.[42]

Fagenblatt's italicisation of 'enacting' and 'showing' stress the peculiar relation between ethics and literature in Levinas, one that echoes the centripetal and centrifugal strain of Bakhtin and involves the disunity between truth and utterance that unsettles all of Dostoevsky's polyphonic writings. It hearkens back, as this chapter has been stressing, to the dual function of language as the means for both cognition and its disruption. Without invalidating the concerns of 'Reality and Its Shadow', Fagenblatt's introduction proposes a dual evaluation of literature in Levinasian theory that accords with its enmeshment within language itself. Taking an 'on-the-one-hand/on-the-other' approach that anticipates the post-postmodern tension of the contemporary Dostoevskian texts, he argues that literature 'attests to humanity's verging from sense to senselessness, even as the transformations it brings to language are the very signs of our always provisional transcendence of the disaster of being.' Literature thus 'has the potency of a pharmakon, at once poison and medicine, descent into egoism and senselessness, but also orientation toward the Other.'[43]

The type of literature that 'interests' Levinas, then, in that it correlates with his understanding of the ethical as the breach of cognitive totality, is a type that orients itself towards alterity not through the semantic relationality of its language, centring itself as the link between chaos and meaning in the manner of a monologic claim to absolute truth, but instead a type that 'explores the implications of a world deprived of the sense of the Other, a world verging toward the abyss of indeterminate, meaningless existence.'[44] Literature that operates at the very limit (or threshold) of intelligibility gestures towards humanity's ascendency over senseless existence by exposing the artifice of meaning, like a fire in the night whose light darkens the sky above. And in doing so, such literature necessarily 'points to the constitutive role of the Other in grounding the

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[42] Ibid., p.x
[43] Ibid., p. xii-xiii.
[44] Ibid., p.x.

conditions of the possibility for meaning.'[45] The artifice of meaning originates in the unknowability of

the Other. The fire can only be seen because of the darkness it resists. However, Fagenblatt goes on

to acknowledge that the 'sense of the Other' in such literature cannot be realised 'through empathy

or intuition' as this realisation would reincorporate alterity within the semantic nexus, thereby

robbing it of its constitutive (and so, ethical) property. Instead, 'it is indicated or intimated by a

phenomenological reduction of intelligibility to humility, epistemic as much as moral, a reduction of

the very possibility of meaning to an acknowledgment, without knowledge, of the Other.'[46]

Literature's phenomenological reduction of intelligibility to an epistemic humility that

accounts for its ethical orientation to the Other, the welcoming of the face, without reducing the

Other to the economy of the monologic same, is the method by which Dostoevsky executes his

authorial abdication through his creation of novelistic polyphony as an articulation of Levinasian

Saying. It is a method that responds to the abnegation of authorial absolutes characteristic of the

post-Nietzschean death of God and the subsequent relocation of the ethical within the transcendent

responsibility of response to the unknowable Other. It is a method that demands that the ineffable

Other be 'expressed' as inexpressible, thus prompting the epistemic humility of the renunciation of

authorial authority. It is precisely the same sense of humility that, for Levinas, defines the God-

incognito; as was noted in Chapter 3, the 'idea of a truth that manifests itself in its humility' was 'the

only possible modality of transcendence'. Fagenblatt's study of the *inédits* thus extends the God-

incognito to the textuality of literature: it is in literature, specifically the type of literature given

precedence by Dostoevskian polyphony which seeks to centralise its hesitancy before cognition and

discourse, that epistemic humility can be made manifest.

This is Dostoevsky's legacy for the contemporary Dostoevskians because it envisages

literature's relation with the ethical that need not be tied to the universalising impulse of an

ideological authority. A type of literature that signals through its falsifying utterance towards the

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

expression of incoherence or silence is one that can acknowledge alterity without subsuming it,

become responsible for the Other through responding to it. One might project that the near

senselessness of *Finnegan's Wake* or some of Beckett's shorter plays would stand as an exemplar of

ethical literature for Levinas, with a hypothetical apotheosis being either a series of contextless

scribbles, signifiers without signified, or simply a blank page. Yet it must be remembered that the

type of literary works Levinas did make mention of in his published writings (Dostoevsky, Blanchot,

Grossman, Rimbaud) do not approach this kind of semantic absurdity, and this is critical in

understanding the tension between the cognitive and discursive function of language that Levinasian

literature must maintain. The claim to authorial mastery may suppress the alterity of the Other, but

responsibility for the Other is contingent on the Other's constitutive role in the creation of meaning.

Both monologic totality and the purity of polyphonic silence (Saying irreducible to Said) would

hereby avoid the answerability of an answer. As such Levinas arguably 'sides with […] the madness,

the folly, of literature' even as he 'respects the need for an order of truth and logic, its status and

validity "in the world".'[47] It is only through a concatenation of the two that literature can 'learn to

speak without authority' (*DBY* 151), less an overcoming of Coetzee's Kierkegaardian paradox than an

embracing of it, an authority that negates itself as it manifests itself.

V

Literature that conforms with the ethical, for Levinas, must therefore contain a 'disorderly and

disruptive function', offering 'a much valued interruption to the merciless orders of the Said in which

the singular sense of the Other is suppressed.'[48] It must strive to become what Fagenblatt calls 'anti-

literature', a style of writing 'amply confirm[ed]' by *Otherwise than Being* 'with its quite mad,

disruptive, anarchic style, its writing against the logos of the Said.'[49] Indeed, that Levinas's own

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[47] Ibid., p.xvii.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

writing encapsulates the consonance of coherence and ethics has been noted elsewhere in

Levinasian scholarship (though without mention of its literary applicability), notably by Simon

Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. As I mentioned during my reading of Straus in Chapter 3,

Critchley's work is one of the more renowned to deal with the intricate and occasionally overlapping

philosophical and ethical thought of Levinas and Derrida. Distinguishing *The Ethics of Deconstruction*

from other approaches to this theoretical relationship is that Critchley studies Levinasian ethics for

their deconstructive tendencies, instead of seeking a way to read the ethical in Derridean

deconstruction. His opening claim is that 'the textual practice of deconstructive reading can and,

moreover, should be understood as an ethical demand.' The 'pattern of reading produced in the

deconstruction', or the 'horizon' towards which deconstructive reading 'tends', can be perceived as

an ethical approach.[50] The necessary failure of that attempt, however, is the root of Critchley's

argument, prompting a deconstructive assessment of Levinas's own writings.

This assessment, naturally, focuses mostly on *Otherwise than Being* because that work arose

as a response to Derrida's critique of *Totality and Infinity* in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. For

Critchley, *Otherwise than Being* marks Levinas's 'linguistic or deconstructive turn', an assertion he

makes by picking up on how 'Levinas's thinking and, more especially, his style of writing become

increasingly sensitive to the problem of how the ethical Saying is to be thematized – and necessarily

betrayed – within the ontological Said.'[51] Whilst *Totality and Infinity* styles itself as departing from

the totalising tendencies of ontotheological ethics, the nuance of *Otherwise than Being* accepts that

the ethical 'is not the simple overcoming or abandonment of ontology, but rather the

deconstruction of the latter's limits and its comprehensive claims to mastery.'[52] Though the

projection of a theoretically ideal Levinasian sense of the ethical might represent the purity of

Saying, equatable to Tiutchev's silence or the polyphonic form without content, the very concept of

a theoretical ideal is itself antithetical to Levinasian ethics. Levinasian ethics are instead 'hinged or

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[50] Critchley, *Ethics of* Deconstruction, pp.1-2.
[51] Ibid., pp.7-8.
[52] Ibid., p.8.

articulated around an ambiguous, or double, movement between the ontological Said and the

ethical Saying'. They must occupy a dual position, which Critchley elsewhere calls a 'double refusal',

and which is analogous to the conditional tense of Dostoevsky's art, between Saying and its

manifestation within the *logos* of the Said. The 'very possibility of ethics is found in the articulation

of this hinge, the activation of this ambiguity between what is said in a text, the language of

ontological propositions, and the very ethical Saying of that text.'[53]

From this sense of an ambiguous movement or double refusal which activates the ethical

component of deconstruction, Critchley develops the Derridean idea of ethical 'closure' and its

corresponding practical methodology, '*clôtural* reading'. The problem of closure, Critchley writes

> describes the duplicitous historical moment – now – when 'our' language, concepts, institutions, and
> philosophy itself show themselves both to belong to a metaphysical or logocentric tradition which is
> theoretically exhausted, while at the same time searching for the breakthrough from that tradition.[54]

In this respect closure's double movement is a refusal 'of remaining within the limits of the tradition

and of the possibility of transgressing that limit.' A *clôtural* interpretation of a text would both

recognise its intended and dominant meaning within the confines of a rigorous scholarly tradition,

and simultaneously seek textual aporias that contribute to '*the destabilization of the stability of the*

dominant interpretation.' Moments of 'blindness' in a logocentric text would thereby offer 'insight

into an alterity that exceeds logocentrism', thus constituting the ethical component of

deconstructive practices.[55]

Critchley's premised *clôtural* reading can thus be re-evaluated alongside the ethical dynamic

of a polyphonic creation to propose the idea of a *clôtural* writing; that is, a text that works to expose

the failure of its monologic coherence, thus conceding to epistemic humility. Critchley's 'governing

claim' for a text's moments of 'blindness' is that 'these insights, interruptions, or alterities are

moments of ethical transcendence, in which a necessity other than that of ontology announces itself

within the reading, an event in which the ethical Saying of a text overrides its ontological Said.'[56] As

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[53] Ibid., p.19-21.
[54] Ibid., p.20.
[55] Ibid., p.20/26/28
[56] Ibid., p.30.

such, *clôtural* writing is an impossibility within pure authorial monologism, because monologism's gesture towards totality impedes an awareness of its own logocentric blindness. By ceding to an independent plurality of consciousnesses, however, the polyphonic author proffers an awareness of his authoritative limits. If the premise that writing is a form of reading can be accepted, with regards to the idea of 'reading' an idea-consciousness capable of disagreeing with and even rebelling against one's own ideological values, then a *clôtural* writing of those idea-consciousnesses would both write them for their 'dominant interpretation' (via the articulation of their ideology without alibi-in-being) and reveal their idiosyncratic blindness through their juxtaposition against a multiplicity of sentients to whom they must respond and so are responsible for.

Levinas's own writing sets itself up against this specific problem of discursive closure. Although Critchley focuses on reading, he still notes the way Levinas perceives language as 'from the start *unbound*' (i.e., having both cognitive and discursive functions). Levinas's prose, therefore proceeds 'in such a way that the Said of language is reduced to its Saying in a reduction that maintains a residue of the unsaid Said within the Saying.'[57] Which is to say, it is a writing that is obliged 'to employ the language of tradition' but which at the same time is obliged 'to interrupt this language and bear it towards its own condition of possibility.' Instead of the consummated rhythm of the centripetal text, such writing maintains a '*clôtural* rhythm of binding and unbinding which preserves the absolute priority of ethical obligation.'[58] It is neither solely rhythmic nor an impossible composition of loopholes, but a style which attempts to portray its own irreconcilability with absolute alterity. Applying Critchley's theories to the idea of a *clôtural* writer there for allows Dostoevsky to again emerge as a precursor to this specific style. To maintain the ethical condition of polyphony within the aesthetic demand for cognition is to develop a writing style that, predicated by Dostoevsky's polyphonic silences and exemplified by Levinas's own texts, actively betrays its own claim to authorial mastery. It is the way by which one learns to speak without authority, by and

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[57] Ibid., p.122-123.
[58] Ibid., p.127-128.

through an authoritative utterance. Levinas's writing, particularly in *Otherwise than Being*, 'does not divorce the ethical Saying of deconstruction from its location in the Said'. Rather, it 'shows how the Saying is maintained within the Said as the permanent possibility of the latter's interruption.'[59]

In the end, Critchley's deconstructive reading of Levinas is a recognition of the paradoxical necessity to reconcile the irreconcilability of the discursive and cognitive function of language. His focus on the particularities of Levinas's own writing effectively insinuates the critical role of literature when it comes to this paradoxical reconciliation. Elucidated most notably by Derrida's relocating of signification from phonocentric presence to the truancy of writing in *Of Grammatology*, the deconstructive conceptualisation of the world as text identified the literary as the optimal space for interrogations into how meaning is generated and negotiated in the absence of metaphysical surety. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, first published in 1992, marked an important stage in the way those interrogations turned their attention to questions of the ethical, temporally coinciding with both Derrida's own circumfession and the critical focus of *Infinite Jest* and *The Master of Petersburg*. It emphasised writing, especially writing's potential for something approaching 'anti-literature', as the post-Nietzschean site of the ethical.

Fagenblatt's co-editor, Arthur Cools, picks up on the concept of anti-literature in his contribution to *New Directions* when he claims there to be 'a structural and indissoluble coherence' between 'Levinas's ethics as first philosophy and the work of literature' based on 'the appearance of the emergence of meaning into being.'[60] The basis of Cools's argument is that there is no structural difference between interhuman and literary ethical relations, which makes literature the most conducive path for studying the dissociation and overlap between once-occurrent being and its significatory representation. Although a study of Levinas, Cools takes an approach that has its associations with Bakhtinian dialogism: drawing, like Bakhtin, on the dominant aesthetic distinction between form and content that can be traced back through Western thought to Aristotle, Cools

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[59] Ibid., p.146.
[60] Arthur Cools, ''The Anarchy of Literature' in Fagenblatt and Cools (eds.), *New Directions*, pp.1-20 (p.2).

reiterates the central Bakhtinian idea of an inescapable disjunction between formal narrative representation and what he variously terms 'the experience of daily life' or 'the concrete event', showing a clear equivalence with Bakhtinian событие.[61] Cools therefore applies the same interpretation of literature that Critchley uses to deconstruct Levinasian ethics. Critchley's 'double movement' recognises that 'on one hand, narration […] is a necessary condition in order to create coherence in the disparate, to impose a structure on the chaotic and to comprehend the ungraspable', whilst 'on the other hand, narratives are challenged and undermined by the very singularity of the experience of daily life.'[62]

Through his introduction of 'deformalization', Cools signals towards an interchange between Critchley's *clôtural* reading and a theoretical type of *clôtural* writing in which the writer forswears a claim to an epistemic totality, the type I am claiming is fundamental to understanding Dostoevsky's polyphonic interruption of monologic coherence as his aesthetic legacy for the contemporary Dostoevskian texts. The notion of deformalisation, Cools writes, 'implies as a minimal condition to put into question the primacy of the narrative form over content'; read from a Levinasian perspective, noting that in Levinas's philosophy 'narrative and narration lose their evidence', Cools here means the primacy of formal categories of representation (which, at their most basic level, accord with the cognitive function of language) over the immediacy of once-occurrent being which always already transcends such categories.[63] Formal notions, he explains, 'cannot become fully intelligible except in light of the concrete event.'[64] This amounts to the ethical failure of 'traditional concepts of narrative forms', the consummated rhythm of monologism in Bakhtin, in that they 'privilege the idea of a unity of the manifold […] or a coherence of being and acting in narrative that are not given as such in light of the concrete experience of the event.'[65] What can be understood by deformalisation, therefore, results from

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[61] Ibid., p.4/5.
[62] Ibid., p.4.
[63] Ibid., p.3.
[64] Ibid., p.5.
[65] Ibid., p.6.

> the attention given to the concreteness of the event prior to the act of narration. It requires precisely to put into question the primacy of narrative forms, to break open the coherence that they intend, and to reconsider the art of narration in light of the concrete experience that does not fit in the narrated time.[66]

This thesis has already touched upon several instances where such deformalisation is brought into the open in Dostoevskian polyphony, such as Myshkin's epileptic fever or Kirillov's suicide. At a wider level, deformalisation corresponds with the concept of polyphony as the articulation of Levinasian Saying, breaking through the precedence of representation in monologism by giving priority to 'an experience of the world that precedes all thought about the world'.[67] And in the sense that deformalisation manifests as a 'giving attention to', the imbrication between a Levinasian reading of a literary work and the processes of Dostoevsky's writing (conceived to be a 'reading' of a multiplicity of idea-consciousnesses) is discernible. Dostoevskian aesthetics, interacting with his Levinasian sense of the ethical, involve the simultaneous formalising and deformalising of narrative, the interchange between monologic coherence and polyphonic ethics within the conditionality of the literary text. Dostoevskian literature, past and present, is a type of literature that acknowledges its own failure even as it tries to succeed: it seeks the polyphonic disruption of its own monologic authority.

VI

The recent developments in the study of Levinas, prompted by the publication of the *inédits*, which focus on the literary application of his ethics (or the ethical application of literature) brings forth the merger of the ethical and the artistic as it is negotiated in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels. The basis for Part IV of this thesis, which will seek to close read the contemporary texts for their idiosyncratic enactments of Dostoevsky's epistemic humility, is formed by a consideration of this merger. Before reaching this concluding close reading, however, I will venture on one last theoretical detour to

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., p.7.

reconcile Cools's 'The Anarchy of Literature' with the work of literary criticism that has been the thus-far unacknowledged driving force of this chapter: Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*. Though I cannot claim to do justice to Attridge's seminal text, which he claims to have developed alongside his study of Coetzee, its conceptualisation of a text's 'singularity' and subsequent paralleling of the activity/passivity dynamic of reading with the Levinasian approach of the Other has been critical in my understanding of the aesthetic hesitancy of Dostoevsky's post-Siberian novels and its reiteration by the contemporary works. I intend here to extend Attridge's singularity to argue that Dostoevskian aesthetics, as they work through the ethical dynamic of polyphony, stand as an example of singularity and portray the staging of singularity. Viewing Dostoevsky's works as such illustrates how the encounter with the unknowable alterity of the Other that marks the polyphonic novel shifts back to a refreshment of the limits of authorial knowledge. It is a refreshment that imbues a sense of epistemic humility within the author's aesthetic creation.

The process of creation, for Attridge, can be perceived as the encounter with a singular Other in accordance with Levinasian ethical philosophy. Creation, specifically literary creation, is an ethical event in which the creator/author must respond to (and so be responsible for) something that both originates within and yet exceeds the near-unfathomable boundaries of that creator's cultural field, which Attridge terms an 'idioculture'.[68] By framing the creative encounter within the context of Levinas's philosophy, setting the stage for his account of a singular reading experience, Attridge makes the link between absolute alterity and the subjective idioculture that both actualises and is actualised by it:

> In the account I am giving, the other is not this at first inaccessible and then all too accessible entity. *Only in relating to me* is the other other, and its otherness is registered in the adjustments I have to make in order to acknowledge it – adjustments that may never become wholly second nature to me. [...] The other, therefore, does not have a prior and independent being which happens to be masked from me.[69]

Attridge's account, because it focuses on the technicalities of reading and creating, here tries to find a middle ground between the passivity before absolute alterity true to the Levinasian ethical, and

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[68] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004) p.22.
[69] Ibid., p.30.

the way such passivity relates back to the subject. Attempting to stay true to the alterity of the Other, he theorises the consequences of the self's ethical passivity as it extends to the actions and activities of the self, consequences that are pertinent to cognitive meaning but that do not risk the totalising integration, manipulation or domestication of the Other. And the result of his theory is an inevitable shift of subjective idioculture, one that recognises and potentially never overcomes the confrontation with the limits of its knowledge that the encounter with the Other reveals.

From this understanding of the creative process, Attridge advances his definition of a text's 'singularity', and it is here that the conflation between reading and authoring occurs. The singularity of a 'cultural object' (which categorises it as 'literature' or 'art') 'consists in its difference from all other such objects', consists in its being 'perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations.' What denotes the singularity of literature is that, though it originates within the socio-cultural context of its production, it nevertheless 'go[es] beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms, the norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood.'[70] This definition accounts for both the creative and receptive dynamic regarding a text. Literature's singularity is as fluctuating as both the individual and social idioculture, and so its status as 'literature' is never wholly guaranteed or negated. The capacity for a work to be regarded as singular is always already conditional. The non-literary can become literary, and vice-versa, dependent on the multiform interactions between the sociohistorical context of its creation and its reception. 'The singularity of the work', Attridge later claims, 'thus speaks to my own singularity.'[71] Neither are affixed across time and space.

This brings forth the concept of a 'creative reading' that, 'in registering the singularity and inventiveness of the work', stands analogous to the inventive creativity of the writer.[72] It is a concept that translates to Dostoevsky's own work, in that his creativity emerges as a response to a socio-historical context in which the possibilities pre-programmed by his 'idiocultural' norms underwent

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[70] Ibid., p.63.
[71] Ibid., p.78.
[72] Ibid., p.79.

heightened re-evaluation. The development of the polyphonic novel was as much Dostoevsky's

creative reading of the singularity of his era as it was a creative composition. In both cases,

polyphony-as-Saying is marked by the shift from the totality of the known to the ethical response to

the unknown, registered as an accounting of how the unknown alters the boundaries and highlights

the limits of the known. Attridge writes that singularity 'arises from the work's constitution *as a set*

of active relations, put into play in the reading, that never settle into a fixed configuration.' These

relations, which bear the hallmarks of a plurality of independent consciousnesses, 'can produce a

sense of multiple voices addressed to multiple audiences, so much so that the "I" who reads may

momentarily lose coherence.'[73]

And so, Dostoevsky's writings, accounting for both his response to multiple voices and the

'voices' of the contemporary writers who respond to him, can be read as mimicking or

emblematising the occurrence of literary singularity even as they continue to exist as singular works

of literature. The artistic imagination that sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute, monologism, is

precisely the text's ever-unsuccessful attempt to overcome (or at least downplay) its own

singularity: to confirm unconditionally that which can only ever be conditional: a text's classification

as literature. The core of Levinas's aversion to artistic rhythm is its unwillingness to yield before

alterity, its inability to reconstitute itself to account for that which is outside the sphere, the totality,

of its internal epistemic mastery. Dostoevsky, in this respect, is both a progenitor and exemplar of

the kind of modern literature that expresses its own awareness of the fundamental insufficiency of

artistic idolatry, even as his works desire the same unity sought for by the centripetal impulse of

Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero', concerned (as the previous chapter argued) with establishing the

epistemic security of a world ordained by a divine presence. However, Dostoevskian instances in

which that desire is tempered by the ethical response to alterity and the consequent recognition of

its own epistemic limits, polyphony (which, at its most extreme, is the registering of silence),

represents the occurrence of inventive creation as it is theorised by Attridge.

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[73] Ibid., p.68.

I contend, however, that beyond the limits of Attridge's portrayal of literary singularity as concretised by the event of reading, Dostoevskian polyphony is in itself a staging of singularity. Each of the multiple idea-consciousnesses that constitute polyphony is a singular text, and the interlocution of these distinct singularities stand for the way one 'reads' the other as singular. It is a confrontation with alterity that results in a shift of subjective idioculture, precisely because the singular, unfinalisable other exceeds the epistemic, cognitive boundaries of the subject. The hero of a polyphonic novel is defined by its resistance to any finalising word another may say about it. Understanding polyphony as the staging of the event of singularity thus demonstrates not only its ethical dynamic (its 'articulation' of Levinasian Saying), but also demonstrates the way that dynamic shifts back to a form of aesthetic expression registered by epistemic humility: the 'expression' of the limits of knowledge. No longer able or willing to reintegrate alterity into the harmony of the known (following the anxiety over the alleged death of the God-of-presence), the polyphonic work vacillates between its own singular unity as a novel and the active relations between multiple singularities of which it is composed. The significance of thresholds, ellipses and silences in Dostoevsky's work all point towards the polyphonic double movement as both a singular aesthetic work and a creative, ethical response to singularity.

