A Study of J.M. Coetzee's Novel *The Master of Petersburg*, With Particular Reference to Its Confessional Aspects

Carol Brammage

Pietermaritzburg

January 2000

Submitted as the dissertation component in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Declaration

Unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, this thesis is entirely my own work.

Abstract

The dissertation focuses on J.M. Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg*, read as a confessional text and discussed in the light of theories of the western tradition of confession. By way of introduction some of the themes and features of Coetzee's novels that have been the subject of criticism and debate and are pertinent to this discussion are highlighted. Alluding to the politics, aesthetics and ethics of writing in South Africa, the introduction is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the criticism Coetzee's work has generated.

In the second chapter, taking into account aspects of Coetzee's essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky", an essay he characterises as a dialogue between cynicism and grace, problems of truth, particularly "how to tell the truth in autobiography", self-knowledge and self-deception are discussed, drawing also on observations made by Dennis A. Foster in his book *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* and with reference to Jeremy Tambling's book *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject.* An important focus is the idea that the concept of sin serves to marginalise the subject who is inscribed in the discourse of confession.

The third chapter focuses on the novel *The Master of Petersburg* and the main protagonist – a fictionalised Dostoevsky – who displays the hyper-self-consciousness of the confessant, and his actions and disclosures which he characterises, in the vocabulary of confession, as being sinful. Notions of truth, self-knowledge, the nature of writing, the role of the reader, as well as critical responses to the novel itself, are examined in the light of theories of confession.

In the final chapter, themes of betrayal, self-alienation and falling from grace are considered in the context of confession and the question "how are we to be ethical in a

secular context?" emerges. How grace manifests itself in a secular world leads to the key question as to whether or not there is an ethical imperative in the process and practice of writing.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my supervisor, David Attwell, for his insightful comments and for giving me confidence in my subject. Thanks to Sharon Dell for proofreading. Dave Brammage's support made part-time study more than merely possible. And lastly, thanks to the animals for an unselfconsciousness that approaches grace.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction 1

Chapter 2

Confession, Truth and Knowing 17

Chapter 3

Aspects of Confession and *The Master of Petersburg* 44

Chapter 4

Conclusion 78

Works Cited 86

Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on aspects of confession in relation to J.M. Coetzee's 1994 novel *The Master of Petersburg*. This first chapter, as a general introduction, highlights some of the themes and features of Coetzee's novels that have been the subject of criticism and debate and are pertinent to my discussion of *The Master of Petersburg*. The themes and features selected are merely highlighted and are not subjected to thorough examination; neither is this introduction intended to provide a comprehensive overview of Coetzee's fiction nor of the criticism his work has generated.

As a South African writer with an international reputation, Coetzee was read both at home and abroad as a writer "living in an oppressive society", a scenario in which South African writers were regarded as "being 'trapped' by their location", and "constrained to write about the politics of apartheid" (Barnett 290). Parry notes that Coetzee's fiction "has been widely embraced as a powerful moral critique of apartheid", and by many critics defended as such against those who, on the other hand, "castigate his fictions as out of touch with the sensibilities of the times, and indifferent to the existential conditions of contemporary South Africa" (Parry 19). Such critics are characterised by Huggan and Watson as charging Coetzee with "an aestheticism which they considered politically irresponsible, or simply irrelevant; they demanded of him an explicit form of commitment which his novels evidently eschewed" (3). Coetzee was criticised for withdrawing from "proper" political commitment in the struggle against apartheid which was understood to be a *moral* struggle for justice and not simply a political obligation.

Discussing the critical reception of Coetzee's writing internationally in the non-academic context of the "metropolitan journalistic review" (289), Barnett makes the point that, "Given the dominant notion of literature as a repository of universal humanistic moral values that underwrites this genre of criticism