It is in this way that polyphony-as-Saying can be framed as competing against the totality of the Said which is fundamental to aesthetic expression. It is this competition that articulates the ethical dynamic of literature's singularity, representing the crisis of modernism (in which the divorce between the ethical and the epistemic reached its apotheosis) which the post-postmodernists return to. It is a crisis that finds optimal expression in polyphonic literature as both the culmination of aesthetic expression and site of discursive ethics. This, therefore, is why the artistic impetus of Dostoevsky and the contemporary Dostoevskians is to find ways to both maintain and disrupt their own coherence, their own unity as texts. Contrary to Bakhtin's initial theorisation, Dostoevsky's creation of the polyphonic novel did not develop a category of literature distinct from monologism: it supplemented the monologism of his art. Dostoevsky's works are not polyphonic as opposed to

monologic. Polyphony is sought within monologism, through the double refusal of closure. It is

through such disruption that the contemporary texts pay homage to polyphony as an ethical

structure, in the sense that polyphony enacts formally the occurrence of the singularity of literature.

In discoursing upon the concept of a 'creative reading', Attridge explains that in order to 'do justice

to a work's singularity' such reading 'necessarily fails'; it must 'explain what can be explained' and

'find a way of showing that even the fullest explanation does not exhaust the work's

inventiveness'.[74] If the writer is first and foremost a reader (in that he 'responds' to the alterity of

the creative instance), then Attridge here provides a blueprint for how Dostoevskian polyphony

operates: the failed creative reading becomes a 'failed' writing. And the Levinasian ethical

significance of failed writing is expanded by Cools's concept of deformalisation, which relates a

Levinasian understanding of literature to a 'narrative's dependency [on] the anarchical concreteness

of experience', which necessarily contrasts 'the singularity of the narrative's expression' with that

singularity's destabilisation of 'the apparent meanings of its formal qualities.' The formal constraints

of a narrative (by which he means semantic cognition) depend on the 'anarchy' (i.e., inability to

cognise) of that which it seeks to narrate. Hence Cools agrees with Attridge that 'a narrative can only

fail, be mistaken, fall short of presenting its relevance or betray it'.[75] Tying together both Attridge's

and Critchley's complimentary approach to the antagonism between narrative ethics and narrative

coherence, Cools concludes his article with the illustrative twist of phrase: 'the literary exceeds the

concept of literature'. The 'meaning' that appears in narrative

> has already been preceded by another meaning […] that disturbs, interrupts, and undermines the
> order of appearing. In this way, Levinas's account of the appearance of meaning is caught by a double
> bind: while the articulation of this appearance still depends on the use of literary means, this use
> cannot be but a betrayal of the sense of transcendence beyond being. […] The double bind […] is
> intended. It has the positive meaning of revealing, in the anarchical moment of disturbance, the
> possibility of an ethics that precedes ontology and resists any attempt of naturalization.[76]

It is in this way that, as Attridge writes, the 'distinctive ethical demand made by the literary work is

not to be identified with its characters or its plot', with any of the 'virtues or vices' it relates at the

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[74] Ibid., p.82.
[75] Cools, 'Anarchy of Literature', p.12-13.
[76] Ibid., p.16-17.

cognitive (aesthetic) level. It is, rather, to be found 'in what makes it literature: its staging of the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world.'[77] Polyphony-as-Saying is precisely this staging, ultimately betrayed by but nonetheless traceable in the monologism of the Said that constitutes Dostoevsky's aesthetic creation. The historical transition from ontotheology to discursivity as the foundation of the ethical therefore explicitly manifests in literature as failed writing. Writing relies on ontological coherence. Failed writing gestures towards how such coherence presupposes an ethics that precedes ontology. It is, as I will show in Part IV, the authorial mode of the contemporary Dostoevskians, for whom Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels are in this respect archetypical.

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This theoretical note, then, serves as the coda of this chapter. It sets the stage for what remains of the thesis: in Part IV, I offer a detailed treatment of each of the four contemporary Dostoevskian texts which interrogates how they seek to recreate the aesthetic/ethical tension of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels. In this way I answer the question that opened the thesis: how Dostoevsky's ethics can be considered 'enough' for the contemporary texts when considering the socio-historical gap between his time and their invocation of his ghost. Under the banner of 'epistemic humility', I will henceforth assess at a broad level how each of the novels incorporates the *clôtural* or 'failed' writing that marks the aesthetic and ethical engagement of polyphony. The epistemic humility of the texts, I claim, is the product of Dostoevsky's legacy, his marriage of a discursive understanding of the ethical with the need for monologic coherence. Although I cannot claim to do justice to the richness of each separate text, it is my hope to conclude the thesis by suggesting a framework through which each of these particular novels (and, perhaps, other novels more or less overtly expressing a debt to Dostoevsky) can be read in light of their attempts to revisit questions of ethics, in literature and in

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[77] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p.130.

life, in the wake of postmodernism. Treating each novel individually (lacking the time to treat them

intertextually), I will begin by explicating on how others have read the epistemic humility of

Wallace's writings, which will pave the way for a similar reading of Rahimi and Coetzee.

PART IV – EPISTEMIC HUMILITY: Close Readings

Chapter 7 – *Infinite Jest / A Curse on Dostoevsky*

> 'You seem like you drift in and out of different ways of talking.
> Sometimes it's' like you don't want me to follow.' (*IJ* 535)

The above quotation from *Infinite Jest* is uttered by Don Gately during a conversation with Joelle van

Dyne. It proposes multiple and competing uses for language: regardless of context or intention, the

quote shows an equivocation between comprehension and the irruption of comprehension. It thus

offers a microcosm of that which I intend to examine within the four contemporary novels, the ways

they reiterate Dostoevsky's search for an uneasy, hesitant and perpetually deficient reconciliation

between aesthetic consummation and the ethical function of literature, between a singular work

and a work composed of interacting singularities. This reconciliation resounds in the competing

centripetalism (rhythm) and centrifugalism (loophole) of Bakhtin's theoretical overlapping of

aesthetic, theological and ethical studies. It too resounds in the way Levinas's seeming repudiation

of the rhythmical and the rhetorical in art and music is challenged by so-called 'modern' works, in

that their 'intellectualism' is aware of the insufficiency of artistic idolatry and so seeks instead to

portray the anarchy of the Infinite. As Part III argued, the irreconcilability between these two

'realities' of Dostoevsky's work, the everyday and the underlying, maintained together only within

the conditional tense in which Dostoevskian polyphony must be read, is ultimately a refreshing of

perhaps the central enigma of ethical philosophy: the simultaneous cognitive and discursive function

of language. This enigma is, however, brought into sharp focus by the historical transition between

Dostoevsky's own sociocultural era, prototypical of modernist metaphysical homesickness, and the

regurgitation of that homesickness by the post-postmodern/metamodern authors and artists

following postmodernism's ethical solipsism. The consequent amalgamation of the monologic and

the polyphonic in Dostoevsky's works, Chapter 6 argued, manifests as an 'expression' of epistemic humility on behalf of either the author, the text or both. Such humility, which Cieply and Jones both relate to varieties of 'silence' within Dostoevsky's work, but which arguably extends to any and all discernible instances in which a text's rhetorical self-mastery is, by virtue of the text itself, exposed as artificial and/or deficient, is the key to assessing how the contemporary Dostoevskians reposition Dostoevsky's ethics within their literature. It is through such humility, achieved through conjectured 'failed' writing, that both he and they register the trace of the ethical Saying within the monologism of the Said, allowing their works to stand as singular texts and as articulations of ethical singularity.

Infinite Jest

Of the four contemporary texts, *Infinite Jest* seemingly offers the most substantial challenge to reading for a sense of epistemic humility, merely because the novel's Pynchon-esque, expansive nature infers an encyclopaedic claim to knowledge at odds with the concept of authorial meekness. In his 2006 foreword to the Abacus edition, the novelist Dave Eggers incredulously remarks how in a 'book [that] is 1,079 pages long', there is 'not one lazy sentence […] [t]he book is drum-tight and relentlessly smart', further contributing to the idea that *Infinite Jest*'s scope and style ill befits the abnegation of monologic authority that signifies Dostoevsky's literary ethics.[1] Yet closer inspection reveals the superficial nature of this initial impression; it is precisely the way *Infinite Jest* merges the extent of its discourse on a variety of topics (from addiction, depression and the commercialisation of culture, to environmentalism and a hyperbolisation of millennial American politics) with a narrative exasperated by its own rejection of authoritative surety which marks the novel as a prominent, even exhaustive, successor of Dostoevskian ethical polyphony. In his 1997 appearance on *Charlie Rose*, Wallace summated the directorial style of the filmmaker David Lynch, one of his

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[1] Daver Eggers, 'Foreword' to Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp.vii-xi (p.viii).

own acknowledged influences, as 'something about the unbelievably grotesque existing in a kind of union with the unbelievably banal', and it is through this Lynchian perspective that Wallace's own writing can be approached.[2] The confluence of 'grotesque' and 'banal', which itself is an important aspect of Wallace's own engagement with addiction and pleasure (as discussed in Chapter 4), can also be read as aggravating the way the epistemic abundance of the narrative runs up against its own refusal to consummate an epistemic totality. The sense of bewilderment that many of *Infinite Jest*'s characters variously feel is in this respect sourced in the novel's oscillation between its plenitude of information and that plenitude's underlying insufficiency.

And there is no better epitome of that oscillation and its subsequent sense of bewilderment than the novel's paginal opening / chronological closing scene, in which the lexically and academically gifted Hal causes a commotion at a university admissions interview, failing to turn his infallible knowledge of the dictionary into meaningful communication. One of *Infinite Jest*'s persistent motifs is the reiteration of the impasse at the heart of Dostoevskian polyphony between the cognitive and discursive functions of language. Hal, as both Ivan Karamazov's neotype and as the character most biographically similar to Wallace himself (gifted both academically and athletically, and yet suffering from substance addiction and depression), is best positioned to represent this motif, and *Infinite Jest* introduces it immediately into the narrative by opening at the plotline's chronological end, by which point Hal's progressive physical speech defect (a metaphor for his ethical solipsism) has reached its zenith. By this stage of the plot Hal can only make '*Sub*animalistic noises and sounds' (*IJ* 14) that horrify his interlocutors, and so the scene builds from the contrast between Hal's composed, rational and intellectual narratorial voice, and his 'silent response to the expectant silence' (*IJ* 5) of the interviewers. Echoing the significance of polyphonic silence in

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[2] Manufacturing Intellect, *David Foster Wallace interview on Charlie Rose (1997)*, online video recording, YouTube, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GopJ1x7vK2Q&t=591s [accessed 30.9.21]. His description of 'Lynchian' starts at 6 minutes and 50 seconds. Earlier in the interview, Wallace describes Lynch's films as 'instructive and useful to think about', saying particularly of *Blue Velvet* that 'it helped me a lot in my own work'.

Dostoevsky, Hal 'cannot make myself understood' (*IJ* 10); the resultant chaos of the scene thus

exaggerates both his and the narrative's 'familiar panic at being misperceived' (*IJ* 8).

The opening scene is one of only four sections in the novel narrated in the first person, and

two of these sections are occupied by Hal's voice, further contributing to the theory that Hal's

idiosyncratic perspective is interchangeable with the narrative dynamics of *Infinite Jest* as a whole.[3]

Yet rather than committing to an exclusively monologic pairing of a single-voiced narrative with the

authoritative weight of the novel, *Infinite Jest* instead seeks to reduce the unity of a single-voiced

perspective to the disjointed multiplicity characteristic of polyphony, instilling within its characters

(and, perhaps, its readers) a sense of humility before any claim to epistemic certainty. It is for this

reason that Hal's opening scene begins by curtailing his narrative, initially, to the subjective purity of

sense impressions, and then building in a Cartesian way to demarcating between the

epistemologically known and unknown:

> I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the
> shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room […].
> I am here.
> Three faces have resolved into place above summer-weight sportcoats and half-Windsors across a
> polished pine conference table shiny with the spidered light of an Arizona afternoon […]. I do not
> know which face belongs to whom.
> I believe I appear neutral, maybe even pleasant […]. (*IJ* 3)

The opening pages thus provide a microcosm of the novel's strategy with regards to its Dostoevskian

hesitancy before narrative coherence and narrative ethics. Hal finds himself confronted by an

alterity that exceeds the boundaries of his known world, exaggerated to such an extent that the

people and things he faces are only related as visible perceptions, broken down into shapes and

sensations. The novel demonstrates its own reluctance to monologise the once-occurrent being of

the Other, in this instance wherein a section is narrated by a character, by concerning itself only with

that character's relation between sensation and cognition. The voice of the Other, that which

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[3] The other sections narrated in first-person (*IJ* 37-39 and 128-135) are auspiciously written in broken/slang English, the first by Ennet House resident Clennette H, and the other by an unnamed narrator who rarely refers to him/herself with the pronoun 'I' but instead uses 'yrstruly'. It is, I theorise, demonstrative of how individual perspective is portrayed as analogous to the fractured and insufficient epistemology of the novel as a whole: both Hal's, Clennette's and yrstruly's interior narratives exemplify the way *Infinite Jest* rejects monologic authority. Indeed, the Clennette/yrstruly sections, infusing their agitation of grammar and syntax with the graphic violence of the scenes they portray, extend the inherent violence of totalising cognition to its extremity.

inaugurates and reveals alterity καθ'αὑτο, is given full ethical significance, here and elsewhere, in that it is not embedded within and does not contribute to a centralised narrative structure but instead serves to disrupt any narrative that claims the centre.

At a wider level, the ethical significance attributed to the disruptive voice plays out through Wallace's emphasis on dissociated or unidentifiable voices. Through its juxtaposition with the indulgence of the ocular that dominates *Infinite Jest*'s interrogation of film and advertising, the dissociated voice signifies as a way to redeem the addictive and fundamentally isolating forces of millennial visual media.[4] The most prominent example of this is Joelle Van Dyne, whose abnormal physical beauty eventuated her accidental facial scarring that led to her 'reincarnation' as Madame Psychosis (metempsychosis), a radio host whose show consists of five minutes of dead silence followed by a 'free associative' (*IJ* 185), nightmare-ish monologue on unpredictable topics.[5] Joelle's scarring prompted her to join the Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed, and so her physical appearance is obscured for most of her interaction with others through the novel; either with her veil or through her radio show she literalises the ethical force of dissociated voices in *Infinite Jest*. Her most ardent listener, fittingly, is Mario Incandenza, who finds in her show a respite from his every-day world, the image-saturated, and thus artificial, millennial America. Mario's response to Madame Psychosis complements the sense of ethical connection he feels when he enters Ennet House. Despite the noise and the mess made by the recovering addicts, 'Mario's felt good both times in Ennet's House because it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard someone say *God* with a straight face' (*IJ* 591). His comparable

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[4] The predominance of the ocular in *Infinite Jest* is most strikingly signified by the endnote reference to *Cage III*, one of James Incandenza's films, in which the figure of Death entices carnival goers to watch people endure 'unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that the spectators' eyes become larger and larger until the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs.' Meanwhile, the figure of Life promises other fairgoers that if they consent to endure unspeakable degradations, they will get to witness 'ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs' (*IJ* 988, en. 24). The premise of Incandenza's film thus unites the commercialisation of pleasure and the catastrophe of addiction under the banner of visual phenomena, a theme which runs through the entire novel, particularly with regards to how the item that unites its plotlines is a lethally addictive film.

[5] Madame Psychosis's name also provides one of Wallace's more discernible nods to Joyce's *Ulysses*. The Joyce/Wallace connection will be expanded below during a discussion of Dominik Steinhilber's essay on parallax in *Infinite Jest*.

reactions to Madame Psychosis's radio show and the quasi-spiritual recovery processes of the Ennet House residents amplifies the overriding ethical force of the irruptive voice in *Infinite Jest*.

By contrast, the Incandenza matriarch, Avril, is portrayed as occupying an intricately structured and externally mandated set of rules and regulations that mark her as the antithesis to the epistemic humility which constitutes *Infinite Jest*'s narrative ethics. Several of Avril's noted traits confirm her as heavily reliant on the appearance of propriety rather than valuing genuine connections with others. In this regard, both her grammatical proficiency (a precursor to Hal's lexical memory) and her ability to 'establish[…] herself in the *exact center* of any room she was in, so that from any angle she was somehow in the line of all sight' (*IJ* 521) suggest the interrelation of linguistic cognition and Levinasian totalisation. Avril's world is specifically ordered so that nothing ulterior, nothing alternate, can escape her cognitive grasp: her disavowal of 'spatial privacy or boundary' (*IJ* 511), a will to remove all thresholds, is also related to her repression of alterity. As, arguably, is her obsessive cleaning, something exaggerated by ONAN's President Johnny Gentle, leader of the Clean United States Party, whose own personal mysophobia evolves into a political merging of left-wing environmentalists and right-wing xenophobes through a combined desire to combat the 'toxic effluvia' (*IJ* 383) of both foreign waste and foreign peoples. Significantly, Gentle's manifesto is focused on 'seeing American renewal as an essentially aesthetic affair' (*IJ* 383), furthering *Infinite Jest*'s concatenation of the aesthetic necessity for cognitive totalisation and the way that necessity is necessarily impeded by ethical alterity, best represented by a voice whose source is obscured.

As the novel progresses, the sinister reasons for Avril's emphasis on the appearance of propriety are revealed (including her affairs with ETA students and the suggestion of incestuous relationships with her oldest son, Orin, and her half-brother, Charles). The etymological link between vision and espionage is also exploited by the end of the plot through the suggestion that Avril (of Canadian origin) is perhaps a spy for the Quebecois terrorists. Through such methods, *Infinite Jest* posits authoritative and centralised knowledge, correlated with vision (as antonymic to voice), as affiliated with an inherent malevolence or violence, in spite of its own existence as a voluminous and

multi-topic work of literature. Avril thus provides a model for the novel's interweaving of the

aesthetic and the ethical when it is mentioned that Mario, whilst listening to Madame Psychosis,

lowers the volume and sits close to the radio speakers 'because Avril has some auditory thing about

broadcast sound and gets the howling fantods [i.e., anxiety] from any voice that does not exit a

living, corporeal head' (*IJ* 189). Wallace extends the contrast between the visual and the vocal, which

is explicitly registered in the opening scene, in this refrain by highlighting that the Levinasian

imperative represented by the voice specifically evades visualisation and rationalisation.[6] The

authorial representation of voices, the profusion of different characters that serve as either chorus

for or counterpoint to a centralised monologism, fails to achieve the narratorial ethics that Wallace,

following Dostoevsky, seeks to inscribe within his text. Polyphonic ethics demand the impossible

representation of unrepresentable voices. Only in this way can the polyphonic narrative trace the

anarchical Saying that inaugurates both subjectivity and writing, thereby exposing the inherent

responsibility of response at the heart of all cognition.

Wallace plays with this idea throughout, not only in the opening chapter in which Hal's

'voice' prompts a cacophony of horrified and hysterical exclamations from the interview panel (*IJ* 12-

15), but also in key digressions that present several intersecting dialogues from mostly unidentified

residents of Ennet House (*IJ* 176-181 / 563-565). Moreover, *Infinite Jest* includes sections which

actively work either to obscure or caricature the symbiosis between subject and voice. Gentle's

political leanings are revealed only through the annual screening of Mario's *The ONANtiad*, a parodic

film in which key political figures are represented as puppets, and in which Gentle himself (a former

famous crooner) is soundtracked by his 'cabinet' of 'tall-coiffured black-girl puppets in shiny

imbricate-sequin dresses' (*IJ* 384). Elsewhere, an epistolary interview between Helen Steeply (OUS

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[6] With this reference, which I argue serves as a metaphor for the author's difficulty in accommodating ethical polyphony within a monologic text, Wallace brings up a fundamental component of Derridean poststructuralism, the conception of the written/grammatological as subordinate to the vocal/phonocentric within logocentrism. Though unfortunately beyond the scope of this subsection to truly assess here, it is worth noting that *Infinite Jest*'s emphasis on dissociated voices seems to endorse Derrida's disavowal of the phonocentric as emblematic of a Western ontological tradition, which would accord with my argument that *Infinite Jest*'s narrative ethics are Levinasian (considering the analogies between Levinas and Derrida that this thesis has touched upon throughout).

Agent Hugh Steeply's alter ego) and a former ETA resident Marlon Bains is implied in the text (*IJ* 663-5) but related only in the endnotes (*IJ* 1047-52): Steeply's role in the interview is subsequently condensed to a mere 'Q, Q, Q, (Q, Q[Q], Q, Q, Q), Q, Q (Q), Q, Q.' (*IJ* 665), leaving the reader to surmise the content of the questions based on Bain's answers. This technique is also employed by Helen to interview Joelle about her role in the creation of The Entertainment (*IJ* 938-941). It is a method that accentuates the gap between utterance and cognition: by reducing the speaker to the basest signifier, Wallace reminds the reader that dialogue necessarily involves the reabsorption of another's words, another's intentions, within the sphere of the subject's own reasoning, thus emphasising the trace of the Saying behind all narrative that always exists outside of the author's control.

Perhaps the most noteworthy example, however, is the 'wraith' that appears towards the end of *Infinite Jest*, primarily to a hospitalised and delirious Gately as he recovers from his gunshot wound. As becomes clear through Gately's 'voiceless' interactions with it, the wraith is the spirit of James Incandenza, fulfilling *Infinite Jest*'s intertextual nod to *Hamlet* by having the ghost of an absent patriarch materialise to a central character. Yet Jim is also the creator of The Entertainment, whose purpose, as he admits to Don, is to free himself and others, especially Hal, from the cage of postmodern isolation, to 'contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse* […]. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life' (*IJ* 838-9). And not only is Jim now removed from the world of *Infinite Jest*'s plot, able to express himself only as a phantom within someone else's fever dream, his creation has both failed in its intentions and exceeded the bounds of his control. The only mention of The Entertainment's content comes during Joelle's interview with Helen and, even then, Joelle only offers incomplete and allusive hints. Jim's authorial relationship with The Entertainment can thus be said to mirror Wallace's own relation to *Infinite Jest*.[7] A one-time authorial control,

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[7] In Jim's filmography, The Entertainment is referred to as the fifth variation of a project called *Infinite Jest*, strengthening the parallel between Jim's film and Wallace's novel.

intended as a means for communication within the anhedonic postmodern milieu, has been relinquished because that very intention, a post-Nietzschean ethical relation with the Other, necessitates the responsibility of response to unknowable alterity. Neither Jim nor Wallace can inscribe this Bakhtinian/Levinasian sense of ethics into their respective creations without enacting a Dostoevskian renunciation of authorial authority, without remaining humble before claims to epistemic control. And the scenes involving the wraith concretise this paralleling of Jim and Wallace as labouring to negotiate their aesthetic and ethical impulses as it teeters on the threshold of irrationality. The wraith's discussion of figurants in television is significant in this regard. As an individual Jim felt himself 'furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him', allowing him to identify with 'how completely *trapped* and *encaged*' figurants are in their 'mute peripheral status[es]' (*IJ* 835). The reiteration of *Infinite Jest*'s motif of imprisonment with reference to figurants compounds the novel's correlation of addiction to televisual pleasure, postmodern solipsism and an understanding of ethics that gives the discursive voice precedence over both cognition and vision. As a filmmaker, therefore, Jim committed to ensuring 'that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and that it wasn't […] just the crafted imitation of an aural chorus: it was real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora' (*IJ* 835).

Jim's creative ambition here echoes the very technique of Dostoevsky's polyphony that Wallace's own narrative ethics endeavour to emulate. Jim's wraith describes figurants in terms reminiscent of the 'voiceless slaves' (*PDP* 6) within the typically monologic novel. And understanding his art in such terms, Jim reinforces the central tension between art and life that conditions Dostoevsky's texts, and that forced the antinomy in Bakhtin's and Levinas's writings on the aesthetic. Jim's films go against the televisual grain. The ethical sensibility of a figurant-less artwork is accomplished only through diminishing its aesthetic integrity. The authorial/directorial mastery needed to create the lethal capacity of The Entertainment is evidenced by its failure as a means of communication: its transcendence of Jim's own control makes a hyperbolic contrast to the risks

involved in ethical responsibility for the unknowable Other. Meanwhile, the narrative of *Infinite Jest*

is engaged in the actualisation of a figurant-less narrative as the wraith converses with Gately. Their

interaction takes place within Don's consciousness yet extends beyond the possible boundaries of

his knowledge: the wraith references people, places, and particularly words, that Don cannot

possibly have known of prior to their discussion. The wraith even explains that it has 'no out-loud

voice of its own' and so must communicate using 'somebody's like internal brain-voice' more

commonly recognised as 'intuition or inspiration or hunches' (*IJ* 831). The wraith's voice therefore

stands as an analogy for the trace of alterity within subjective consciousness, the Saying that

inaugurates and is then betrayed by the Said. So while Jim's ghost laments his loss of authorial

control over The Entertainment, an artwork so aesthetically perfect that it grasps all otherness

within its cycle of addictive pleasure, Don's own interior narrative, which in this subsection

integrates with the novel's narrative, traces its threshold position in relation to the voice of the

Other by evincing a loss of control over internal coherence or cognition:

> and then […] into Gately's personal mind, in Gately's own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilled forces, comes the term *PIROUETTE*, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape […]. Other terms and words Gately knows he doesn't know from a divot in the sod now come crashing through his head with the same ghastly intrusive force' (*IJ* 832)

From here proceeds a list of capitalised words that, though unrelated with Gately's own plot arc,

touch upon some of the central themes of *Infinite Jest*. The disruption of Gately's own consciousness

by dissociated voices from elsewhere in the narrative emblematises the necessary internal tension

of *Infinite Jest* between monologic aesthetics and polyphonic ethics. The voice of the Other

threatens the artistic unity of the narrative, yet only by doing so does it enact the ethical break from

postmodern solipsism that *Infinite Jest* gestures towards. The impossibility of the aesthetic

representation of alterity is thus the foundation of Wallace's epistemic humility as an author. In this

respect, the workings of the novel manifest Wallace's own 'howling fantods' as he negotiates the

expression of the inexpressible.

A focus on instances of dissociated voices can hence be expanded to assess the various ways in which *Infinite Jest*'s narrative gestures beyond the possibility of a unified, monologic authority on behalf of its author, the ways in which Wallace's single voice is confronted by something that exceeds it, something that intimates the absolute alterity which constitutes Levinasian/Bakhtinian ethics. The myriad ways *Infinite Jest* makes this gesture cannot be fully recounted here, but it is worthwhile noting that the transgression of authorial authority is embedded in the intended structure of the work. In a 1996 KCRW Bookworm interview with Michael Silverblatt, Wallace revealed that *Infinite Jest* was designed to resemble a Sierpinski gasket, a self-similar pyramidal fractal.[8] The idea that informed this design, Wallace confirmed, involved a tripartite relationship being accessible at microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, whether it be narrative sequences, plot runs, character relationships or the metafictional relationship of author-work-reader.

Yet the very nature of a fractal is its infinite complexity. Fractals challenge classical geometry via the process of recursion: they occur within themselves and so exceed regular geometric definition. By conceiving of a structure for his novel based in pyramidal fractals, Wallace concedes a totalising authority over *Infinite Jest* from the beginning. The fractal form of the novel is designed to exhibit the operation of its narrative ethics, transcending authorial limits and bringing the primordial Otherness of being to the fore. *Infinite Jest* maintains this effect in numerous ways, even beyond the instances of 'failed' writing assessed above, most notably through its structural disruption of both linear plot (the temporal displacement of the chapters, the subsidisation of calendar time, the prolepsis and analepsis of the opening and closing chapters) and the process of reading (the infamous endnotes), and the emphasis on 'annulation', a term Wallace adopts to mean 'two perfectly circular motions on two distinct axes, a non-Euclidian figure on a planar surface' (*IJ* 502).[9]

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[8] 'David Foster Wallace: *Infinite Jest*', *Bookworm*, KCRW, April 11, 1996, https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest. The discussion of *Infinite Jest*'s fractal structure takes place between 00:45 and 02:20.

[9] In the plot, annulation offers a pseudo-scientific solution to the problem of regenerating nuclear waste. The significance of annulation to the novel's tense maintenance of an aesthetic and ethical narrative, however, is based in the challenging geometry of 'a cycloid on a sphere' (*IJ* 502), which allegorises the deliberate challenge to the epistemic authority of the author.

The reference here to Euclid is one of several in the novel: Euclidean geometry is also invoked in the

descriptions of depression that precede the segment on Hal's anhedonia (*IJ* 692). The fact that Hal

himself sees the terms that describe an emotional response to others as 'like so many variables in

rarefied equations' (*IJ* 694) illustrates the link between the emotionless rationalism of Euclidean

geometry and the anhedonic solipsism of postmodern America: *Infinite Jest*'s structural intimation of

a non-Euclidean geometry is thus indicative of its incorporation of polyphonic narrative ethics,

corresponding with the non-Euclidean terminology of both Levinasian (the diachronic, the

otherwise-than-being) and Bakhtinian (the threshold, the centrifugal) theory.[10] Non-Euclidean

geometry also marks another important way in which *Infinite Jest* engages with Dostoevsky: as

Timothy Jacobs's seminal intertextual analysis points out, Hal's Karamazovian prototype, Ivan,

confesses to having a 'Euclidean mind' (*BK* 235). The implication, Jacobs writes, is that *Infinite Jest*'s

numerous anhedonic characters view 'their interactions with others as merely cold intersections

with other geometrical beings'.[11]

A 2020 essay by Dominik Steinhilber for the *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* picks up

precisely on *Infinite Jest's* association of 'a Euclidean perspective with American cynicism, the

solipsism produced by postmodern irony', and subsequently how the juxtaposition between

'Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry' plays a 'central role' in the novel.[12] Though an intertextual

reading of *Infinite Jest* with Joyce's *Ulysses* rather than *The Brothers Karamazov*, Steinhilber's essay

engages with many of the arguments made previously in this thesis by understanding Wallace's

interaction with a modernist text like *Ulysses* as part of a wider scheme 'to revert to modernist

goals' as a means of transgressing beyond postmodernism, even whilst 'maintaining postmodernist

repudiations of modernism'.[13] Referencing the metamodern theories of Vermeulen and van den

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[10] Coach Schtitt's approach to tennis is also based in Euclidian geometry (*IJ* 80). As the representation of 'Old World' values, Schtitt's reliance of Euclidean dimensions offers a marker for the post-Nietzschean departure from such dimensions, the rising demand for a non-Euclidean geometry.

[11] Jacobs, 'The Brothers Incandenza', 276.

[12] Dominik Steinhilber, 'Modernist Aims with Postmodern Means: Joycean Parallax and the Doppler Effect in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* 1.3 (2020) 41-77 (55).

[13] Ibid., 70. This strategy would therefore be similar to what I term 'post-postmodernism' in the previous chapter. Steinhilber does not view Wallace's reinterpretation of Joyce specifically in terms of ethics; however, the

Akker, Steinhilber's reading focuses on Wallace's reapplication of Joyce's literary 'parallax', a term that traditionally signifies the displacement of an object when viewed from a different perspective but that, as a Joycean literary method, 'resolves the epistemological crisis of the modern experience by stressing the ultimate attainability of meaning [as] a joint effort.'[14] Steinhilber argues that Wallace seeks to reintegrate this Joycean parallax in to *Infinite Jest* in response to postmodern solipsism. Wallace therefore creates a novel consisting of 'two consecutive read-throughs', accessible from different vantage points, corresponding with the Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry of the narrative.[15] Yet despite maintaining both perspectival readings within the same text, Steinhilber argues that *Infinite Jest* enacts a metamodern 'oscillat[ion] between coexistent postmodern and modernist readings', defined as a narrative Doppler effect.[16]

Steinhilber's reversion to metamodern oscillation, rather than the conditional tension between the aesthetic and the ethical more reminiscent of *Infinite Jest*'s Karamazovian origins, stems from his reading of the way Wallace's text proposes a 'pragmatic […] change of perspective' on behalf of the reader to end the cycle of solipsist addiction to pleasure.[17] Nevertheless, for Steinhilber, Wallace's way of presenting that proposal is precisely through 'the novel's narrative structure': Steinhilber too cites the temporal and structural dislocation, the 'annular scheme', of *Infinite Jest* as the method by which Wallace 'out postmodernizes postmodernism'.[18] In either case, the overcoming of postmodern solipsism is achieved 'through an act of epistemic humility'.[19] The primary difference between metamodern oscillation and post-postmodern conditional tension is only whether one understands that act to be demanded of the reader or the author. Centralising Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial authority as the leading influence over *Infinite Jest*'s ethics

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modernist/postmodern distinction he makes (building on Boswell's initial reading of Wallace) is framed in terms of epistemology (modernist) and ontology (postmodern). By this account, when Steinhilber writes of Wallace turning 'postmodernist techniques' towards 'the modernist goals of reconciliation and resolution of an epistemological crises' (70), I believe he is doing so with a similar argument in mind to my theory of post-postmodern metaphysical homesickness.

[14] Ibid., 46.

[15] Ibid., 42.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 60.

[18] Ibid., 62/61/69.

[19] Ibid., 70.

prompts the latter understanding, yet the pragmatic humility of a metamodern reader offers an equally valid alternative. Regardless of their respective differences, the fundamental convergence of a metamodern or post-postmodern approach to how *Infinite Jest* 'thematiz[es] its own ambiguity' is the epistemic humility of the subject before unknowable alterity.[20] That Steinhilber should use for *Infinite Jest* the same terminology that Fagenblatt uses to theorise a Levinasian reading of literature underscores the importance of Levinasian responsibility (or Bakhtinian answerability) to the narrative ethics of post-postmodern literature. And though Steinhilber concentrates on Wallace and Joyce, whose own narrative heteroglossia seems reminiscent of the polyphonic impetus, the recurrence of a Levinasian idea in a reading of *Infinite Jest* cannot help but silently acknowledge Dostoevsky's influence.[21]

Infinite Jest's self-reflexive utilisation of its own structure to embed a sense of epistemic humility as the foundation for its narrative ethics is the basis of Wallace's own attempts to hold the grotesque and the banal in an uneasy union.[22] The novel's concession of its simultaneous ethical and aesthetic dimensions, in accordance with how the Saying is necessarily relegated to but traceable within the Said, is complemented by how the regular, typical and banal coexists with the unexpected, inexpressible and grotesque. Borrowing from a common trope of science-fiction, the boundaries of the ordinary are stretched but not to such an extent that neither characters nor readers can readily discern what is and is not common within their distinctive idioculture. For someone like Hal or Gately or Joelle van Dyne, as Attridge would later theorise, it enables a re-evaluation of those precise idiocultural boundaries, the only subjectively active response to their absolute passivity in response to the absolutely Other. The reduction of Hal's consciousness in the opening scene to his narration of sensation and cognition on the one hand evidences the novel's dominant theme of

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[20] Ibid., 69.
[21] For a Bakhtinian reading of Joyce, see Beryl Schlossman, 'Polyphony and Memory' In James Joyce's Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.4 (2000) 984-988.
[22] Steinhilber, 'Modernist Aims', 69.

postmodern solipsism. Yet as its closing chronological scene it also evidences how Hal, through a process of losing his own capacity to speak and thereby having the primordial responsibility of response take on greater significance in his interactions with others, is left to begin by reassessing the borders of his own cognition, remaining humble before that which he might not know or be able to express cognitively.

Hal's position here, which also resounds in the admittance of powerlessness that is a core tenet of Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous, can also be read alongside the New Sincerity movement Wallace is commonly associated with. One of the first and most influential essays on Wallace and the New Sincerity movement, Adam Kelly's 'New Sincerity in American Fiction', takes as its starting point the same call for 'passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues' that Wallace makes in his review of *The Miraculous Years* with which this thesis began.[23] And, correspondingly, Kelly recognises 'it could not simply be a question of contemporary literature returning to the precise kind of sincerity he saw as informing Dostoevsky's fiction.'[24] Kelly's argument therefore follows the timeline set forth by this thesis, particularly in the introductory chapter; Wallace's response to postmodern cynicism must find a reinterpretation of sincerity analogous to the Levinasian/Bakhtinian sense of the ethical that supplants theological and philosophical ethical ideals. And, though Kelly does not try to source Wallace's reinterpretation of sincerity in Dostoevsky's works, dismissing Dostoevsky as a venerated anachronism whose ghost cannot be invoked, he utilises Derridean theory to put forward an aporetic conception of sincerity, a post-postmodern narrative sincerity 'tied […] to the very excess of writing itself' and so necessarily 'beyond representation, beyond theoretical definition'.[25] It is almost unsurprising therefore that, around a decade before Fagenblatt published his introduction to *New Directions*, Kelly too describes Wallace's 'unconditional' New Sincerity as 'resist[ing] power and knowledge, instead inducing weakness and

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[23] Wallace, 'Jospeh Frank's Dostoevsky', p.271.
[24] Kelly, 'New Sincerity', p.134.
[25] Ibid., p.146.

epistemological humility'.[26] Wallace's indebtedness to a narrative ethics that, I argue, is sourced in

Dostoevskian polyphony, is noted as a chief characteristic of his works by scholarship that need not

focus on Dostoevsky's influence. Both Kelly's and Steinhilber's overlooking of Dostoevsky prevents

either from being able to locate him as the progenitor of the epistemic humility they read in *Infinite*

Jest. Even so, a dialogic understanding of the ethical emerges through many channels in response to

the metaphysical homesickness of the post-Nietzschean era, aggravated by the ontological solipsism

of postmodernism.

To conclude this reading of *Infinite Jest*, I return to Mario Incandenza, the neotype of

Alyosha Karamazov and the closest thing *Infinite Jest* offers to a Levinasian exemplar. However,

Mario remains in danger of being read as the novel's ethical ideal, a concept which is inherently

opposed to the Bakhtinian/Levinasian understanding of ethics manifest in the polyphonic work.

Wallace thus counterbalances Mario's seemingly innate goodness by portraying him as physically

malformed and, by virtue of his implied illegitimacy, as a reimagined representation of Smerdyakov

as well as Alyosha. Wallace augments this purposeful duality to Mario by indicating that his ethical

purity makes him almost non-human: it is suggested that Mario cannot lie (*IJ* 249 / 871), which is for

Dostoevsky (following Tiutchev) an essential component of cognition. Nor can Mario feel physical

pain (*IJ* 589) or be offended (*IJ* 784). So, although Mario is the central figure of the novel's ethical

climax, the scene involving his acquiescence to Barry Loach's plea for contact in which *The Brothers*

Karamazov is directly referenced (*IJ* 969), Wallace draws back from championing Mario as the

cornerstone to *Infinite Jest*'s ethics. Mario may serve as an example of how Levinasian ethics may

work in practice. Yet that practice is beyond the grasp of most people. Mario cannot teach anything.

The scene immediately before Loach's segment, on the other hand, concerns an assistant

district attorney who waits for Gately whilst he recovers in hospital. Gately emotionally abuses the

A.D.A. and his wife during the height of his criminal career, and even when reformed he still both

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[26] Ibid., p.143. It is perfectly feasible that Steinhilber's use of 'epistemic humility' was sourced in Kelly's essay, perhaps even unwittingly so. Steinhilber does not cite Kelly's 'New Sincerity' (although he does cite a different Kelly essay on Wallace). However, Kelly's essay (along with the other essays in Hering's collection) is foundational for Wallace studies.

feels ashamed of the incident and fears the A.D.A.'s reprisal. In the scene, however, the A.D.A.

explains his reasons for wanting to speak to Gately to Ennet House's executive director. The A.D.A. is

also a recovering alcoholic, it turns out, and as part of his Ninth Step has come to 'ask [Gately's]

forgiveness for my own failure to forgive' (*IJ* 963). In order to overcome years of resentment and

hatred towards Gately, the A.D.A. believes he has to forgive Gately for the crime, but that 'the only

way I'll be able to forgive him' (*IJ* 963) is to himself ask for Gately's forgiveness for that very hatred

and resentment, in spite of its justifiable cause.

In this respect, the A.D.A.'s story both anticipates Mario's Alyosha-like ethical gesture

towards Loach, yet also offsets the impossible standard Mario would set were he the novel's sole

ethical ideal. The A.D.A.'s own gesture, prompted by the quasi-spiritual teachings of the 12-Step

Program commented upon in Chapter 4, reads as the most 'Levinasian' incident in the novel;

although Levinasian ethics necessarily distance themselves from prescriptive or pragmatic measures,

the A.D.A.'s willingness to substitute himself for another to the point of injury or death, to take

responsibility for the persecutions he has suffered, is the most akin to Zosima's responsibility for all,

more than others, that epitomises Levinas's theories. And augmenting the A.D.A.'s role in

juxtaposing Mario's ideal standard is the fact that he cannot actually put his idea into practice. He

admits to the executive director that he has sat outside Gately's hospital room 'saying the Serenity

Prayer over and over […] and haven't been able to go in. I go and sit paralyzed outside the room for

several hours and drive home' (*IJ* 963). The A.D.A.'s story portrays the ethical in its truest Levinasian

sense, as a struggle to reconcile the ethical foundations of being for the Other with subjective self-

interest. Opposing Mario's unthinking willingness to acquiesce to Loach's request for contact, the

A.D.A. offers a more appropriate representation of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative ethics. His actions are too

based in a kind of epistemic humility, sourced in the tension between cognition and ethics, offering

no authoritative resolution.

Wallace thus contrasts the A.D.A. and Mario, not to champion one over the other but to

propose that a polyphonic sense of the ethical, which arises via the interchange of the cognitive and

discursive functions of language, lies in the space between being and its otherwise. Neither example is robbed of its ethical import: the transition from one to the other is key, as Wallace shows in two ways. Firstly, the A.D.A.'s resolve to forgive Gately is free from the demand for reciprocity. Whether Gately 'forgives or not is not the issue. It's my own side of the street I need to clean' (*IJ* 963). Whilst this position is in accordance with the asymmetrical transcendence of the Other in Levinasian ethics, the phrase the A.D.A. uses here echoes Johnny Gentle's myso-xenophobic brand of politics. Gentle's manifesto is for 'a more or less spotless America that Cleaned Up Its Own Side of the Street' (*IJ* 383). By reiterating the terminology, Wallace hints at the danger implied in taking any one ethical position as an absolute standard: the A.D.A.'s distinctive and private ethical resolve, when transfigured into a public policy, gets conflated with a type of nationalism that invites the same totalising, xenophobic zealotry Levinasian ethics developed in response to. Secondly, the A.D.A.'s own inability to ask for Gately's forgiveness is provisioned by the possibility that he may manage it one day. The final words of the segment are the admission that he has not 'yet been willing. Yet. I wish to emphasize *yet*' (*IJ* 964). The A.D.A.'s ethics, like all Levinasian ethics, are an ethics *to come*. The structural placement of his story before Mario's embellishes this point. Neither Mario nor the A.D.A. are exemplars in their own right: again, the ethical is the silent transition from the actual to the conditional, from the struggle to the ever unachievable, but nevertheless sought for, ideal. This particular sequence makes manifest at the level of both plot and structure the processes of epistemic humility as a form of narrative ethics. Like Dostoevsky's own ethical polyphony, the ethics of *Infinite Jest* are contained within the novel's narrative silence, its humble response to the inexpressibility of the voice of the Other. To trace the moments wherein the monologic authority of the novel, like the A.D.A.'s own ethical resolve, is stretched to the point of failure is to trace its ethical Saying within its aesthetic Said.

A Curse on Dostoevsky

As mentioned above, the scope and complexity of *Infinite Jest* makes it an unlikely starting point for an assessment of narrative ethics based in authorial epistemic humility. In one respect, however, the magnitude of Wallace's authoritative voice, how his novel works to proffer a sense of authorial mastery, deepens the effect of his humility: the more erudite the novel presents as, the more conspicuous its confrontation with unknowable alterity. Even so, the remaining contemporary Dostoevskian texts to be analysed offer more pertinent source material for epistemic humility as a concept: neither *The Master of Petersburg* nor *A Curse on Dostoevsky* explicitly commit to broad, state-of-the-world commentaries in the manner of *Infinite Jest*, even if it is possible to apply their treatment of 1860s Russian nihilism or the early phases of the Afghan civil war in such terms. Meanwhile, as was touched upon in Chapter 3, *Diary of a Bad Year* makes a point of treating C's authorial denunciation of 21st-century Western society in cursory terms; the novel works to undermine C's overtly disparaging essays both through its plot and its paginal structure. This is of course not to say that any of the Dostoevskian texts is somehow more or less adept at delineating the inherent tension of post-postmodern narrative ethics, evolving from Dostoevskian polyphony, within their respective aesthetic creations. There is not any one way to certify the epistemic humility of the specific texts which, this thesis claims, is indicative of Dostoevsky's legacy. Nevertheless, the narratives of the remaining texts seem to proceed with a sense of restraint or prudence when compared with the aesthetics of excess that characterises Wallace's novel. As such, my analyses of them here will focus only on the ways in which such restraint can be read as endorsing a quasi-Levinasian 'failed' or clôtural literary work.

There is an ostensible difference between *Infinite Jest* and *A Curse on Dostoevsky* in terms of authorial style. The former takes an approach that strives to both engage and awe its readers, infusing multi-clausal sentences with a wealth of information which often overflows into its protracted endnotes. Rahimi's novel, on the other hand, seems to revel in its own obscurity. It sways

between an external narrative voice and Rassoul's interior voice almost imperceptibly from its opening pages: in the immediate moments after Rassoul murders Nana Alia, the narrative embarks upon its own bewildering internal duologue that foregrounds the problem of authorial uncertainty which plagues the novel throughout,

> His terrified gaze is lost in a pool of blood, blood that streams from the old woman's skull […] then trickles towards the woman's flesh hand, which still grips a wad of notes. The money will be bloodstained.
>
> Move, Rassoul, move!
>
> Total inertia.
>
> Rassoul?
>
> What's the matter with him? What is he thinking about?
>
> *Crime and Punishment*. That's right—Raskolnikov and what became of him. (*CoD* 1-2)

The number of voices at play here, and the source of those voices, remains concealed, and this is one of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s consistent narrative tropes. Whilst *Infinite Jest* also occasionally confronts its readers with unidentifiable voices, and whilst it too takes a somewhat circuitous path to narrative obscurity by at times overwhelming its readers with information and digression, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* portrays throughout an awareness of the insufficiency of narration, constantly verging on senselessness and so making the reading process itself laborious. In this way, the novel from the start acknowledges a Levinasian sense of the unknowability of the Other, even as it juxtaposes this acknowledgement with an opening scene that depicts a murder, the totalisation of the Other at its most extreme. In doing so, the narrative augments the ambiguity over the number of voices present in the narrative: the author, the reader, Rassoul and an innumerable number of interlocutors, and, by virtue of the reference to *Crime and Punishment*, both Dostoevsky and Raskolnikov, are all arguably present in the scene. Yet the fact of the murder also allows for the possibility that every recorded utterance is merely a variant of a single voice. In a 2004 interview on an earlier novel, Rahimi states the intention behind his use of internal dialogue was 'to illustrate that [the protagonist] is alone. He hasn't another person. This is introspection.' Moreover, far from introducing a multiplicity of interlocutors both within and beyond the text, Rahimi claims the technique 'creates a disassociation with the reader', albeit 'subtle'. Instead of aligning narrator and

reader consciousness, the fragmentation of Rassoul's own thought processes (including the occasions he refers to himself in the second person) marks the asymmetry between subject and Other, emphasising the latter's unknowability.[27] The overall result is to create, or perhaps expose, the conditional possibility of multiple narratives within the same aesthetic creation, and multiple ways of reading them. In a manner similar to *Infinite Jest*, as Steinhilber understands it, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* seeks to emphasise its own singularity as a novel by manipulating the impossibility of a definitive reading (and, by extension, of a definitive authorial voice). This, as I will go on to explain, is an integral part of its wider strategy of correlating the monologism of narrative with the pervasiveness of war in post-Soviet Afghanistan. Inherent in the conditional possibility of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, following on from Dostoevsky's conditional polyphony, is the equally conditional concept of a cessation to Afghanistan's cycle of violence and vengeance.

Despite the stylistic differences between the two novels, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* and *Infinite Jest* do share some commonalities which may have stemmed from their mutual debt to Dostoevsky. As could be expected from a novel about war, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* also places an emphasis on the body, and especially on the grotesque; scenes of Rassoul's bodily functions are interspersed with the gruesome consequences of bombs and bullets on the human body. And like *Infinite Jest*, Rahimi's novel thematises its circular structure. As explored in Chapter 3, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* starts and ends with the same description of Nana Alia's murder, reinforcing Rassoul's solipsism and helping form the novel's post-postmodern impetus that desperately seeks the reintroduction of an ethical connection with others. That circularity is also key in the conditional possibility on which *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s narrative ethics are based. Comprehending Dostoevsky's aesthetic legacy in terms of epistemic humility amplifies the previous chapter's reading of Commandant Parwaiz's sacrifice: the 'failure' of the narrative can be seen as the effacement of a singular, monologic authority, an

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[27] Nadia Ali Maiwandi, 'Dialogue with Atiq Rahimi', *Afghan Magazine*, 2004 https://afghanmagazine.com/post/183898131534/dialogue-with-atiq-rahimi [accessed May 2019]. Rahimi is discussing his novel *Earth and Ashes*.

expression of polyphonic responsibility for the Other through the acknowledgement of that Other's inexpressibility.

As such, perhaps the most noteworthy trait *A Curse on Dostoevsky* shares with *Infinite Jest* is that both works portray a protagonist who cannot speak. Both Hal and Rassoul begin the linear narrative unable to talk. However, Hal's muteness is an outcome of *Infinite Jest's* plot progression. As explored above, it symbolises the multivalence of *Infinite Jest*'s conditional narrative in that, by the end of the plot, Hal's incapacity for speech engenders his singular awareness of unknowable alterity, provoking a subjective reassessment of the limits of his knowledge that, in accordance with Wallace's narrative ethics, inaugurates a Levinasian sense of responsibility for others. In this way it counterbalances a primary reading of the scene in which Hal's muteness is emblematic of both the ethical and lexical isolation with which he begins the chronological plot. Rassoul's narrative arc, on the other hand, lacks the duality of both starting and ending with the transition from muteness to speech (or vice versa). He spends more than two thirds of the novel able to communicate only via gestures or the written word; his 'confession' to Sophia, for example, is robbed of its grandiosity when she misinterprets his notebooks for poetry (*CoD* 143), further frustrating his desire that his crime have ethical and juridical consequences within the chaos of wartime Kabul. And when the unexplained reason for his lack of speech is resolved, again without explanation, it occurs in the presence of the woman with the sky-blue chador, with whom Rassoul forms a sort of obsession as the novel progresses. This woman, whom Rassoul at times confuses with Sophia and at others believes was the only witness to Nana Alia's murder, can be read as the personification of Rassoul's conscience or his inner guilt. As a witness she can validate his inner suffering by testifying to his crime. And while Rassoul must confront the fact that 'Sophia is not Sonya […] Sophia is from another world' (*CoD* 146), by perceiving the woman in the sky-blue chador to be Sophia's double, he can project onto her the pathways required to achieve a Raskolnikov-like redemption. Significantly, therefore, the woman remains silent. Rassoul reclaims his voice only to remain unable to

communicate with his interlocutor (*CoD* 168-70). She leads Rassoul to the ruins of the Kabul

Wellayat and then disappears, leaving a 'silence [that] is deeper than ever' (*CoD* 170).

Throughout the novel, therefore, Rahimi makes a metaphor of communicative failures. The

disorienting effects of the narrative style, seemingly both confirming and denying the possibility of a

dialogue that transcends the subject, is paralleled by Rassoul's own loss of voice, and this in turn

instils a wider uncertainty as to the ability of an artwork to extend beyond its own boundaries. The

internalised dialogue that begins with the novel's opening pages works to dissociate the reading

experience and thus establishes an incoherence between the singularity of the work and the

singularity of the reader. Even as a singular text *A Curse on Dostoevsky* verges on self-containment:

its narrative struggling to break from the same sense of solipsism that besets Hal Incandenza. At one

stage of the novel, Rassoul goes to see an ENT doctor for speech problems and is told that he must

work through any emotional trauma before physical trauma can be assessed. Leaving enraged,

Rassoul wanders 'again through the unsettled city until nightfall. Then he goes home and sleeps. No

nightmares' (*CoD* 95). This is because, as readers are told by the opening of the next chapter, the

'nightmare is his life. Grace is but a dream' (*CoD* 96). Consequently, however, as Rassoul 'huddles

deeper under his sheet', he is visited by the woman in the sky-blue chador who presents him with

his Adam's apple in a jewellery casket similar to the one he failed to take from Nana Alia (*CoD* 96).

This, of course, is then revealed to be a dream. Rahimi advances the prominence of nightmares in

Crime and Punishment to such an extent that *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s narrative operates through an

indistinction between dreams and waking life, and this is enhanced by the oneiric quality of the

writing style. The reader remains perpetually unsure whether the events being described are

actually occurring beyond Rassoul's consciousness, in the same way that Rassoul's attempts to

ethically communicate with others are continually checked by the isolating chaos of war.

Moreover, the thematic use of oneiric narrative to delineate communicatory failure is, as

Tobias Grey points out in an interview with the author, 'a theme that […] will continue to absorb'

Rahimi.[28] It therefore aligns with the concept of war itself, and particularly with the dictatorial

oppression inevitably following war's creation of a power vacuum which is too a predominant topic

of his work. Rahimi makes this alignment clear in a different interview, this time with J. K. Fowler

undertaken shortly after the completion of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, lamenting how the pre-

communist constitutional monarchy in Afghanistan, substantiated by the 1964 Constitution, gave

way to Soviet, and then fundamentalist, dictatorships. In the years between the 1973 Afghan *coup*

d'état and the 2001 U.S. invasion, Rahimi declares,

> everything changed: the mentality and the confidence of people. Everybody had confidence before
> but no more. When you lose your confidence, you are afraid of everything, you don't believe in
> everything […] and you don't have any confidence in yourself. And this is the beginning of the
> destruction of the culture, of identity; when you don't believe in you, you don't believe in your
> country, you don't believe in your identity.[29]

The narrative style of *A Curse on Dostoevsky* reflects the identity crisis brought about by

Afghanistan's succession of political power struggles, the various factions which sought to repress

dissent. Albeit in markedly different circumstances, *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s conception of

subjectivity is comparable with *Infinite Jest*'s: Hal and Rassoul are both responding to the dislocated

reality of disintegrated epistemological or ontological certainty that, as mentioned in the previous

chapter whilst discussing Wallace, questions the possibility of a knowing subject. And for both novels

that response manifests as the loss of voice. In the Fowler interview, Rahimi goes on to specifically

relate the repression of speech with the violence of war:

> in countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and other dictatorships, voice becomes very important. So in
> Europe or the United States, the question is "to be or not to be?" But in Afghanistan with a dictator,
> the question becomes, "to say or not to say?" Because the voice does not exist here. You cannot love
> your life and say things opposite to government opinion. […] As a writer, I know that words are very
> important. In the beginning it was the verb. I believe that because if you don't have voice, if you
> cannot explain everything, you do some things to express yourself and take what is bottled inside and
> let it outside. Why is there all of this violence in Afghanistan? Because we don't have voice. This is a

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[28] Tobias Grey, 'Interview: Atiq Rahimi on language and expression in Afghanistan', *FT.com*, Nov 29, 2013,
https://www.ft.com/content/1d4ba53a-5361-11e3-b425-00144feabdc0 [accessed May 2019].

[29] J. K. Fowler, 'Literary Currents Series: An Interview with Atiq Rahimi', *The Mantle*, March 7, 2011,
https://www.themantle.com/literature/literary-currents-series-interview-atiq-rahimi [accessed May 2019]. This period is
covered by the fourth chapter of Barfield's *Afghanistan*. His subsection on the fall of the Musahibans (pp.210-225), from
the 1964 constitution, through the *coup d'état* to the Saur revolution of 1978, counters Rahimi's romanticised imagery of
the pre-communist constitutional monarchy. The changes wrought by the Constitution, Barfield argues, were superficial:
'no political parties were permitted, and real power remained in the hands of the king and his relatives.' Even so, the new
parliament 'became a place of lively debate' (p.211), which is more befitting of Rahimi's association between present-day
Afghanistan and an unreliable narrative voice.

very human characteristic. When children cannot say things, they become very frustrated. And if we don't talk, we do violent things. To change the combat to debate, this is the voice.[30]

Rahimi's position here harks back to Chapter 2's discussion of the preface of *Totality and Infinity*. The concept of an abstract and universalising metaphysical truth, striving to enact a Bakhtinian finalisation of being was reconceived by Levinas as the 'permanent possibility of war'. Bakhtin and Levinas, and now Rahimi, solidify their opposition to totalitarianism through a championing of the voice as the site of ethics. Such was the foundational theory that supported the opening chapters of this thesis. The structural nature of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, however, allows for an extension of this principal antagonism between totality and voice by thematising the relation between totality, in its most extreme form as war, and the literary work itself. Following directly from the conditionality of Dostoevsky's polyphonic ethics within the monologic text, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* parallels its own existence with war's solipsistic chaos, thus demanding its own failure (i.e., the failure of its monologic coherence) be the pathway to war's end.

Revisiting the consideration of 'Reality and Its Shadow' made in Part III of this chapter offers a starting point for the reading of Rahimi's novel. As has been argued so far, the hindrance of language's discursive, and thus ethical, function that is shown as both the cause and effect of war in *A Curse on Dostoevsky* is formalised by the narrative's bewildering dissociation of narrator, character and reader, by Rassoul's own loss of discursivity, and by its circular plot. The prominence of these narrative features with regards to rhetorical ethics is foreshadowed in Levinas's essay by his critique of the voiceless enslavement of characters in a traditional novel. Levinas writes that the characters in a book are 'committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts'. Their history, he argues, 'is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway.' As noted in Chapter 5, there is a stark overlap between Levinas and the tone of *Problems*: in either case, the 'ending' of *A Curse on Dostoevsky* in which Rassoul retells his story to the Wellayat clerk using the same words that opened the novel seems an apt example for the infinite repetition of artistic monologism. This position is reinforced by

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[30] Fowler, 'An Interview'.

Fagenblatt who notes that such Levinasian (and, by implication, Bakhtinian) sentiments rouse the Platonic suspicion of mimetic idols, conceiving of artwork in terms of its 'formal structure of completion.'

The way Rassoul's infinite repetition is itself at the heart of war's absurdity is therefore indicative of the correlation between war and monologism on which Rahimi's narrative operates. The epistemic humility that Rahimi derives from Dostoevsky's polyphony has at its root an understanding of the artist as the perpetrator of war, of the author as dictatorial authority. An anti-war novel thereby becomes an impossible condition. Toward's the end of the novel, during Rassoul's final embrace with Sophia (who is now wearing a sky-blue chador) he wistfully promises to build for her 'the Valley of Infans Regained', equating the innocence of childhood and a Miltonic sense of paradise with the etymological inability to speak. In the beautiful valley 'where no one speaks', no one 'has ever experienced evil' (*CoD* 248) because in the world of the novel language is correlative with war.[31] *A Curse on Dostoevsky* struggles both for coherence and for progress precisely because it is always already at the point of self-implosion, always fighting against the betrayal of the Saying by the very Said of which it is composed.

This peculiarity stems from the uniqueness of war in Afghanistan, as Rahimi understands it. War in Afghanistan has transcended the status of 'permanent possibility', a potential obscured by abstract philosophical universalism, to hold in and of itself the formal structure of completion. Through changes in political regimes and factions, from the PDPA to the Soviet Union, the *mujahideen*, the Taliban, and to Western intervention, war has become Afghanistan's fixed value, its closed circuit. To follow Steinhilber's reading of *Infinite Jest*, war in *A Curse on Dostoevsky* has

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[31] It is also worth noting that Milton's *Paradise Regained* is a retelling of the temptation of Christ from the Gospel of Luke, which is of course a key point of reference for *The Brothers Karamazov*, and forms part of The Grand Inquisitor's debate with Christ. Within a novel about war, it is also hard not to make the connection between 'infans' and infantry. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* (https://www.etymonline.com/word/infantry) explains how 'infantry' incorporates 'infant' because historically the infantry was composed of child soldiers too inexperienced to ride in the cavalry. Rahmi may also be juxtaposing the innocence of childhood and the catastrophic totalisation of war: as will be pointed out shortly, Commandant Parwaiz's sacrificial suicide is partly prompted by the death of a child (which too plays such a significant role in Ivan's 'rebellion' against faith). Finally, the etymology of infancy is also invoked by *Infinite Jest*. The importance infancy to Wallace's novel is discussed in relation to Jacques Lacan by Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp.128-132 / 151-160.

assumed the stability of Euclidean geometry. Yet unlike Wallace, Rahimi does not layer his novel

with annular strategies to generate a second reading *within* the text, one that is able to hold itself in

an uneasy tension (or metamodern oscillation) between the Euclidean and the non-Euclidean. The

ceaselessness of war in *A Curse on Dostoevsky* compels the narrative to source its ethical dynamic

beyond the text, allowing for a concord of its own aesthetic self-maintenance and ethical self-

effacement even when the former category perpetuates war's violence. The novel's narrative ethics

come into play only once the text itself is complete. Such a recondite interpretation of Dostoevskian

polyphony is revealed in its final line. As mentioned, the narrative comes full circle, repeating the

opening page word-for-word, although shifting from plain to italicised text to signify that the words

have become recorded within the text's action rather than revealing it.[32] Yet after '*the money will be*

bloodstained', the novel breaks from the internal dialogue that constitutes the opening pages,

instead ending with an ellipsis and a question from the Wellayat law clerk who is reading the words

aloud to Rassoul: '… So, tell me, why didn't you take the money?' (*CoD* 250).

Though seemingly understated, this ending carries the weight of *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s

narrative ethics, if such ethics are understood as given precedence by the epistemic humility of

Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial authority. On the surface, it indicates the refreshment of the

novel's cycle of war: the ellipsis marks the end of the previous iteration and the clerk's question

brings about the latest one. The nature of the question reflects the frustration Rassoul suffers from

throughout the novel: his quest for the validity of ethics within the absurdity of a warzone is the

basis of his quasi-postmodern solipsism, and it remains thwarted by the clerk's question which once

more implies that murder is ordinary, whilst the refusal of self-gain is questionable. And a reading

that remains within the boundaries of the text, in the same way that Rassoul's 'dialogue' seems to

remain within the boundaries of his own mind (enhanced by his inability to communicate), is left

solely with a message that insinuates the eternality of violence and vengeance. Yet, as mentioned in

Chapter 3, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* persists in its own existence despite appearing to endorse only the

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[32] There is, however, one missing comma from the ending section. This may or may not be deliberate.

failure of political ethics at a particular moment in history. Something must have changed between the novel's opening and its end in order for its existence to be justified. And the concept of authorial humility elucidates the attention that must therefore be switched to the journey rather than the destination. The focus must be switched from the law clerk's question to the questions the law clerk does not ask, questions the nature of the novel inevitably raises but refuses to utter for fear of subsuming them within monologic violence. Rahimi's novel advocates the apotheosis of authorial humility, the negation of ethical utterance, as the means by which its cycle of warfare can be broken, the non-Euclidean tangent that can exist only in the conditional. The novel's correlation of violence and authorship means that it cannot escape itself as a single entity except by gesturing towards what is not written. The reader in this sense becomes the infinite Other, and Rahimi's responsibility towards the Other plays out as a refusal to incorporate his 'response' to the reader within the confines of the Said, of the text itself. In this way *A Curse on Dostoevsky* attempts to instantiate the purity of polyphonic silence. The 'second' novel is neither written nor read, but it nevertheless exists as an 'un-uttered' thought. The prototype for Rahimi's non-scriptural gesture is Commandant Parwaiz; by the end of the novel Parwaiz's troops achieve retribution for the man who killed his adopted son but, upon hearing that the man's wife and child were caught up in the bloodshed, Parwaiz hangs himself with the rope intended for Rassoul. He leaves a note asking for mourning, not vengeance. Yet though this Levinasian act saves Rassoul's life, it neither ensures his redemption nor effectuates change in the Afghanistan that Rahimi portrays. However, it foreshadows Rahimi's own sacrificial 'suicide', operating in the truest Levinasian sense without guarantee of success. Significantly, therefore, Parwaiz's suicide is not described in the novel: he is discovered only when soldiers attempt to carry out Rassoul's execution. The most compelling ethical act in the novel happens in an un-actualised reality beyond the text.

This is how *A Curse on Dostoevsky* negotiates the interaction between the Euclidean and the non-Euclidean, centripetal rhythm and centrifugal loopholes, the aesthetic and the ethical. It is Rahimi's hesitancy before the written and the unwritten text that identifies his narrative ethics as

characteristically polyphonic. Concluding his interview with Fowler, Rahimi responds to a question

about the prevalence of dream imagery in his work by saying that 'the novel is not reality but the

possibility. For me, everything that I write is a possibility. This is a possible world.'[33] The reality of *A*

Curse on Dostoevsky is a cycle of war, chaos and death. The ethics of such a world therefore

manifest in Rahimi's possible novel.

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[33] Fowler, 'An Interview'.

Chapter 8 – *The Master of Petersburg / Diary of a Bad Year*

The Master of Petersburg

In her contribution to a 2009 collection of critical essays on Coetzee, Katy Iddiols quotes an interview

Coetzee gave with the renowned South African academic Tony Morphet.[1] This interview took place

in 1987, seven years before the 1994 publication of *The Master of Petersburg*. 1994 was also the

year South Africa held its first general election in which citizens of every race were eligible to vote,

marking the end of the apartheid era. As such, the Morphet interview has a distinct historical

backdrop, the socio-cultural context immediately preceding the negotiations which signalled the

demise of apartheid, aligning with the refreshed ethical impulse of post-postmodern literature. In

the interview, Morphet comments on a particular aspect of Coetzee's novelistic style, the way his

writing 'throws into doubt the whole significance of created meanings'.[2] He then asks whether

Coetzee would 'accept the implication that your work contradicts the idea of a "master narrative".'

Coetzee, however, refuses to be trapped by agreeing to Morphet's implication. To do so, he replies

would thereby 'produce a master narrative for a set of texts that claim to deny all master

narratives.'[3]

Coetzee replies in a way that anticipates my reading of *Master*, as well as the novelistic

mastery I will later interrogate in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The play between mastery and its

denouncement, neither of which in itself accords with Coetzee's ethical impetus which, I claim, is

sourced in his polyphony-inspired epistemic humility, forms the crux of this chapter. For my reading

of *Diary of a Bad Year*, it is the basis of both C's and Coetzee's vacillation before rhetorical mastery

and the oxymoronic idea of 'ethical mastery' that Dostoevsky represents. I will argue, however, that

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[1] Katy Iddiols, 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies' in Elleke Boehmer et al. (eds.), *J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory* (London: Continuum, 2009) pp.185-97 (p.191).
[2] Tony Morphet, 'Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987', *TriQuarterly* 69 (1987) 454-464 (464).
[3] Ibid.

both meanings of 'master' are embedded in Coetzee's reference to Dostoevsky as 'the master of

Petersburg'. I will begin by analysing how *Master*'s narrative and structure is established precisely to

disturb the reading process by thematising the deferral of readerly catharsis. Coetzee's tactic here,

as other critics have noted, can be read in ethical terms, specifically with regards to the breach of

cognition which characterises the ethical in Levinasian theory. In this reading, therefore, I intend to

build upon the works of previous critics by arguing that the distinction between Saying and its

incorporation by the Said as it is portrayed in *The Master of Petersburg* manifests as the intensified

perversity of the novel, a perversity which reveals Coetzee's epistemic humility as he negotiates

between polyphonic ethics and the monologic necessity for aesthetic cognition.

Iddiols uses Coetzee's interview with Morphet to help her identify in Coetzee's novels the deliberate

disruption of what she calls 'inauthentic reading'. Her claim is that Coetzee 'refuses to allow his

fiction to be reduced to inauthentic, singular interpretations by making it virtually impossible to be

read and appropriated in this way.'[4] An inauthentic reading 'appropriat[es] the text through our

interpretative attempts, either consciously or unconsciously, in order to reflect and confirm our self-

perceived hegemonic comprehension of it'.[5] To disrupt such readings, explains Iddiols, Coetzee

develops 'strategies […] to complicate and disrupt our hermeneutic attempts' causing his readers 'to

rethink the ethics of interpretation'.[6] Such strategies would therefore be affiliated with the

epistemic humility Coetzee, as a writer, confronts in his texts, producing the kind of *clôtural* writing

that acknowledges the insufficiency of language to relate the ethical even as it acquiesces to the

necessity of signification.

Morphet does not build upon his suggestion that Coetzee's work disorients created

meanings. Meanwhile, Iddiols's essay only touches briefly on *The Master of Petersburg*, gesturing at

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[4] Iddiols, 'Disrupting Inauthentic Readings', p.196.
[5] Ibid., p.187.
[6] Ibid., p.196.

but not detailing the novel's 'deliberately inflicted confusion'.[7] Nevertheless, even an elementary

analysis of *Master*'s composition reveals that which Morphet and Iddiols note, along with other

academics whose critiques will be discussed below. At a remove from the intricacies of its style,

Master's very plot and context invites disconcertion. The historical and fictional blend on which it is

based sets up reader expectations which it then cannot but fall short of (or it would otherwise be an

historical biography). And Coetzee plays into this. On the one hand he delays the revelation that

Dostoevsky is the protagonist until the novel's fifth chapter (*MoP* 34), a potentially needless gesture

considering the way press releases, newspaper reviews and jacket blurbs direct readers towards

newly published novels. On the other hand, part of *Master*'s power as a novel comes from the way

its readers, once aware that it concerns a fictionalised Dostoevsky, are driven to seek parallels

between his fictional portrayal and his historical life. *Master* opens not with a name but with a time,

'October 1969' (*MoP* 1), so that readers are eventually able to situate the historical Dostoevsky: they

know that *Demons* is the next novel the historical Dostoevsky will publish, and so can search the text

for the fictional context of its historical composition. Central to this, in the first instance, is Sergei

Nechaev. Any reader with the knowledge that the historical Nechaev was the inspiration for Pyotr

Verkhovensky is thus impelled to approach Coetzee's Nechaev as the basis for Dostoevsky's

Verkhovensky, an anachronism that Coetzee's approach exploits as part of his wider design, in

Iddiols's phrasing, to disrupt inauthentic readings. A similar approach can be found in Pyotr Ivanov, a

police 'watcher' (i.e., spy) in *Master* who shares his surname with Ivan Ivanov, the student murdered

by Nechaev whose demise is portrayed through Shatov in *Demons*. Pyotr Ivanov is too murdered on

the fictional Nechaev's orders, yet his brief appearance in *Master* hampers an easy parallel between

him and Shatov: Pyotr Ivanov is an elderly beggar, 'worn down by years and by disgrace' (*MoP* 86)

and smelling of 'putrid fish' (*MoP* 84) whom Dostoevsky shelters for a night and then with relief gets

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[7] Ibid., p.193.

rid of.[8] As with Nechaev, Coetzee's strategy is to condition and then frustrate the potential

preconceptions of his readers, thereby exposing the absolute alterity of singular literature in all its

ethical implications. The text, corresponding with the Levinasian Other, cannot be anticipated in

advance.

And such deliberately inflicted confusion is evident within the narrative itself. *Master*'s style

in this respect is not wholly dissimilar from *A Curse on Dostoevsky*. Both seemingly work to dismantle

the artifice of a coherent and unproblematic narrative. Dreams, daydreams and half-memories

suffuse the narration of *Master* like they do in Rahimi's novel, although instead of the chaos of war it

is Dostoevsky's own grief for his lost son that bewilders him. In *Master*'s fourth chapter, for example,

Dostoevsky occupies Pavel's former room, a room 'that is and is not his' (*MoP* 23), holding the white

suit Pavel used to wear in an attempt to resurrect any lingering trace of him. In a passage that

demonstrates *Master*'s narrative style, Dostoevsky

> is sitting on the bed with the white suit in his lap. There is no one to see him. Nothing has changed. He feels the cord of love that goes from his heart to his son's as physically as if it were a rope. He feels the rope twist and wring his heart. He groans aloud. 'Yes!' he whispers, welcoming the pain; he reaches out and gives the rope another twist. (*MoP* 23)

At this point Matryona, the daughter of the landlady Anna Sergeyevna, enters with a question about

Dostoevsky's dinner plans. From the vivid imagery of the previous paragraph, the scene diminishes

into a mundane conversation between them, and then ignites once more:

> he is struck by the fine line of her temple and cheekbone, the dark, liquid eyes, the dark brows, the hair blonde as corn. There is a rush of feeling in him, contradictory, like two waves slapping against each other: an urge to protect her, an urge to lash out at her because she is alive.
> Good that I am shut away, he thinks. As I am now, I am not fit for humankind.
> He waits for her to say something. He wants her to speak. […] He raises his eyes to her. Nothing is veiled. He stares at her with what can only be nakedness. […]
> He is aware, even as it unfolds, that this is a passage he will not forget and may even one day work into his writing. (*MoP* 23-24)

This extended passage reveals Coetzee's overriding mode in *Master*. The first section flits from

monotonous to animated prose and back again without warning. Such animation is itself obscure,

however. A cord of love turns into a tortuous rope, yet it is a welcome torture for reasons that can

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[8] *Master* also relates a story concerning Pavel and the neighbours of his aunt in Tver, a drunkard names Captain Lebyatkin and his physically and psychologically disabled sister, Maria Timofeyevna (*MoP* 72-74), further evidence of Coetzee's deliberate courting of associations between *Master* and *Demons*.

be conjectured (a connection with Pavel, a desire for oblivion) but are left unexplained. The metaphorical rope then changes to a physical one that Dostoevsky can reach out and twist, before disappearing with the same banality with which Matryona enters. The second passage works with similar elements, mixing enigmatic impulses and unresolved thoughts. Dostoevsky's ambivalence over whether to protect or harm Matryona is paralleled by the narrative's own ambiguity concerning the meaning of the scene. It is both a confession and a plea for mercy. Dostoevsky is both to be reviled for his intentions and pitied for his own seeming inability to control his emotional state.

Moreover, Coetzee again courts an anachronistic reading of the scene through making a clear reference to *Demons*: his very mention that Dostoevsky may one day 'work into his writing' his encounter with Matryona recalls the censored chapter from *Demons* that tells of Stavrogin's seduction and emotional torture of a child of the same name. This reference is endorsed by *Master*'s final chapter, named 'Stavrogin', in which the figures of Pavel and Nechaev merge in Dostoevsky's mind as he creates *Demons*'s most notorious character. And although 'Stavrogin' appears at the end of the novel, Coetzee prefaces *Master* with a contents page that includes chapter titles. It effectively leaves a reader aware of Dostoevsky's own work in no doubt that Coetzee's character Matryona is in some way intended as a fictionalised origin story for Stavrogin's confession in *Demons*. Coetzee hence induces his readers to affirm in their own minds the insinuated sexuality of the scene. Dostoevsky's emphasis on Matryona's physicality and the fact that his emotional stance before her is described as 'nakedness' infuses the encounter with a sinisterness that is augmented by a prior knowledge of *Demons*: the violence of the fictional Dostoevsky's desire to 'lash out' at Matryona (narratively paralleled by the 'slapping' waves) and his confession that he is 'not fit for humankind' evokes Stavrogin's sexual violation of Matryosha (*Demons* 696) and the eventual suicide of both Stavrogin (*Demons* 678) and his victim (*Demons* 700). It is a tactic that Coetzee frequently employs in *Master*: several scenes which feature the fictional Dostoevsky and Matryona involve the understated suggestion of predatory sexual attraction, yet at the same time suggests an ambiguity or irresolution concerning its overt expression. In one instance Dostoevsky betrays his 'envy' (*MoP* 156) of the

quasi-sibling friendship between Matryona and Nechaev. Later, pondering upon Nechaev's 'comical and sinister' disguising himself as a woman to evade police detection, asks to himself from where 'did Nechaev get the curls [for his wig] – from one of his sisters? How many little sisters does he have, all itching to snip off their maiden locks for him?' (*MoP* 163) That Matryona is earlier described as Nechaev's 'Little sister' (*MoP* 156) thus connotes, but does not explicitly articulate, that Dostoevsky's rivalry with Nechaev is sexual. The use of euphemism here, such as the double meaning of 'maiden' as both youthful and virginal and the related parallel between snipping hair and tearing the hymen, further demonstrates how such ambiguity is ingrained within the narrative itself. The implication of Dostoevsky's taboo fantasies is apparent, but it requires external participation to actualise, an externality that is aggrandised by the intertextual relationship between *Master* and its Dostoevskian precursor, *Demons*. The narrative equivocation ensures that its internal catharsis of the fictional Dostoevsky's desires remains in the conditional. Whether he does or does not bring about Stavrogin's abuse of Matryosha is left for the reader to determine.

 The fictional Dostoevsky's sexual jealousy of Nechaev is just one instance of the recurrence of his umbral desire for Matryona throughout *Master*. Elsewhere, it materialises as a similar jealousy of his deceased stepson Pavel, especially when Dostoevsky imagines a union between Pavel and Matryona through an analogy with 'a little terracotta statue he saw in the ethnographic museum in Berlin' (*MoP* 76). Again, the use of figurative imagery is important in displaying how the idea of Dostoevsky and Matryona is only suggestive. The fantasy itself is never explicitly stated; whilst Dostoevsky's 'imagination seems to have no bounds' in conceiving of 'this child in her ecstasy' (*MoP* 76), the narrative is not equivalently uninhibited. In a different instance, whilst chiding Matryona for her association with Nechaev, he is confronted by a 'glance that is at once shameless and derisive' and a 'taunting, provocative smile', before Matryona's expression again reverts back to 'a child as before, confused, ashamed' (*MoP* 213). Significantly, Dostoevsky describes this particular encounter as having come 'not from the world he knows but from another existence' (*MoP* 213).

It is this latter instance that most explicitly reveals the layering between plot and narrative that is at the heart of *The Master of Petersburg*, which in turn is fundamental to assessing Coetzee's epistemic humility as an extension of the historical Dostoevsky's own hesitancy before polyphonic ethics and monologic aesthetics. The unexpressed yet traceable predatory desire that runs up against the fictional Dostoevsky's conscious bewilderment at his inner thoughts, his concomitant need to protect Matryona and the narrative's own refusal to candidly articulate that desire, is put across in a manner akin to the interplay between the cognitive and discursive functions of language within a literary text. In Dostoevsky's own works this interplay is rooted in the ineffableness of the 'higher reality' of his Orthodox faith, leading to the analysis of Dostoevsky's 'literary apophaticism' that I undertook in Chapter 6. Meanwhile, throughout this thesis I have taken the same interplay to be crucial for understanding Dostoevsky's narrative ethics, the instance of the Levinasian Saying presupposed by but incorporated within the Said. In *The Master of Petersburg*, however, the imbrication of narrative and plot exposes how the inexpressibility of literary ethics is framed in terms of the deferral or frustration of desire, which in fact parallels it with the unarticulated, sinister yearnings which drive the plot action. That aspect of Matryona which compels the fictional Dostoevsky, described as having come from 'another existence' outside of the world he knows, decidedly corresponds with the transcendence of the Other in Levinasian theory, as well as with the way that transcendence is reconfigured by Derek Attridge to stand for the 'singularity' of the literary text. That which marks the ethical in a Levinasian sense, or in a literary sense as given precedence by Dostoevskian polyphony, is precisely the most unethical component of *The Master of Petersburg* at the level of plot. It is in this respect fitting that *Master*'s denouement, a kind of sublimation for the fictional Dostoevsky's lack of sexual catharsis, is a literary event, an event of reading. Dostoevsky composes an early prototype of Stavrogin's confession by merging his memories of Pavel with his impressions of Nechaev. Dostoevsky then leaves the draft papers open on a table for Matryona to read, an act he describes as 'an assault upon the innocence of a child' (*MoP* 249). Yet even this 'assault' is contingent on her reading the papers and deriving from them the same intentions that

went into his writing. Once more the plot reiterates the method of the narrative by extending its textual climax beyond the boundaries of the text itself. The 'assault' on Matryona, if it happens at all, happens outside of textual expression. The text can only gesture towards it.

Nor does this layering between narrative form and plot action exclusively relate to the deferral of heinous sexual desire. The unattainability of a longed-for object is the thread that ties together *Master*'s other central themes. Nechaev's revolutionary activities are portrayed in a similar manner: Dostoevsky describes Nechaev as 'an extremist of the senses. He wants to live in a body at the limits of sensation, at the limits of bodily knowledge. That is why he can say *everything is permitted*' (*MoP* 114). And the same idea epitomises *Master*'s occasional references to Dostoevsky's gambling addiction. As with the intertextual anachronism of 'everything is permitted', Coetzee is once more drawing upon his readers' potential extra-textual knowledge of the historical Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's real-life gambling addiction allows his fictional counterpart to recognise Nechaev as 'the kind who gambles', because that kind are 'never satisfied' and are 'always greedy for more' (*MoP* 158). Dostoevsky's capacity to recognise the sensualism and addiction-oriented tendencies of Nechaev in himself further contributes to the alignment of all such tendencies under the rubric of the tension between writing of being and the otherwise than being which cannot be written about. Dostoevsky the writer is as much a sensualist as Nechaev the revolutionary.

Perhaps the ultimate exemplification of *Master*'s preoccupation with insatiable desire is the prominence of death itself to the plot. It is Pavel's death and Dostoevsky's desire to either resurrect him or somehow associate with him beyond death that motivates the plot more than anything else. Alongside this, there is the suggestion that Pavel's death was a suicide, which brings once more to Dostoevsky's mind the idea of 'sensualists', except that this time such sensualists are 'hungering for the ecstasy of death' (*MoP* 104) rather than sexual, revolutionary or gambling catharsis. Needless to say, either resurrecting or joining Pavel is beyond Dostoevsky's cognitive grasp, and so death too is conflated with writing and expression in *Master*, not only in the final scene as Dostoevsky conjures

Stavrogin partially from Pavel's memory, but also on occasions (*MoP* 5/60-61) in which Dostoevsky

seeks to recall Pavel by repeatedly uttering his name.

In this way, Coetzee aligns sex, revolution, death and gambling with literature itself. In the

novel, all coalesce around the desire for and expectation of transcendence, and its postponement or

denial of that transcendence. Coetzee enhances this by ingraining desire and the expectation of

catharsis within the narrative, both through the erratic writing style and the intertextual references

to the historical Dostoevsky and his novels. To read about Matryona is to expect Stavrogin, and yet

Master ends with neither violation nor suicide actualised within the text. As with a gambler's

definitive victory over the house, or the utopian society dreamed of by the revolutionary, *The*

Master of Petersburg sets itself up just before a climactic moment, only to infinitely delay it. And

this, I have been arguing, constitutes its analogy with the unknowability of the transcendent Other in

Levinasian theory. Indeed, the frustration of desire is fundamental to Levinasian ethics: Levinas

opens *Totality and Infinity* with a segment titled 'Desire for the Invisible', which theorises the rise

and maintenance of metaphysics as a desire which 'tends towards *something else entirely*, toward

the absolutely other' (*TI* 33). It is a desire to totalise 'an absolute, unanticipatable alterity' (*TI* 34),

and can thus be correlated with the various avenues to catharsis mentioned above. And, because

absolute alterity is beyond the reach of the same, it is 'a desire that can not be satisfied' (*TI* 34). As

mentioned back in Chapter 1, it is the frustration of this desire that inaugurates ethical subjectivity:

the exercise of desire provokes subjective freedom (for totalisation / for cognition), a freedom both

realised by and thus indebted to the alterity which cannot be consumed.

In *Master*, then, Coetzee seeks to countenance a sense of the ethical that accords with

Levinasian ethics, yet as a writer he must, like Dostoevsky, contend with the ineffability of the ethical

as such. His response is to thematise within the novel the way the unknowable alterity of the Other

runs up against a writer's 'refusal to accept the limits of what he is permitted to know' (*MoP* 71).

Master's epistemic humility emerges from this contrast. It is both the fictional Dostoevsky's and

Coetzee's writerly affliction to seek, yet be unable to find, ever new forms of otherness that might

effectuate the cathartic grasping of transcendent alterity and thus satisfy the metaphysical desire

that founds the subject. Moreover, when considering the reprehensible actions and ideas which are

conflated in *Master* with the metaphysical desire tending towards absolute alterity, that affliction

stands on the threshold between humility and humiliation. It is as though Coetzee's thematisation of

the writer's desire to express the inexpressible transfigures into a humility that courts humiliation,

that tests the extremity of a culture's moral sensibility in order to exemplify the absolute alterity

that marks the ethical instant.[9]

Derek Attridge's chapter on *Master* in his *The Ethics of Reading*, his monograph on Coetzee's

first eleven novels which serves as a corollary of *The Singularity of Literature*, takes a comparable

approach to the novel's 'disturbing singularity'.[10] He too claims that *Master* 'presents a vision of the

writing process […] as having nothing to do with traditional understandings of ethics, or with human

responsibility—only responsibility to and for the new, unanticipatable, thing that is coming into

being.'[11] In this respect, he focuses primarily on two scenes, the aforementioned 'Stavrogin' chapter

and an episode from the chapter concerning Ivanov in which the fictional Dostoevsky is awoken

from a dream by the wail of a dog, mistaking its cry in his slumberous state with Pavel's voice. The

peculiarity of this scene, which further demonstrates *Master*'s stylised discordance, comes when

Dostoevsky, understanding the cry to be from a dog, overrides his own 'specious, contemptible'

(*MoP* 81) reasoning and, with seeming reluctance, leaves his lodgings to find and comfort it. In

another example of *Master*'s concatenation of narrative style and plot to convey the conflict

between expression and the inexpressible, Dostoevsky tells himself that the howl is

> a dog, not a wolf; a dog, not his son. Therefore? Therefore he must throw off this lethargy! *Because* it
> is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his
> son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he
> expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects
> what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within
> paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect. (*MoP* 80)

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[9] Both 'humility' and 'humiliation' are derived from the Latin word 'humilis' ('humble'). See The Online Etymology
Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/humiliation [accessed 28.12.21].
[10] Attridge, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.134.
[11] Ibid., p.132-133.

Attridge uses this scene to develop his own reading of *The Master of Petersburg* in terms of the Derridean theory of the 'arrivant', the aporetic arrival of that which is other, whose coming cannot be anticipated but must be expected. Encompassing the French verb 'arriver' ('to happen'), the 'arrivant' can also imply 'a happening [...] that brings otherness into being', in which the ineluctable accusative-ness of the subject is revealed in all its contradictoriness. Attridge thus claims that the scene involving the dog exemplifies the wider ethical focus of the novel: it is 'a novel of waiting [...] without any clear sense of what would constitute the longed-for arrival'.[12] In this sense the *arrivant* relates to the idea of an endlessly deferred catharsis which constitutes Coetzee's engagement, in *Master* at least, with the historical Dostoevsky's own ethical polyphony. The 'wholly new', which upsets the dichotomy of familiar and unfamiliar, is thus conceived by Attridge in distinctly Levinasian terms as 'an appeal from the other which comes from outside any structure of moral obligation'.[13] Attridge here expounds on a dialogic sense of the ethical that supersedes pre-Nietzschean ethical abstractions, which Coetzee's novel both locates in Dostoevsky's fiction and investigates on its own terms. Over and above externally mandated moral categories, the authorial obligation that both Dostoevsky (historical and fictional) and Coetzee, as writers, are consumed by 'presents itself not as a simple *alternative* to moral behaviour, but as a responsibility that stubbornly remains when all the needs of morality have been answered.'[14] Again, the epistemic humility of the author is invoked, yet *Master* takes such humility to its most extreme degree in its final scene by thematising an act that, by any modern standard of morality, is both 'unthinkable' and 'unspeakable' (in the sense that it is impermissible).

However, though Attridge extends his analysis into a brief treatise upon the nature of literary ethics as such, cooperating with his theorisation of literary singularity, he shies away from an analysis of the ways that sense of disturbance is effected through Coetzee's literary methods, the layering of plot humiliation and narrative humility (enacted by its discordant writing style as well as

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[12] Ibid., p.120.
[13] Ibid., p.122.
[14] Ibid., p.131.

its intertextual references to the historical Dostoevsky). Apart from brief yet undeveloped digressions concerning the 'unusual demands' that the novel makes on readers through disruption of readerly 'momentum' and 'the principle of onward movement', his chapter resists scrutinising the interplay between form and content in *Master*.[15] Thus, a statement claiming Coetzee 'has let his own voice be taken over by a strange and at times dismaying mode of utterance', rather than 'attempting to represent other voices […] by mimicry and ventriloquism', is deprived of overtly recognising Coetzee's debt to the hesitation before ethical 'truth' and aesthetic utterance that characterises Dostoevsky's polyphonic works.[16]

In a critical passage from the final chapter of the book, the fictional Dostoevsky makes explicit the association between his 'assault' on Matryona, and the related transgressions within the book, the writer's refusal to accept a limitation on the known. In envisioning the corruption of a child's innocence through exposure to sexual activity, Dostoevsky reiterates 'the story of his gambling in another guise. He gambles because God does not speak. He gambles to make God speak' (*MoP* 237). In such terms, he distinctly links the desires that drive both the plot and the writing of which it is comprised, with the metaphysical tendency towards transcendence: his writing is intended to achieve a union between truth and utterance. Yet Dostoevsky immediately proffers an awareness of a dialogic understanding of the divine (perhaps in relation to the historical Dostoevsky's apophaticism) by immediately admitting that '[o]nly when God is silent does God speak. When God seems to speak, God does not speak' (*MoP* 237). It is a passage that, like *The Master of Petersburg* as a whole, seems to incorporate (or even summarise) many of the topics this thesis has explored. Condensed in a metaphor of a writer's wager on the existence of God is a theory of transcendence as predicated by linguistic discursivity, an awareness of the necessary equivocation between speech (Said) and the alterity of the Other presupposed by speech (Saying), and an understanding that writing about God inevitably betrays the silence through which God speaks.

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[15] Ibid., p.119-120.
[16] Ibid, p.133.

Michael Marais, in his contribution to a 2006 collection of essays on Coetzee, is more adept than either Iddiols or Attridge in assessing the particular amalgamation of transgression, transcendence, ethics and writing that is central to *Master*. Of the several critical works that have treated Coetzee's novel as source material for a study of the ethical, Marais's 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other' runs perhaps closest to my own argument that *Master* works to thematise a dialogic understanding of ethics with the necessary betrayal of the ethical that writing represents.[17] His distinct approach is especially focused on the trope of death in *Master*: he notes an early reference to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (*MoP* 5) and proceeds to read the myth 'as a metaphor for the desire which inspires Dostoevsky to write.'[18] Writing, claims Marais, 'is inspired by a desire for that which is beyond representation: it originates in a desire for death.'[19]

However, by using Maurice Blanchot's 'The Gaze of Orpheus' as a textual intermediary between the myth and *Master*, Marais is able to consider writing's desire for unrepresentable death in Levinasian terms, as the necessary incorporation of Saying by Said.[20] Just as Orpheus inevitably betrays Eurydice as he coaxes her out of Hades, so too must the writer's desire for alterity both inspire and destroy the literary text. Betrayal, Marais argues, 'is a necessary corollary of the unpresentability of Eurydice's radical alterity and the resultant aporia in which the writer finds him/herself in writing.'[21] As such, *Master*'s emphasis on betrayal and death

> foregrounds the aporetic nature of writing. Betrayal is the corollary of the writer's excessive desire to reveal in writing that which revelation destroys. Read thus, Dostoevsky's sense of betrayal indicates, as opposed to represents, the other's excession of the text. It thereby points to the failure of the text, that is, the absence in the text of that which he desires. It is the trace of that absence, the trace of that which exceeds the apparent totality of the text. […] The disjunction, which makes what has been said refer to the unsayable, causes the text to become the locus of its own excess […].[22]

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[17] Michael Marais, 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*', in Jayne Poyner (ed.), *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006) pp.83-99. Marais offers a similar argument to this essay in '"Little enough, less than little: nothing": Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000) 159-182. However, in this earlier essay his focus extends to several other Coetzee novels, and so I have chosen to limit my analysis to 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other'.

[18] Marais, 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other', p.90.

[19] Ibid.

[20] For a brief overview of the theoretical affinity between Levinas and Blanchot, an affinity which cannot be overstated, see Robbins, *Altered Reading*, pp.150-154.

[21] Marais, 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other', p.91.

[22] Ibid., p.92.

In reading *Master* thus, Marais anticipates my understanding of failed writing as the way the trace of polyphonic ethics is sourced within the disruption of monologic authority. It is perhaps Marais's narrow focus that prevents him from being able to extend 'the other's excession of the text' to a reading of Dostoevsky's influence over Coetzee. In any case, his reading of *Master* here as a text that 'constantly points to that which remains unsaid and, indeed, cannot be said', concisely outlines the theoretical argument I set forth in Chapter 6, which in turn formed the basis of my approach for the close readings of Chapter 7.[23] And Marais goes on to relate *Master*'s concern for 'the subject's *inability* to foreclose on the otherness of the other' with the "unrelating relation" with alterity that marks 'the very condition of ethics' in Levinas.[24] Marais too, therefore, sees the desire for, and frustration of, transgression within the novel as correlating with its understanding of literary ethics, an understanding definitively based within the duality of language for both cognition and discourse, and the necessary hesitancy it produces within the work of literature.

It remains, therefore, to advance Marais's argument by offering a final word on how *Master*'s ethical understanding, derived from the Dostoevskian vacillation before ethical truth and the lie of utterance, manifests as Coetzee's epistemic humility as an author. For while Marais stresses the idea of a writer's 'betrayal' of the text, he stops short of offering an indication of how *Master* performs its 'ontogenetic anxiety', that is, its self-reflexive 'preoccupation with the relation to alterity that is established in the act of writing.'[25] To conclude this close reading, I will therefore hark back to the etymological association between humility and humiliation, using John Bolin's essay on 'desire and intensity' in *Master* to read his summation of the transgressive desire that prompts writing in terms of the necessary perversion of ethical truth which constitutes artistic creation.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p.96.

[25] Ibid., p.94 / 97. Though Marais does not expand upon such ontogenetic anxiety, I believe his has in mind the anachronistic intertextuality of *Master* and *Demons*. The former is at once inspired by the latter and tells the story of the latter's creation. This anachronism actively works to throw *Master* outside of teleological history (and brings to mind the Levinasian distinction between synchrony and diachrony). As I have argued above, the textual anxiety caused by *Master*'s anachronistic relation with *Demons* is just one of the ways it thematises writing's relation with alterity.

Angelika Reichmann's essay on *Master* notes how the 'different kinds of mastery –

hermeneutical, ideological, sexual, spiritual, artistic' evoked in Coetzee's novel are summed up in the

central trope of possession.[26] Possession is clearly a key facet of *The Master of Petersburg*'s

intertextual relationship with *Demons*, which is also known in English as *The Possessed*: in

Dostoevsky's novel, it was the 'possession' of the Russian people by the demonic ideology of Russian

nihilism that defined the socio-political and spiritual crisis to which he was responding.[27] Meanwhile,

the confusion between possessing and being possessed connoted by 'possession' is an apt metaphor

for the writer's desire to grasp alterity, and its frustration: what the writer wills to possess ends up,

by its refusal to be possessed, possessing the writer. This metaphor becomes prominent in scenes

where the fictional Dostoevsky reflects upon his stepson and finds that 'he cannot distinguish Pavel

from himself' (*MoP* 21).

Yet Reichmann too identifies how this trope of possession is counteracted by the

'monstrosity [which] seems to be the inevitable product of the attempt to relinquish mastery in

textual production'.[28] The intent behind Reichmann's reading is to advocate Dostoevskian polyphony

as a prototype of characteristically postmodern art in its renunciation of an authoritative voice: as

such, it is analogous to this thesis's reading of Dostoevsky, excepting for its lack of ethical

consideration which forgoes the metaphysical homesickness of Bakhtinian theory. Even so, in

detailing the way *Master* re-stages the development of the polyphonic work, Reichmann exposes the

'authorial plight' of post-postmodern narrative ethics, a plight summed up by the post-Nietzschean

demand that authorial mastery be proclaimed through its denunciation.[29] As such, she reads the

'potentially demonic possession' of *Master*'s 'Stavrogin' chapter as 'the very consciousness of the

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[26] Angelika Reichmann, 'Possession: The Dostoevskian Master Trope of Reading and Writing in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 21.2 (2015) 409-422 (411/409).
[27] See Pevear's 'Foreword' to *Demons* for a brief digression on the translation of the name Бесы into either 'The Possessed' or 'Demons' (p.xiii).
[28] Reichmann, 'Possession', 409.
[29] Ibid.

instability of all kinds of boundaries and integrity' which is nonetheless 'a prerequisite for artistic

creativity from a position that is necessarily devoid of authorial power or mastery'.[30]

Illustrative in this regard is a confrontation between Coetzee's Dostoevsky and Councillor

Maximov, the man officially investigating Pavel's death. Maximov claims that a fictional story written

by Pavel offers proof that he was a follower of Nechaev's ideology. The story involves the murder of

a cruel landowner, Karamzin, by an impassioned youth. By reading it as a metaphor for revolution,

Maximov invests Pavel with a mastery over the story, thereby championing his own reading as

authoritative. In turn, Dostoevsky accuses Maximov of not knowing how to read, an accusation he

reiterates towards Nechaev's own single-minded ideology (*MoP* 201):

> What is it that frightens you, Councillor Maximov? When you read about Karamzin or Karamazov or
> whatever his name is, when Karamzin's skull is cracked open like an egg, what is the truth: do you
> suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don't answer? Let
> me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving
> yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering. (*MoP* 47).

The anachronistic reference to *The Brothers Karamazov* furtively reveals that Coetzee's Dostoevsky

perceives reading and writing to be comparable activities, in the manner suggested by Critchley's

clotûre and Attridge's singularity. Writing, like reading, is the paradox of being both murderer and

murdered, master and mastered, possessor and possessed. Giving yourself up is, for a writer,

remaining humble before claims to an epistemic totality: it is writing that does not distance itself

from its own loss of control, the inevitable failure of its attempt at mastery. The implication of the

Dostoevskian trope of possession in *The Master of Petersburg*, which is 'a consistent continuation of

and an organic development from its Dostoevskian original', is 'the necessary ambiguity of the

authorial position, the simultaneous inevitability and futility of the attempt to draw the limits of the

subject'. It is such ambiguity that leads to the irresolution of the plot, the absence of narrative

catharsis, and the persistent indiscernibility between characters, authors and readers. Coetzee,

writes Reichmann, 'envisions Dostoevsky as a prototype of the (post)modern artist in the process of

finding a "middle voice" […] between a voice of one's own and that of others', thus producing 'the

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[30] Ibid., 414.

monstrous, hybrid body of the postmodern (inter)text.'[31] To become the author of 'truly polyphonic

novels' is to realise that 'all any writer can do is to produce "perversions of the truth".'[32]

Perversion, rather than possession, therefore becomes a more fitting trope for *Master*'s

portrayal of narrative ethics. It is this angle that Bolin's essay investigates, although without the

stated recognition of a dialogical sense of the ethical which engenders an association between

perversion and writing. Bolin was able to claim a significant advantage on previous readings of

Master through accessing drafts of *Master*'s manuscript and typescript stored at the Harry Ransom

Centre's Coetzee archive; he was able to note, for example, that Coetzee initially planned Stavrogin

to be a central character of *Master*, and that he intended sexual deviance to be Stavrogin's

predominant characteristic. Furthermore, Bolin goes on to make a connection between the

supposed theme of problematic naming in the ur-text and Coetzee's own 'uncertainty about the

novel's fundamentals'.[33] The effect, he claims, was to evolve the sexual perversity of Stavrogin and

Dostoevsky in the novel into a metaphor for authorship: both concern an unresolvable desire to

both escape the self and to beget. The Stavrogin of the ur-text, therefore, can be read not only as a

sexual deviant but also, following the etymological Greek root of 'stavros' ('cross', but too implying

'black'), a figure for 'the writer's struggle with the 'crisscrossed' 'realm of words'—his concern with

(failed) acts of reading and writing'.[34]

Writerly perversion therefore manifests out of the failure of writing that marks a text's

epistemic humility. This is the cause for *Master*'s indeterminacy before humility and humiliation. It

is, as Marais writes, 'in failing that Dostoevsky's work works', which is to say it is through the

perversion of writing, and the thematic use of perversion in the writing at the level of plot, that

Master gestures towards its understanding of the ethical as unthematisable otherness.[35] Enhancing

an understanding of writing as 'the voluptuous urge to confess' (*MoP* 62) is how Coetzee sets forth

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[31] Ibid., 417.
[32] Ibid., 414. *Cf. MoP* 236.
[33] John Bolin, 'The Sinister Mirror: Desire and Intensity in J.M. Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg', *The Review of English Studies* 65 (2013) 515-535 (518).
[34] Ibid., 519-20.
[35] Marais, 'Death and the Space of the Response to the Other', p.92.

his renunciation of authorial mastery. To be a master in this sense is to present oneself for humiliation and shame, yet without the expectation (or with the frustrated expectation) of salvation, which resituates the confession within the sphere of the known.

The failure of writing is the ethical: the perversion that constitutes *Master*'s narrative, then, is precisely the confrontation of the ethical and the aesthetic, the polyphony within monologism of its Dostoevskian forebears. Instead of reading the 'Stavrogin' chapter, as Bolin does, as a 'perverted confession' which 'involves […] violating the confession's formal trajectory toward absolution, toward the discovery of a pure language of the heart', it can be read as the confession that all writing is always-already perverted, that the 'pure language of the heart', if it exists at all, is forever betrayed by its own utterance.[36] It is in this sense that the perversion of *The Master of Petersburg*, can be considered under the banner of epistemic humility incorporating the previous close readings of *Infinite Jest* and *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, as well as the forthcoming reading of *Diary of a Bad Year*. The crux of such humility in *Master* is the narrative's concatenation of desire, sex and death: the imagery of 'falling' is also significant in this regard in that it speaks of the primordial 'fallen' state of the Said in its betrayal of the Saying. In an early scene which anticipates the fictional Dostoevsky's literary gamble to 'make God speak', he reflects upon Pavel's death by falling in terms reminiscent of the New Testament temptations of Christ. Pavel, Dostoevsky imagines, 'said to God: If you love me, save me. If you are there, save me. But there was only silence' (*MoP* 75).

Pavel's fallen state thus comes to symbolise the sinfulness of postlapsarian times, which the historical Dostoevsky's eschatological imagination foresaw, and which encapsulates the post-Nietzschean context of Coetzee's composition. The only true catharsis for the desire that infuses *Master* is silence, the silence of death or the silence of the God incognito. Yet within the postlapsarian is the trace of the prelapsarian, just as in the silence of God or death there is the conditional anticipation of the voice of the Other. Writing such silence, or writing death as Dostoevsky tries to do, is analogous to desiring the invisible or totalising the Infinite. It is an

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[36] Bolin, 'The Sinister Mirror', 531-2.

unachievable destination that is nevertheless perversely journeyed towards. And by denying an

ultimate narrative or plot catharsis (no violation of Matryona, no gambling victory, no utopian

revolution and only a perverse resurrection of Pavel), Coetzee maintains the narrative tension

between the aesthetic and the ethical. It is through such thematic and stylistic perversity that

Dostoevsky can keep Pavel, and Coetzee can keep the ethical, 'alive, suspended in his fall' (*MoP* 21).

Diary of a Bad Year

In a 1996 polemic on pornography and censorship, Coetzee makes an aside about the role of

seriousness in art. The conspicuous point of address of 'The Harms of Pornography' was the feminist

legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon and her contributions to the anti-pornography movement of the

1980s. In a manner typical to both Coetzee's fiction and non-fiction, the essay converges with

MacKinnon's line of reasoning at several points whilst seeming to question the theoretical validity of

her argument: the essay ends with Coetzee's own stance on pornography unclarified. Central to the

essay, however, is the debate over the artistic validity of obscenity, and Dostoevsky is used as an

example. The obscenity that permeates Dostoevsky's novels (especially the post-Siberian novels)

would, Coetzee claims, see his writings covered by the blanket of MacKinnon's proposed censorship.

And, given Coetzee's own indebtedness to Dostoevsky and the fact that _The Master of Petersburg_ is

centred round perhaps the most obscene moment in all of Dostoevsky's works, one can assume

Coetzee's adversarial position on comprehensive censorship, and call for nuance when evaluating

artistic integrity. The kind of seriousness an artist like Dostoevsky engages in, claims Coetzee, is 'an

imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical.'[37]

Beyond the particularities of obscenity and censorship, the terminology of Coetzee's aside

raises germane connections with the understanding of contemporary Dostoevskian literature

presented here. The requirement of 'seriousness' within art, in the sense that art can be categorised

as distinct from the false and/or flippant, stands on notoriously unstable ground: Coetzee

immediately qualifies his statement by reminding that artistic seriousness can easily be

deconstructed 'as a feature of the ideology of so-called high art and the drive to power of the high

artist.'[38] Yet, classifying a text (or the work of an author) as serious remains a persistent tactic in

distinguishing the attributes of its form, content and context as expedient qualities in defining the

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[37] Coetzee, 'The Harms of Pornography: Catharine MacKinnon' in _Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) pp.61-82 (p.73).
[38] Ibid.

artistic. With regards to the post-postmodern desire for the question of ethics within art, 'serious'

literature is therefore that which prompts ethical consideration, that which reiterates modernism's

metaphysical homesickness. By equating Dostoevsky and seriousness, Coetzee echoes Wallace's

review of Joseph Frank's *The Miraculous Years* with which this thesis started. Appropriately, both

essays were published in the same year (the year after Coetzee's own review of Frank for *The New

York Review of Books*), offering further evidence that the Western impulse to incorporate the ethical

within postmodernism was at full strength during the mid-1990s, concurrent with both the

Derridean ethical turn as theorised by Straus and the culmination of the Afghan *mujahideen* wars. In

Wallace's review, the ethical affiliations between modernism and post-postmodernism are

exemplified by his lament that, following the modernist elevation of aesthetics to the level of ethics,

'Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity', the

initiation of a transition that ultimately led to 'the unseriousness of our serious fiction'.[39] Serious

fiction, as he explained to Larry McCaffery, is that which gives the reader imaginative access to other

selves, literature that concerns what it is to be a human being.

     Coetzee's identification of Dostoevsky as a standard of 'serious' literature can therefore be

read alongside Wallace's similar gesture; accordingly, the imperative to unite the aesthetic and the

ethical can be read in Levinasian terms. The ethical imperative becomes the unconditional

responsibility for the Other to be incorporated within the aesthetic creation. The same imperative

demands that the aesthetic creation not actualise the authority of its authorial voice, not actualise

its claim on epistemic totality. Unconditional responsibility for the voice of the Other engenders the

conditional status of the aesthetic word, the conditionality of its utterance that hesitates before (or

oscillates between) Christ and truth, thought and lie, silence and speech, loophole and rhythm, the

centrifugal and the centripetal, polyphony and monologism, the discursive and the cognitive, Saying

and Said. Diverging from the artistic drive to power which potentially undermines 'high' and 'low' art

distinctions, Coetzee conceives of the imperative for responsibility inaugurating subjectivity as the

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[39] Wallace, 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', p.272/274.

basis for serious literature. And for C in *Diary of a Bad Year*, reading Dostoevsky makes one 'ethically better'. Dostoevsky is an integral bearer of 'the standards towards which any serious novelist must toil' (*DBY* 227).

The final essay of *Diary*, however, postulates that this standard for artistic seriousness, set with 'indisputable certainty' by 'Mother Russia', is not constituted solely by Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's counterpart in *Diary*, the 'exemplary author' (*DBY* 149) Tolstoy, is also referenced: only by toiling towards the standards of both Dostoevsky *and* Tolstoy does the serious novelist become 'a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful, but ethically better' (*DBY* 227). The correlation is key. Following the bifurcation of the aesthetic and ethical, based in the duality of language, I have thus far advocated Dostoevsky as the exemplar of ethical authorship. Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial authority allowing for the development of novelistic polyphony, read as the creative 'articulation' of the Levinasian Saying prior to and presupposed by its incorporation by the Said, has been put forward by this thesis as an instance of Levinasian responsibility towards the irreducible alterity of the Other's voice. As I have argued in the previous chapters, however, the conception of polyphony-as-Saying challenges the aesthetic creation itself, precisely due to the necessary incorporation of the Saying within the Said: the ethical discursivity of polyphony must always be subsumed by the aesthetic cognition defining monologism. Such is the conditional tension of both Dostoevsky's and contemporary Dostoevskian works, which has its parallel in both metamodern oscillation and the irresolution over the aesthetic and the ethical in Bakhtinian and Levinasian theory. In assessing C's final essay (as a preliminary for a close reading of *Diary*'s epistemic humility), attention must be given to the juxtaposition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as it is reiterated in C's advocacy of the standard for artistic seriousness. Reading Dostoevsky makes one an *ethically* better artist; reading Tolstoy makes one an ethically better *artist*.

In C's essay 'On authority in fiction', Tolstoy's exemplary artistry is lauded in terms of his capacity for 'building up authority' (*DBY* 149) in his writing. Such a pronouncement accords with the polarisation of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy on either side of the vacillation between the ethical and the

aesthetic. Tolstoy would in this sense be archetypical of the monologic, counterbalancing

Dostoevsky's exemplary polyphony: it is no coincidence that, in *Problems*, Bakhtin gives Tolstoy as

the prime example of authorial monologism.[40] The essay then notes, from the perspective of literary

theory, the historical transition from the pre-Nietzschean centrality to the post-Nietzschean

suspicion of ideological authority on which this thesis has been founded. Laconically paraphrasing

poststructuralism, C writes that

> Announcements of the death of the author and of authorship made by Roland Barthes and Michel
> Foucault a quarter of a century ago came down to the claim that the authority of an author has never
> amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks (*DBY* 149).[41]

The authority of Tolstoy's voice was exposed as the 'consequence of his rhetorical skill' (*DBY* 150).

And C augments this distinctly Levinasian pronouncement by citing Russian formalism's influence

over Roland Barthes, thereby assimilating Bakhtin within the repudiation of authorial authority.[42]

The penultimate paragraph of 'On authority in fiction' states that what 'the great authors are

masters of is authority' before posing the question of whether 'authority could be achieved simply

by tricks of rhetoric' (*DBY* 151). Yet, once more, C's polarising between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, a

polarisation enhanced by their equivalent placing as the penultimate essay of the Strong Opinions

and the final essay of the Second Diary respectively, seems to undo itself. In 'On Dostoevsky', C's

emotional response to Ivan's 'rebellion' against theodicy is, he claims, 'nothing to do with ethics or

politics' but instead 'everything to do with rhetoric' (*DBY* 225). And, meta-textually recalling

Coetzee's earlier novel on Dostoevsky, C describes the standard for artistic seriousness as 'the

standard of the master Tolstoy on the one hand and of the master Dostoevsky on the other' (*DBY*

227). There is, therefore, the integration of rhetorical mastery, recognised as the foundation of

authorial authority, within C's classification of the standard set for ethically better artists.

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[40] 'A second, autonomous voice (alongside the author's voice) does not appear in Tolstoy's world' (*PDP* 56).

[41] *Cf.* Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977); Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author' in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 2)*, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998) pp.205-222. Foucault's essay, originally given as a lecture in 1969 to the Société Française de Philosophie, is commonly read as a response to Barthes's 1967 essay.

[42] Clark & Holquist and Morson & Emerson acknowledge the influence of Russian formalism over Bakhtin's literary and linguistic theory on numerous occasions in their respective studies.

A close reading of *Diary of a Bad Year* which emphasises the novel's equivocation over the aesthetic and the ethical can thus be understood as an extension of these two tenets of authorial mastery, the on-the-one-hand of Tolstoy and the on-the-other-hand of Dostoevsky. C's final essay presents itself as an account of a particular reading (conforming with the instance of singularity theorised by Attridge) but it also operates, as I have been arguing, as an author manifesto detailing the competing ethical and aesthetic imperatives of so-called serious literature. Their juxtaposition can furthermore be understood as reflective of *Diary*'s distinctive formal structure: by this analysis, one of *Diary*'s central functions is to thematise epistemic humility as the post-postmodern method for narrative ethics. The novel exposes the artifice of writing in unsubtle and diverse ways. Its fractured paginal structure is quite literally designed to disrupt the reading experience and so abate any claim to authorial mastery as such, mastery that strives to seamlessly subsume the reader within its authorial control.[43] Added to this are such techniques as the uncanny doubling of C and Coetzee, as though Coetzee were disclosing the fragility of his own authoritativeness, and the fact that the underlying plots themselves concern the creation of the Strong Opinions and the evolution of the Second Diary. These stylistic and structural measures are designed to augment the undermining of the authoritative voice which, as noted earlier in this thesis, serves to place *Diary* on the back end of the postmodern turn away from ethics. If C represents an antiquated adherence to moral principles, the motives of the 'man on the street', as exemplified by Alan's neoliberal economics, are 'beyond good and evil, like Nietzsche said' (*DBY* 98). Alan and the world of *Diary*'s setting are specifically identified as post-Nietzschean, and the technical workings of the novel reiterate this identification through their exposition of authorial contrivance.

As such, by close reading the discernible ways *Diary* seeks to undo its own claims to the mastery of Tolstoy's rhetoric, I will follow the general wake of critical commentaries on *Diary*. Peter

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[43] This definition of authorial mastery has its counterpart in the effectiveness of an ideological Grand Narrative at the interpellation of the subject, discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to Andrew Corsa's essay on metamodernism. Perceiving Tolstoy as the epitome of this type of authorial mastery (opposing Dostoevsky's 'mastery' of ethical polyphony) aligns Tolstoy with the German idealism which Bakhtin identifies as typifying monologism: Both C and Bakhtin place Tolstoy's artistry and pre-Nietzschean philosophical/theological ideology as contingent upon establishing a singular, authoritative voice.

McDonald's essay on the novel assesses it to be 'perhaps Coetzee's most elaborate working out of his own discomfort with the expectations and anachronistic forms of authority thrust on him as a writer', and most scholarship on *Diary* begins from a similar position.[44] Instead of seeking to counter such scholarship, however, I propose to advance it by stressing that, although *Diary* seeks to renounce its claims to aesthetic mastery in favour of the ethical, it likewise recognises that this renunciation cannot be achieved in its entirety, nor does it seek to bifurcate the aesthetic and the ethical by claiming that the latter has a higher claim over the imperative of serious literature than the former. At the heart of the Kierkegaardian paradox of learning 'to speak without authority' is the belief that the ethically better artist must speak both with and without authority: both must be held in the irreconcilable tension that is central to Dostoevsky's conditional merger of the polyphonic and monologic. The troubling of authorial authority that *Diary* thematises through its form and content is itself consequently troubled by its own inevitable failure: its irregularity thus serves as both a repudiation of monologism's tendency towards the unethical and the totalising, and the recognition of the necessity for the aesthetic or monologic rhetoric of an artist like Tolstoy, based within the cognitive function of language itself.

'During his later years,' concludes 'On authority in fiction', 'Tolstoy was treated not only as a great author but as an authority on life, a wise man, a sage.' C notes a similar fate for the poet Walt Whitman in America, arguing that 'neither had much wisdom to offer: wisdom was not what they dealt in. They were poets above all; otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions' (*DBY* 151). It is a pronouncement that accords with the tone of the essay, distinguishing

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[44] Peter D. McDonald, 'The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *NOVEL: A Forum of Fiction* 43.3 (2010) 483-499 (496). To sample some similar critical positions, see Atwell's 'Mastering Authority', which concludes by arguing that *Diary* is 'distrustful, even hostile to self-deceiving, self-assured language and to rational calculation' which characterises the Strong Opinions, and that Second Diary is Coetzee's way of 'crafting a *non-position*' of authority (219). Alternatively, Paul Patton's essay on the novel sees it as an endorsement of the multivocal nature of opinions themselves: to have an opinion is a necessary part of being in the world, but opinions can only ever escape the boundaries of subjectivity. Opinions too, therefore, belie single-voiced authority. Paul Patton, 'Coetzee's Opinions' in Chris Danta et al. (eds.), *Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2011) pp.53-62.

the rhetorical effect of creating an authoritative voice with the failure of political/ideological

authority as a means of anchoring the subject to the world beyond, i.e., the historical failure of

Grand Narratives. This distinction encapsulates the way *Diary* as a whole expresses a hesitancy

before authority and authorship (and, by extension, other forms of artistry such as visual art or

music). C's Second Diary essay on 'The classics' reiterates *Diary*'s laudatory stance on literature,

claiming *War and Peace* and *The Iliad* can 'renew one's faith in humanity', yet also presents such

acclaim as correlative with an old man's nostalgia for 'a bygone age': C's claim that none of 'the new

fiction I have read over the past twelve months […] has truly touched me' (*DBY* 189) introduces an

element of uncertainty over whether *Diary*'s advocation of art and literature can be differentiated

from the way C emblematises an old, pre-Machiavellian position holding to the supremacy of moral

law. His essay on J.S. Bach proffers a similar equivocation, at once lauding his music as the 'best

proof we have that life is good' (*DBY* 221) whilst moulding him into a 'spiritual father' before whom

C, as a product of his spiritually dilapidated time, is guilty for having been a 'bad son' (*DBY* 222).

The appellation of 'sage' in reference to Tolstoy is moreover noticeable for its later

reiteration by Alan in Anya's plot. Following the publication of the Strong Opinions, C hosts a

celebration to which he invites Anya and Alan. The latter, having earlier been dissuaded by Anya to

give up his plan to steal from C by digitally siphoning the interest off of C's savings, instead belittles C

in a drunken outburst, revealing his plan and his amoral justification for it. Alan's approach to life,

which is integral to his success in neoliberal finance, is a concatenation of *Diary*'s overly simplified

Machiavellianism and Nietzscheanism: he consistently uses the concept of *necessitá* to justify his

own moral transgressions within an economic system that, he claims, transcends moral categories

(*DBY* 97).[45] Life for Alan 'is a struggle of all against all' (*DBY* 195), a seemingly serendipitous

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[45] In this respect he bears a resemblance to the quasi-Nietzschean criminals of Dostoevsky's novels, in particular Smerdyakov, Raskolnikov and Pyotr Verkhovensky. The difference for a contemporary Dostoevskian text like *Diary* is that Alan's perspective is standardised within the world that the novel presents: Alan's financial success and his sexual ascendency over C with regards to Anya are meant to emphasise that C is *Diary*'s aberration from the norm. Like Pyotr (and unlike Raskolnikov and Smerdyakov), the novel ends without Alan suffering any juridical or conscientious consequences. He loses Anya, but his last words of the novel are to make clear that Anya meant little to him anyway (*DBY* 220). Alan therefore comes to embody the anhedonic solipsism of the postmodern era that is central to *Infinite Jest*, yet unlike Hal or Don, Alan is able to thrive without a sense of ethical connection to others: his cycle of pleasure dependency is the creation

counterpart to the Elder Zosima's responsibility to all, for all, more than others. Accordingly, his

attack on C is based in what Alan perceives to be C's arrogance in self-defining as 'a lone voice of

conscience' (*DBY* 197). Knowing from Anya that the Strong Opinions were commissioned by a

German publisher, Alan surmises that

> in the English-speaking world, the world of hard heads and common sense, a book of pronouncements on the real world won't get much traction, coming from a man whose sole achievement lies in the sphere of the fanciful. Whereas in places like Germany and France people still tend to drop to their knees before sages with white beards. Tell us, O Master, we pray, what has gone wrong with our civilization! […] You have decided to try your hand at being a guru' (*DBY* 206-8).

The episode is *Diary*'s strongest paralleling of authorial and ideological authority, and its most

malicious critique of the archaism of the latter which thus undermines the validity of the former.

Alan's tirade even identifies what he later terms '*old Europe*' (*DBY* 213) as the one-time epicentre of

such now-redundant theological or philosophical absolutes: the German publisher of the *Strong

Opinions* hereby gestures back to a time when Kantian 'consciousness everywhere' or the Hegelian

'absolute I' were governing philosophical principles. And this derogatory association between the

authorial and the authoritative voice brought forth by the word 'sage' further echoes remarks

Coetzee himself gave in an interview with David Atwell shortly after winning the Nobel Prize for

Literature. In the early days of the prize, Coetzee said,

> a writer could still be thought of as, by virtue of his or her occupation, a sage, someone with no institutional affiliations who could offer an authoritative word on our times as well as on our moral life […]. This idea of [the] writer [is] pretty much dead today […]. I would certainly feel very uncomfortable in the role.[46]

That the same sentiment, and some of the same words, found their way into the assorted

viewpoints of *Diary*'s competing voices reinforces this central concern of the novel. The vitriol with

which Alan is endowed is intended to expose and undermine the historical affiliation between the

writer and the sage, an affiliation that Coetzee declares to have deteriorated with the transition

away from the monologic authority of ideological absolutes. The challenge that confronts both C and

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of personal wealth and a hyper-masculine sexuality which, *Diary* implies, is not only thoroughly legitimised but even commendable in the 21st-century West. His ascendency and lack of comeuppance, set against the novel's revelation of his potential for criminality and corruption, thereby offers the hallmark of its post-postmodern position. *Diary* seeks to find a way to combat a world in which Alan can thrive yet cannot fight that world with anachronistic moral dictates and condemnations.

[46] Quoted in McDonald, 'Question of the Novel', 496.

Coetzee as writers, and that provokes *Diary*'s existence, is to validate the aesthetic without

endorsing its inevitable suppression of alterity, a suppression found out and denounced as

modernism gave way to postmodernism. Yet even by portraying that denunciation in the terms that

Alan does, *Diary* riddles itself once more: Alan's reproof of sages and gurus is offered from a position

of self-assumed authority. This is the other side of the Kierkegaardian coin. C's first Strong Opinion,

'On the origins of the state', concludes by asking why 'there can be no discourse about politics that is

not itself political', before ultimately conceding that to 'strive for a systematic, supra-political

discourse about politics is futile' (*DBY* 9).

      Diary extends this quandary to authorship itself: the overtly political tone of the Strong

Opinions thus functions to invest the issue of authorship and authority with the practical urgency

brought on by the perceived political crises of the contemporary world. Alan has his counterparts in

the real-life political figures that are C's targets for critique. Essays such as 'On Guantanamo Bay',

'On the slaughter of animals' and 'On political life in Australia' bring these crises to the fore, whilst

even the non-political Strong Opinions are still offered from the position of a frustrated authority. An

essay ostensibly about the use of video technology in sport nevertheless boils down to the

'confrontation between a nostalgic, backward-looking view' and 'the view that predominates today'

which, C coyly reminds his readers, 'may have an analogous cultural value' (*DBY* 77). Even so, C is

forced to recognise that 'the argument that the past was better than the present cannot be won'. It

can only 'be bravely put' (*DBY* 77). Subsequently, when C aims his condemnatory crosshairs at Tony

Blair's role in the Iraq war, he envisions Blair responding to him in a manner that anticipates Alan's

actual critique later in the text. In private moments, C imagines, 'men like Blair defend themselves by

saying that their critics (always labelled armchair critics) forget that in this less than ideal world […]

politics is not for sissies […], by sissies meaning people reluctant to compromise moral principles'

(*DBY* 125). The essay concludes by asking how the public hunger for supra-political discourse 'can be

satisfied by the mere writer […] when, half the time, he is because of his vocation as much interested

in the liar and the psychology of the lie as in the truth?' (*DBY* 126). As mere writers, both C and

Coetzee must half the time immerse themselves in the psychology of the lie; that is, they must devote their works as much to the tricks of rhetoric as to the advocacy of moral principles. For such mere writers, there is therefore no supra-authoritative condemnation of authority, and they are thus forced by their vocations to temper their own ethical inclinations, at least in a pragmatic sense.

The basis of the relationship between *Diary of a Bad Year* and the Strong Opinion essays, then, is the awareness of their own impossible positions as literature. The author of the Strong Opinions knows that their authoritative tone will only ever come across as the outdated grumblings of a sage or guru, a form of 'magical revenge' (*DBY* 23) on the actual world for its dissimilarity from his fanciful one. The author of *Diary*, meanwhile, knows that its externality from the Strong Opinions will only ever be reabsorbed into the critique of authorial authority. Coetzee's rudimentary 'othering' of himself as C contributes to that awareness. Whilst the incongruity between Coetzee and C seems on the surface to be a part of the former's attempts to distance himself from the latter, the ease with which that incongruity can be verified in actuality only enhances how the reproachment of authorial authority is inescapable: it is as though Coetzee is almost ridiculing the idea that *Diary* can effortlessly dissociate itself from the accusations of redundancy that Alan, as a representative of his era, levels at C's Strong Opinions.[47] It is one of several instances in which Coetzee's techniques to undercut the authority of the Strong Opinions appear so evident as to verge on superficial or perfunctory, which at a wider level is indicative of the difficulties *Diary* encounters in trying to demarcate the 'untouched […] mystery of Tolstoy's authority' (*DBY* 150) and the 'sadly foolish' (*DBY* 151) repercussions of treating him as a sage. It is at this wider level that *Diary*'s characteristic formal irregularities can be read alongside the 'failed' writing that bears witness to the hesitancy before the ethical and the aesthetic in the other contemporary Dostoevskian texts. *Diary*

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[47] Biographical differences between C and Coetzee that are easy to factcheck include their respective dates of birth and cities of residence. During his drunken tirade, Alan calls C 'Juan' (*DBY* 165, *et passim*), the Spanish equivalent of Coetzee's first name, John, building on Anya's unexplained assumption that C is Hispanic which allows her to designate him the homonymic title, 'Señor' (i.e., 'senior' – *DBY* 26, *et passim*). Atwell, Patton and McDonald all pick up on disparity between C and Coetzee. All likewise understand it as a means by which Coetzee distances himself from the authoritativeness of the Strong Opinions. It is worth noting that this type of ambivalent 'othering' is common in Coetzee's work. Jacobus Coetzee (from *Dusklands*), Elizabeth Costello and the protagonist of his fictionalised memoirs (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*) are all examples.

has its resemblances, for example, with *A Curse on Dostoevsky* in that both texts present an active confrontation with the unfeasibility of their manifestation: both novels are confounded by the discrepancy between the aspirations and the effects of their textual existence. *A Curse on Dostoevsky*'s obstruse style and cyclical structure arise in response to such perplexity. And while *Infinite Jest* and *The Master of Petersburg* do not explicitly foreground textuality as itself an impediment to the post-Nietzschean ethics of responsibility, both make it implicit in the parallactic/perverted writing of which they are composed.

Diary of a Bad Year, meanwhile, does not stall its own intelligibility as evidence of the necessary failure of writing to portray the alterity of the other. Coetzee's tactic is instead to make the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical central to his composition of the novel. The Strong Opinions hereby becomes the text that 'fails', whilst the other components of the novel offer the means by which that failure is substantiated both formally and at the level of plot. In this way *Diary* can be read as C's coming to terms with his own incapacity for the epistemic totality which would provide the foundation for his authority as an author. Were such a totality possible, those heralding Tolstoy and others as sages would be justified. Yet the alterity presupposed by linguistic cognition renders such totality unattainable, exposing either the claim to it on behalf of the author, or the impression of it on behalf of the reader, as stemming from the tricks of rhetoric. At the plot level, the abasement by which C learns a sense of epistemic humility develops from the external affirmation that his political and ethical views are outdated, not only through Alan's humiliation of him but also from his interactions with Anya, which more profoundly impact him. This development comes to a head when C's antiquated views of the 'dishonour' (*DBY* 111) Anya must take on as a victim of rape impels her to withdraw her typographical services and her companionship. It is this incident more than any other that obliges C to 'thoroughly revise my opinions […] cull the older, more decrepit ones [and] find newer, up-to-date ones to replace them (*DBY* 142-3).

Accordingly, the quarrel between C and Anya is the last action of C's underlying narrative before the end of the Strong Opinions: his decision to revise his opinions becomes the Second Diary.

The final essay of the Strong Opinions is, significantly, 'On the afterlife'. It is *Diary*'s only essay without a fragmented page structure. Once more, the message is unsubtle: a unified authorial narrative that conceals the alterity of which it is necessarily composed is not only an idea that has itself died a death since the poststructuralist heyday of Barthes and Foucault, but itself has only ever been an idea achievable through the finality of death, the consummation of the subject. 'On the afterlife' is a meditation on the subjective 'incapacity to think of a world from which the thinker is absent' (*DBY* 154), a topic which incorporates the theology of the afterlife, but which also recognises 'such incapacity as part of the human condition' (*DBY* 154), gesturing towards the trace of ethical Saying at the heart of subjective cognition and thus reiterating the secular theology of Bakhtin and Levinas (and Wallace's postsecularism). C's narrative is then empty for the first four essays of the Second Diary, resuming on the morning after Alan's drunken invective, which is related in (and concludes) Anya's narrative.

The relation between plot and structure, therefore, corresponds with *Diary*'s plot in the way it thematises the alterity of writing and the necessary failure of monologic or aesthetic authority. The interaction of the underlying narratives works to undermine the rhetorical power of the Strong Opinions, unmasking both the senility and sexual risibility of their creator, and Anya's inadequacy as a typist. Puns are made between the words of the essays and Anya's initial typesetting, so that the reader learns 'somewhere in the Urals' (*DBY* 19) or 'Papists and Popery' (*DBY* 13) were originally typed 'somewhere in the urinals' and 'papers and papery' (*DBY* 25). C claims Anya to be 'a bit of a disappointment' (*DBY* 25) as a typist and describes their working as 'error-strewn' (*DBY* 32). On the other hand, much of Anya's initial narrative pokes fun at C's unstated intentions behind his hiring of her: contrasts are made between his deteriorating eyesight and the 'half-blind scrawl' it produces, and the visual and masturbatory pleasure Anya knowingly incites within him,

> The truth is, he doesn't' need a segretaria or even a tipista, he could type out his thoughts himself […]. But he doesn't like typing […], he prefers to squeeze the pen and feel the words come out at the other end, he says […]. You shouldn't say things like that to a nice girl, I say. And I turn my back and off I go with a waggle of the bum, his eyes avid upon me. (*DBY* 30)

Yet beyond the undermining of the content of the Strong Opinions, beyond subjecting C's pre-Machiavellian morality to the ridicule of Anya's and Alan's post-Nietzschean context, *Diary*'s irregular form becomes in itself a nod towards the ethics of alterity which constitute Dostoevskian polyphony. The literal layering of three different narratives within the paginal construction is, at its basest level, the actualisation of polyphonic narrative form without content: outside of 'On the afterlife' there are always at least two voices at play, formalising dialogic interaction. The rhetorical artistry of the monologic text is challenged not only by the redundancy of the world into which it enters, a world of hard heads and common sense, but by the way the voice of the other breaks up the flow of the essays: this is *Diary*'s polyphony within monologism. And adding to this, the development of the Second Diary as a response to the failure of the Strong Opinions becomes a further example of the epistemic humility of a text in accord with a Levinasian sense of the ethical. It again realises, at a foundational level, the conditionality of the aesthetic gesture within the contemporary Dostoevskian text: the Second Diary has its counterparts in *Infinite Jest*'s parallactic structure, the pathway out of the cycle of violence in *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, and the gamble and inevitable perversion of authorial creation in *The Master of Petersburg*. *Diary* even plays on the threshold time of Bakhtinian polyphony through its juxtaposition of the synchronic essays and the diachronic experience of reading those essays whilst simultaneously reading about their creation. The fact that the Strong Opinions are given specific dates (*DBY* 1) whereas the Second Diary is un-dated further contributes to a reading of this temporal play as ethically significant: the Second Diary arises within the a-synchronic time of the Other.

However, like Coetzee's 'othering' of himself as C, the evident ways *Diary* destabilises the claim of the Strong Opinions to monologic authority, through both form and plot action, and so enacts C's epistemic humility as an author, draws attention to the analogous failure of that enactment. If the ethical within the aesthetic is to be revealed via polyphony (as opposed to the concealment of alterity within the typically monologic works of an author like Tolstoy) through an emphasis on the failure of the text to maintain an epistemic totality, then ethics must also be shown

to be always already reduced to the cognition of the aesthetic. The mechanisms of *Diary* may bring forth C's epistemic humility, but they must also bring forth Coetzee's. Coetzee as an author attempts in *Diary* to rid Tolstoy of his sage-like authority yet retain the gift of his rhetorical power to engage and absorb. It is a deliberately unachievable endeavour which leaves *Diary* in the realm of the paradox or aporia, epitomised by the fact that Alan, deriding C as a sage better suited to old Europe, sarcastically terms him 'Master', the later epithet of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. To conclude this close reading, I will follow two critical commentaries on *Diary of a Bad Year* that seek to emphasise its equivocation before the ethical and the aesthetic, drawing attention to the ways the novel fulfils the dictates of 'serious literature' by presenting Coetzee's epistemic humility as an advancement of C's, rather than compatible with it.

Johan Geertsema's essay on the 'problem of position' in *Diary* is specifically targeted towards assessing how *Diary* navigates the author's capacity for political critique. It uses the final set of remarks in the opening essay of the Strong Opinions as its cue, reading the interplay between *Diary*'s content and structure, and the metafictional techniques Coetzee employs such as the prosopopoeial creation of C, as the novel's attempt to surmount the futility of supra-political discourse. His companion text is an essay Coetzee wrote on 'Madness and Rivalry' in Erasmus, a commentary (amongst other things) on Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*.[48] Geertsema transfers Coetzee's analysis of the role of folly in Erasmus to his own reading of *Diary*. The 'position of folly, of the marginalized, the powerless, the fool free to criticize all without being co-opted by either side in a particular conflict' is integral to how *Diary* 'hints at a way out of the double bind' of political positioning.[49] By co-opting a 'foolish' position through the denigration of a near-double, Coetzee aims 'to move towards a position *beyond* politics, to an impossible, ironic position that allows the text to make a political intervention without, however, getting caught up in the game of politics.'[50]

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[48] This essay, 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry', is included in the collection *Giving Offense*, pp.83-103.
[49] Johan Geertsema, 'Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, Politics, and the Problem of Position', *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.1 (2011) 70-85 (74).
[50] Ibid., 71.

Geertsema's reading can itself be extended beyond the study of *Diary*'s political critique. Within the broader nexus of the discord between the aesthetic and the ethical, *Diary*'s 'attempts to carve out a position off the stage of political rivalry while yet positioning itself with respect to the outrages with which it is concerned' develops precisely through its own 'undercutting [of] the positions it takes'.[51] That is to say, the ironic, impossible non-position *Diary* seeks to occupy through its various fictional and metafictional techniques can be viewed as a refusal to endorse either side of the ethical and aesthetic tension of post-postmodern fiction, instead of the rivalrous desires which fuel political antagonism.[52] It is rightly, therefore, an impossible position: to say something apolitical about politics is here reconceived as the Kierkegaardian paradox of speaking without authority. For Geertsema, *Diary*'s refuge is a political (non)position that undermines its own expression, importantly, for both sides of the debate. The 'power' of such a position 'ironically lies in its weakness', lies in its refusal to endorse either, which is equivalent to its conditional endorsement of both.[53] *Diary*'s equivocation before aesthetics and ethics develops in the same manner. The novel's position is not one that merely portrays the staging of polyphonic ethics through the destabilising of monologic authority, but one that equivocates before the uncritical and authoritative portrayal of either for fear of equating the author and the sage.

This understanding of how *Diary* operates is foreshadowed by Carrol Clarkson's monograph on Coetzee when she comments on an interview from *Doubling the Point* concerning his interpretation of Jacques Lacan. Clarkson writes that the commonality of the Lacanian 'uneasiness about the occupation of a subject position' to Coetzee's fiction and nonfiction is part of Coetzee's wider 'consideration of the relation between thought and language'.[54] Mirroring Dostoevsky's adoption of Tiutchev, this wider consideration engendered 'a crucial feature of Coetzee's philosophical appreciation of writing: that is to say, his understanding of the verb 'to write' as

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[51] Ibid., 76.

[52] The 'rivalry' in relation to which Erasmus's folly seeks a non-position, in Coetzee's essay, is given its theoretical foundation by Girard. The two works that Coetzee draws from most heavily are *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, and *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[53] Geertsema, 'Problem of Position', 75.

[54] Carrol Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.42.

belonging to the classical middle voice, rather than to the active or passive voice.'[55] Divested of

context, a philosophical appreciation of language that strives to uphold the classic middle voice,

both affecting and affected by language, dovetails neatly with a hesitation before the ethical and the

aesthetic, in the sense that this hesitation is primordially rooted in language's simultaneous capacity

for cognition and discourse. Levinas perceives the inauguration of the subject as, first and foremost,

a passivity beyond all passivity. Yet the Saying that founds the subject cannot hold, must always

already be subordinated to the activity of Said. An artwork seeking to expose the Saying within the

Said would, in this sense, be constituted by the middle voice.

The section of Clarkson's *Countervoices* that close reads *Diary* follows on from this general

evaluation of Coetzee. Moreover, it is one of few studies of the novel that picks up on the pairing of

multiple narratives and Dostoevskian identification to read *Diary*'s structure alongside Bakhtin's

Problems. The idea behind Coetzee's so-called 'countervoices' is that his writing is more concerned

with interpolating the alternate voices within the text through its narrative strategies, rather than

the staging of differing characters within the same, monologic worldview. In this respect, Clarkson's

concept of countervoices bears a striking resemblance to my reading of novelistic polyphony as the

articulation of Levinasian Saying. And *Diary*'s own peculiar narrative strategies emphasise this point:

> any attribution of an authorial position to the writer of *Diary of a Bad Year* would be one that is *incorporated* within these different voices, and the dialogic angle set up between them – it is not as if an autonomous authorial voice is outside and before the writing that we encounter as a multiplicity of voices. There is no author-narrator who prescribes a resolution to the collision of voices from a position of anonymous omniscience. [...] What is demanded on the part of the writer, though, is a responsiveness to other voices, a willingness to be incorporated by them [...].[56]

However, Clarkson's theorisation of countervoices risks misreading the distinctly ethical dynamic of

polyphony, the way responsiveness manifests as irreducible responsibility, by verging on a reading of

Bakhtin that claims the voice of the other can be realised through authorial utterance. Making note

of a section of *Problems* which discourses on the 'object of authorial aspirations' as '*the passing of a*

theme through many and various voices' (*PDP* 265), Clarkson claims 'that the aspiration to 'speak in

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., p.100.

one's voice' takes on the somewhat different connotation of raising the countervoices within oneself, of refracting utterances through them'.[57] The 'author's writing' thus 'carries within it residual encounters with innumerable other writers.'[58] Perhaps influenced by the psychological theory which contributed to her understanding of countervoices (as evidenced by her development of Coetzee's remarks on Lacan), Clarkson claims that 'the effect of refracting the authority of the 'I' across a multiplicity of countervoices' is carried out by an 'ethic of responsiveness to the writing of the other, which becomes *part of* 'one's own voice'.[59]

A reading that the voice of the other is somehow subsumed within the singularity of the text, within the authorial voice, is in an unmistakable contradiction with the tenets of Levinasian ethics, and too seems to be antithetical to the architectonics of being as theorised in *Philosophy of the Act*.[60] That countervoices could *become* part of the subjective voice, rather than be presupposed by it, places them within the realm of cognitive totality. Yet Clarkson's reading here is useful in that it clears a path for assessing the subtle ways *Diary* undermines its own undermining of rhetorical authority, ensuring that the prioritisation of a Levinasian sense of the ethical does not supplant the irresolvable on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand dynamic of serious literary mastery. Despite its obvious pertinence to the concept of countervoices, Clarkson does not give sustained attention to the section of 'On authority in fiction' directly preceding C's quotation of Kierkegaard. After clarifying the affiliation between the author and authority, C muses that 'Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic.' However, he continues,

> what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically? [...] The god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come. (*DBY* 151)

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[57] Ibid., p.99.
[58] Ibid., p.104.
[59] Ibid., p.103.
[60] The role of the mind and of psychoanalysis in Levinas's philosophy is one that continues to vex scholars from different fields. Corresponding with the role of literature, an initially perceived Levinasian aversion to psychologism is giving way to a sustained critical interrogation which is yielding potentially strong correlations. Simon Critchley in particular is a prominent figure in this field. His *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999) includes one chapter exploring Levinas, psychoanalysis and trauma, and another specifically on Levinas and Lacan. Meanwhile, Sarah Harasym has edited *Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) which includes several essays dedicated precisely to the conceptual associations between the two thinkers.

This passage is important for Atwell, who claims that *Diary* reconceives of literary and political authority as 'associated with the mimesis or the performance of a particular kind of voice, a vatic speech'.[61] The transition from the Strong Opinions to the Second Diary takes place as C searches for a language 'more open to vatic promptings'.[62] Clarkson's section on *Diary* would presumably agree: similar to the kind of kenosis performed by *Master*'s fictional Dostoevsky in the creation of Stavrogin, 'vatic speech' would imply the competing existence of multiple countervoices within the authorial voice, and so an embrace of the vatic utterance would comply with the refraction of utterance prompted by the raising of countervoices within oneself.

Yet an emphasis on the redemptory potential of vatic speech again overlooks the inexorable accommodation of the Saying within the Said. The vatic utterance is still an utterance, and a thought once uttered is a lie. Which is to say, the renunciation of authority definitive of the polyphonic author must always be checked by the monologism fundamental to aesthetic creation: the ethical artwork incorporates both monologism and polyphony without endorsing either. With this in mind, allowing for an equivalence between vatic speech and countervoices elucidates *Diary*'s hesitation before the ethical and the aesthetic. In a manner symptomatic of Clarkson's reading of the novel, Atwell fails to recognise that C's musings on speaking vatically are in the conditional tense. They reiterate the conditionality of Dostoevskian polyphony, the artistic equivocation before God and Truth. The God can be invoked but does not necessarily come: the invocation itself is critical to the Dostoevskian failure of writing that is also a writing of failure. If the countervoice of the Other can be prompted vatically, its expression resumes monologic authority and so is once more in need of vatic prompting. The Levinasian conception of the divine, expounded upon in Chapter 3, relocates the authority of the words said by the prophet to the condition of their saying, to the trace of the Saying within their Said.

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[61] Atwell, 'Mastering Authority', 219.
[62] Ibid., 219.

The invocation of a God that does not necessarily come, the paradox of authority, thus relates to the wider strategies which *Diary* employs to maintain its hesitation before the mastery of Dostoevsky and of Tolstoy. Geertsema's essay on the novel ultimately favours a reading of its politics aligned with the Derridean notion of democracy 'to come', in which its political position can have 'no final, clearly defined essence other than that it is open to the other, which of course in itself will destabilize it if it is actually to be open to the other', creating 'a necessarily impossible project defined by its constant interruption by itself of itself.'[63] It is a reading that has similar applications to *Diary*'s ethical position. Like the other contemporary Dostoevskian texts, *Diary*'s ethics are an ethics 'to come', an ethics that always have 'one responsibility more than all the others' (*EI* 99). This is evidenced by the way the death of authorial authority gestured towards in 'On the afterlife' is matched by the variously postponed deaths of the Second Diary. The empty spaces of C's underlying narrative which begin the Second Diary, an intimation of the instance of polyphonic silence, eventually give way to C's relating of Anya's departure and their final goodbye. C's narration of his own narrative does indeed end with this goodbye, portrayed as his quiet withdrawal from her life: 'I thought, *Enough is enough*, and let her go' (*DBY* 190). Thereafter C's narrative is filled by a letter from Anya; in this way, Anya's narration occupies the final sections of the two underlying narratives, vatically prompted by C's withdrawal in a way that mirrors her unacknowledged but traceable presence in the Strong Opinions. Anya is 'everywhere' in the Strong Opinions, 'everywhere and nowhere. Like God, though not on the same scale' (*DBY* 181).

Moreover, Anya's own narrative concludes with an imaginative envisioning of C's actual death. She would in this sense be the alterity that consummates his life from without, yet this too is shown to be a deferred event, unable to be actualised within the remit of the novel. And it is this play between Anya's vocalisation of C's narrative and the deferral of C's death in her own that exhibits *Diary*'s epistemic humility. The Strong Opinions give way to the Second Diary. C's narrative

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[63] Geertsema, 'Problem of Position', 80. For Derrida's fullest elaboration of 'democracy to come', see *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

gives way to Anya's letter. Anya's narrative ends with the prophecy of C's death. All three

accumulate to suggest the necessary renewal of the vatic utterance. Anya's narrative continues

beyond the page, but it is implied that she too is composed of countervoices, which will be refracted

through her own utterance, thereby refreshing the cycle and ensuring that no definitive ethical

position is actualised. The novel's ethics are always an ethics to-come, a necessary consequence of

the interaction between the discursive and cognitive functions of language. Whilst the other

Dostoevskian texts work to develop a sense of epistemic humility by exposing the trace of polyphony

within their monologic utterance, *Diary*, because its very structure desires to formalise the

polyphonic, displays its epistemic humility by showing that polyphony as such cannot be formalised,

must always be reduced to aesthetic expression. Ultimately, it is not Ivan Karamazov's 'reasoning'

that moves C to tears. It is 'the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky […] that sweeps me along'

(*DBY* 225). Even so, as C admits, Ivan's voice has everything to do with rhetoric, although it should

not be dismissed as 'mere rhetoric' (*DBY* 226). The trick of rhetoric that constitutes Ivan's voice

instead opens up the fundamental conditionality of polyphonic art. Ivan's utterance, hostile to

Dostoevsky's own convictions (thus demonstrating Dostoevsky's radical spiritual courage),

illuminates the polyphonic within the 'sentiment (martyred children) and caricature (cruel

landowners) [of] the substance of his argument' (*DBY* 225). It is the rhetorical exposure of the Saying

within the Said, in spite of Saying's inevitable subordination within that Said. *Diary*'s marriage of

form and content too seeks to expose the polyphonic within the monologic, only to conceal it again.

In this way it depicts the paradox of the vatic utterance. Yet it is via the exposure of the failure of

writing (and its failure to write its own failure), that one can be an ethical author without being an

authority on the ethical. *Diary*'s epistemic humility is thus broadened across the on-the-one/on-the-

other dynamic of serious literature, of the literary mastery of 'Mother Russia' (*DBY* 227).

Conclusion

Dostoevsky's Ghost: The Spirit of Dostoevskian Literature

I have employed figurative language on numerous occasions throughout this thesis. The Berlin Conference of 1884, for Frederic Jameson a symbolic marker of the modernist turn, has for me not only emblematised the dawn of modernism (neatly situating on either side Dostoevsky's death in 1881 and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886) but has also been utilised as a figuration for the demarcation, or mapping, of the transition critical to the post-postmodern repositioning of Dostoevsky's ethics: the process of both spatial and temporal mapping is, I claim, an important (if arbitrary) stage in identifying the divergences and correlations between different historical and socio-cultural understandings of the ethical. By placing Dostoevsky and Nietzsche on either side of the Berlin conference I employed another figuration, borrowing the trope of the threshold from Bakhtin, who in turn sourced it in Dostoevsky. Erdinast-Vulcan's homesickness and exile are further examples, as is Rahimi's own use of 'exilic' as a way of understanding writing itself. Indeed, the very proliferation of symbol, allegory and metaphor across the works of all the writers studied throughout speaks to the very hesitancy I note at the heart of linguistic duality. Writing's equivocation between truth and utterance inspires, even demands, a reliance on figuration, so that when Bakhtin speaks of the threshold, or Levinas of the proximate Face, or Dostoevsky and Coetzee of possession, or Wallace of The Entertainment or Rahimi of Raskolnikov's axe, they are all both proposing an idea within language and reminding readers of the insufficiency of language to represent the idea that is proposed.

To conclude this thesis, I would like to return to the figuration with which it opened, a metaphor for the question that has prompted it throughout: the invocation of a ghost. It is an image that, more than any other, symbolises both the presence of absence and the absence of any discernible presence. Dostoevsky, the ghost announced, was gone. And the Dostoevsky that remained was not what it once was. Familiar in aspect, but a spectre all the same. Emptied of that

which used to make him whole. Yet to evoke the presence of absence is, paradoxically, to retain presence. True absence cannot announce itself. Dostoevsky was a ghost, but to those who invoked him he was also a guest. His spirit signalled loss but demanded reconciliation, if not a reunion in the matter of a return to unity.

It is in the spirit of reconciliation that I would like to update my figurative use of Dostoevsky's ghost. As well as signifying the simultaneous presence and absence of the values and principles of a bygone era, which in this thesis I have taken to mean the recognition of the inadequacy of ontotheological ethical absolutes aligned with the fear of post-Nietzschean moral relativism, the image of the ghost may also signify the intractable albeit irreconcilable tension at the heart of post-Nietzschean literary ethics, stemming from the very duality of language of which such literature is composed. A ghost is both meaning and its trace. The image present is a failed image, signifying both what is and what was, what has been lost yet what still remains. A ghost, as a present image, can be cohered and conceived of. It belongs to the cognitive function. Even so, it is not a full presence, not a unity of meaning and being. On the other hand, a ghost is an image of something past. It can only gesture towards an absence, towards the transcendence of the otherwise than being. In this respect it connotes the discursive function. Yet, again, the gesture still belongs to the realm of signification. A ghost is neither same nor other, but instead must somehow come to mean both, somehow encapsulate by its very figuration an uneasy hesitancy between two polarities.[1]

The invocation of Dostoevsky's ghost by the contemporary texts in this way takes on a second meaning. In the Introduction, I used it to mean the recognition that Dostoevsky was dead and gone, prompting the lament for what he once was and/or a joyful confirmation of his burial. It is in this sense that Vonnegut's Eliot Rosewater accused Dostoevsky of not being 'enough any more'. The contemporary Dostoevskians invoked his ghost because the era they depicted had far departed

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[1] Derrida offered his own typically convoluted musings on the concept of the spirit in his 1987 work, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Though the complexities of the text are beyond the scope of this short coda, its overriding theme is an interrogation of how Heidegger treated the idea of spirit (*geist*) in Hegel. Because it implicitly engages with Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism, it in some ways presents the concept of the spirit or the ghost as significant for the consideration of postructural/deconstructive ethics, aligning with Straus's conjectured timeline for Derrida's 'circumfession'.

from the absolute ethics that traditional, Christocentric readings of his work claimed they

represented. Dostoevsky's ghost thereby testified to the need for a new understanding of the ethical

in the absence of ontotheological grounding. And this new understanding prompts the second sense

of Dostoevsky's ghost. Rather than signalling a loss, his ghost comes to signify the contemporary

repositioning of his ethics. The contemporary texts do not seek to revive Dostoevsky. They source

their ethics in the duality of his ghost, the ethical revealed by the way a ghost both succeeds and

fails to achieve a comprehensible presence. It is only as a ghost that Dostoevsky can be alive for the

post-postmodern writers. His ghost is the spirit of contemporary Dostoevskian literature.

These two ghosts have haunted my thesis. In the Introduction I began the process of

demarcation by introducing the concept of 'Dostoevskian literature', literature that paid homage to

Dostoevsky and upheld his relevance to the various contemporary ethical crises they depicted, but

that nevertheless portrayed and lamented an irrecoverable historical and axiological distance

between his time and their own that ostensibly undermined the very relevance they sought to

establish. The Introduction then moved to plot out this historical transition, drawing the concept out

through a close reading of Coetzee's and Wallace's comparable reviews of Joseph Frank's *The*

Miraculous Years, which in their own ways offer their respective evaluations of Dostoevsky himself.

Using the opening sections of Zygmund Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* as a guide, and collating

(perhaps indelicately) the numerous geo-conflictual, totalitarian and genocidal tragedies besetting

the years between 1880 (the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov*) and 1994 (the publication of

The Master of Petersburg), the Introduction reiterated a commonly accepted premise that, in terms

of Western ethics or morality, such years saw the decline and eventual abandonment of the ethical

absolutism associated either with religious institutions or philosophical imperatives. It positioned

Dostoevsky at the crux of this transition. Consequently, it proposed that attempts to read

Dostoevsky's novels (particularly the post-Siberian works) as advocating such absolutes would annul

his relevance to the contemporary texts. These attempts would be the target of Rosewater's rebuke.

The impetus behind Part I, therefore, was to find a way to read Dostoevskian ethics that allowed for their translation into secularised, 'post-Nietzschean' society. It did so through a comparative reading of this thesis's two central ethical theorists, Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom acknowledge Dostoevsky's influence over their respective philosophies. Chapter 1 detailed how Bakhtin and Levinas established an antagonistic position, in line with the phenomenologists that directly influenced them, regarding the Western philosophical tendency towards universalism, a tendency that culminated in the Kantian 'consciousness everywhere' and the Hegelian 'absolute I'. Rejecting the totalising effects of deontological ethics but fearing Nietzschean moral relativism (a fear typified by the way Dostoevskian proto-modernists such as Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov influenced their nihilist counterparts, Pyotr Verkhovensky and Smerdyakov), Bakhtin and Levinas relocated the ethical away from the stasis of finalised Being and towards an 'unfinalizable', inherently dialogic becoming. Using this, the chapter favoured situating Dostoevsky as a forerunner of the modernist response to the post-Nietzschean disinheritance of ethical absolutes, rather than at the tail end of a dying philosophical tradition. Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial monologism was central to that response: novelistic polyphony, as theorised by Bakhtin, was therefore read as the articulation of dialogic ethics. Chapter 2 sought to extend this reading by disregarding Bakhtinian reciprocity to posit a post-metaphysical anchorage of ethical subjectivity within the unlimited accusative. The condition of the subject is subjection, called to respond and to be responsible. Polyphonic form was thus theorised as the pre-discursive articulation of such anchorage, understood in Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being* as 'Saying' presupposed by the coherence of the 'Said', a renewal of the infinite breach of cognitive totality.

Chapter 3 began by offering a more detailed look at the conditions in which Bakhtin's and Levinas's converging ethics arose, using Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan's metaphor of 'metaphysical homesickness' as a structuring trope. Noting the persistence of religious rhetoric within Levinas's necessarily secular ethics, and using Ivan Karamazov's equivocation between Alyosha and Smerdyakov as an example, the chapter sought to draw out the competing nostalgia for a

metaphysical grounding and recognition of its insufficiency as characteristic of the period covered by literary and philosophical modernism (i.e., corresponding with the analytic and continental philosophy of the early 20th century). I then charted another historical transition, this time concerning ethical consideration, noting that Jacques Derrida's 'circumfession' (as read by Nina Pelikan Straus) to ethical questioning had a counterpart in the resurgence of ethical interest characteristic of contemporary Dostoevskian literature. I argued that the contemporary texts posit the same metaphysical nostalgia as literary and philosophical modernists, as a direct refutation of their immediate postmodern forebears, and thus understood the literary response to the postmodern heyday of the 'long sixties', ill-defined as 'post-postmodernism', as a return to modernist concerns. Chapter 4 used Wallace's essay 'E Unibus Pluram' to understand post-postmodernism as a growing rejection of the isolated subjectivity that early postmodernists championed as a way to illuminate the hypocrisy of traditional Western power structures through irony and cynicism. Such cynicism, claimed Wallace, had been repossessed by the digital age to leave an impotent and solipsistic subject, addicted to the pursuit of pleasure and unable to secure ethical grounding. Finally, the chapter turned all the way back to the surrogacy of religious concepts in the secular (or post-secular) context portrayed by the contemporary works, particularly in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Part II in this way performed its own playful 'circumfession'.

The persistence of a theological lexicon within the dialogic ethics of the post-Nietzschean thinkers and writers had, I noted in Part III, its correspondence with the equivocation over the role of the aesthetic within ethical theory. In Chapter 5, I used the burgeoning ideas put forward by metamodernism both to demonstrate the conspicuous nature of the concepts informing post-postmodernism in current scholarly fields and to distinguish the metamodern emphasis on 'oscillation' with my proposal that it is instead a tension or hesitancy which underscores the competing claims of the ethical and the aesthetic over the post-Nietzschean. Offsetting key early theorisations of art and literature by Bakhtin and Levinas, Chapter 5 ended with the suggestion that it was in fact literature itself that was best equipped to sustain the irreconcilability of those

competing claims. In Chapter 6, I developed this suggestion by tracing such literary hesitancy back to

Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels. I read his mistrust for the capacity of words to ever represent the

underlying reality of divine transcendence as the origin for the prominence of polyphonic 'silence'

(representative of all disruptions of coherence). I therefore argued for the consideration of

Dostoevskian ethics as based within literature's aptitude for preserving the cognitive and discursive

functions of language simultaneously, the theoretical conditionality of his works. Noting how a

renewed critical appreciation of Levinasian aesthetics was based in the same such hesitancy

(hypothesised as 'epistemic humility), I then contended that Bakhtinian polyphony should be

advanced. It is not that polyphony stands for a break from authorial monologism. It is instead a

humility before authorial mastery. If monologism extends out from cognition, and polyphony from

discourse, then literary ethics manifest within the provisional maintenance of the two.

Part IV dedicated itself to close-reading the contemporary texts for the ways they sought to

reposition Dostoevsky's ethics; that is, for the ways the aesthetic necessity for monologic cognition

and a polyphonic sense of the ethical which challenges such cognition. I began in Chapter 7 with the

myriad ways *Infinite Jest* fuses its maximalist style with the irruption of knowledge, a fusion

premised on the way another's voice challenges the predominantly visual addiction to pleasure at

the core of American postmodern solipsism. That previous Wallace scholars have utilised the

concept of epistemic (or epistemological) humility when studying his works lends weight to his

repositioning of Dostoevsky: such humility plays out as Wallace's 'parallactic' literary method, his

aggrandising of the multifarious ways to read *Infinite Jest* at the expense of his own authorial control

over the narrative. Chapter 7 then drew on parallels between Wallace's methods and Rahimi's in *A

Curse on Dostoevsky*. Noting similar tendencies in plot, characterisation and structure between both

texts, I applied Wallacean parallax to Rahimi's anti-war sentiments. I equated authorial monologism

with the totalising violence that Rahimi's novel protests against, thus exposing his impossible

position as an author opposed to war. *A Curse on Dostoevsky* responds to this impossibility, I claim,

by gesturing towards its conditional rewriting on behalf of the reader. The reader this way becomes

the alterity, the otherwise-than-being, who can stand for the cessation of Afghanistan's cycle of violence and vengeance. In Chapter 8, I turned my attention to the two Coetzee novels that I chose to incorporate within the scope of contemporary Dostoevskian literature. Despite the 13-year difference between *The Master of Petersburg* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, the fact that both invoke Dostoevsky's ghost for their respective interrogations into the conflict between authorial mastery and literary ethics evidences the analogous tendencies of the contemporary repositioning of a polyphonic sense of the ethical. *Master*, I argued, operates through the anticipation and deferral of readerly catharsis, employing overt intertextual references to its Dostoevskian forebear and an incohesive writing style to ingrain such an operation within the narrative as well as at the plot-level. It does so to expose the ethical transcendence of alterity, and this transcendence runs up against the writerly desire to cognise and totalise, to set itself up as knowledge of the absolute. Coetzee broadens this by thematising epistemic humility as authorial humiliation, incorporating a thematic perversion within the narrative and plot that ultimately registers the incapacity to represent ethical Saying within the aesthetic Said. Meanwhile *Diary* evinces its epistemic humility by portraying the necessary impossibility of actualising the polyphonic structure within an aesthetic text. By positing the standard of serious literature as an equilibrium between the artistic mastery of Tolstoy and the ethical mastery of Dostoevsky, *Diary* implies a reconceiving of mastery that corresponds with my reconceiving of Dostoevsky's ghost. Literary mastery no longer refers to the authority of the sage or the sorcerer but to the humility of the pupil or the apprentice. This is what it means for Dostoevsky to be enough. It is through such humility that the contemporary texts reposition his ethics within the context of their works, and thus retain within their time and place the spirit of Dostoevskian literature.

Appendix: Synopses of the Contemporary Texts

A Curse on Dostoevsky

The novel is set during the Afghan *mujahideen* wars of the early 1990s. Rassoul, a young Afghan living in Kabul with an obsessive interest in Dostoevsky, murders Nana Alia, a pawnbroker and rumoured pander of his love interest, Sophia. Startled by an intruder, Rassoul flees the scene of the crime and into the streets of Kabul, which is soon after struck by a rocket. In the resultant chaos, Rassoul seemingly escapes juridical consequences. He then traverses Kabul without purpose, mysteriously unable to speak, mulling over the meaning of both his crime and his impunity within internecine Afghanistan. He tries to confess but is unable to find anyone to confess to. Eventually he is arrested and sentenced to death for bringing Sophia to a sacred place, considered a heresy because Sophia is a woman and because, it is implied, she is a prostitute. Yet before his sentence is carried out, a local Commandant uses the noose intended for Rassoul to hang himself, attempting to end the civil war's cycle of vengeance.

Infinite Jest

In a near future, North America has united as a single nation, the Organisation of North American Nations. Most of the novel is set in a year corresponding to 2009, although the novel does not follow a linear chronological structure. *Infinite Jest* infamously has over 300 endnotes, some of which are several pages long. There are three central plotlines, albeit with numerous loosely related minor plotlines and backstories.

     1) At the Enfield Tennis Academy in Boston, Massachusetts, Hal Incandenza and his classmates negotiate academic learning and intense tennis training. Hal is the son of Jim, a filmmaker and the founder of the ETA. Jim was an alcoholic suicide. Jim's widow, Avril, and her brother, Charles, run the ETA. Hal's eldest brother, Orin, is a punter for the Phoenix Cardinals. Orin is portrayed as a Lothario, which compensates for his implied Oedipal complex. Hal's other brother, Mario, is physically deformed but so abnormally genial that he is beloved by all. Hal is academically and athletically gifted but emotionally numb. He is addicted to marijuana.

     2) Nearby the ETA is an alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre called Ennet House. The protagonist of the Ennet House plotline is Don Gately, a physically enormous narcotic addict with a criminal history. Don, however, is portrayed as generally good-natured and desperate to abstain

from narcotics. Later in the plot he is shot whilst defending the other Ennet House residents from an attack. Refusing painkillers because of his addiction, Don hallucinates the ghost of Jim Incandenza whilst recovering in a hospital bed. One of the other Ennet House residents is Joelle van Dyne, the former love interest of both Orin and Jim. Joelle was facially disfigured by her mother and so belongs to the Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed, meaning that she now wears a face veil. Joelle also works as a radio show host under the pseudonym Madame Psychosis. Her show is a favourite of Mario's. Joelle and Don develop romantic feelings for each other.

3) Uniting the two other plotlines is the race between the USOUS (ONAN's intelligence agency) and Quebecois separatists for the reproducible master copy of Jim's film, The Entertainment (also known as *Infinite Jest*). The Entertainment is so addictively entertaining that anyone who views it loses all interest in other activities. The separatists plan to distribute copies of The Entertainment as an act of terror. The bulk of this plotline consists of dialogues from the briefings between USOUS Agent Hugh Steeply and Remy Marathe, a quadruple agent for USOUS. Steeply advocates the American principle of free choice. Marathe, who betrays the Quebecois cause only for the sake of medical assistance for his gravely ill wife, advocates the renunciation of free choice for the sake of a transcendent national and/or political ideology. Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that the master copy of The Entertainment is buried with Jim.

The Master of Petersburg

A fictional version of Dostoevsky returns in disguise to St Petersburg following the death of his stepson, Pavel. Though officially believed to have either been an accident or suicide, Dostoevsky suspects Pavel was murdered. Investigating his suspicion, he takes a room at Pavel's former lodging, meeting and eventually seducing the landlady, Anna Sergeyevna. He also meets Anna's young daughter, Matryona. It is suggested that both Anna and Matryona may have had romantic feelings for Pavel, although the extent of their relationships is not revealed. Dostoevsky's interrogation into Pavel's death leads to conflicts with the local police force. He is also contacted by a fictionalised Sergei Nechaev, who claims Pavel was a nihilist revolutionary and was murdered by the police. Sergei pressures Dostoevsky to write a public denouncement of the police. Instead, Dostoevsky writes a denouncement of Nechaev. It turns out this was Nechaev's plan; using that denouncement, he incites riots across St Petersburg. In the final chapter, Dostoevsky writes Stavrogin's confession to the seduction of a child that was, historically, censured from *Demons*. He leaves the 'confession' for

Matryona to read, thereby raising the suggestion that Matryona is the inspiration for Stavrogin's seduced child.

Diary of a Bad Year

Diary of a Bad Year is split into two parts: the Strong Opinions and the Second Diary. Each part contains a number of brief essays on a variety of socio-political topics, many of which condemn Western governments, and Western society more generally, for their lack of moral conviction and seemingly Machiavellian willingness to abandon principles for personal or political gain. In general, the Strong Opinions are more condemnatory than the Second Diary essays.

     Diary's pages are mostly split into two or three segments. The essays are the top segments. The underlying segments offer the plot action. The narrator of the first underlying segment is 'C', a South African author who lives in Australia. He shares many biographical details with Coetzee, but there are discrepancies between the two. The narrator of the other underlying segment is Anya, a Filipina resident of C's building. C describes meeting Anya in the building's shared laundry room and being sexually attracted to her. To get to know her better, he asks Anya to be a typist for his forthcoming book, a contribution to a collection of essays called *Strong Opinions*. Anya, it is revealed, lives with her partner, an investment consultant called Alan. Alan's views are distinctly neoliberal. Learning of C from Anya, Alan schemes to siphon the interest off of C's savings. He is dissuaded by Anya but, having gotten drunk at C's publication party, Alan reveals his plan in a scathing belittlement of C's moral principles. Meanwhile C, having offended Anya by suggesting she should feel ashamed for having been raped in her early adulthood, resolves to revise his opinions and thus writes the Second Diary.

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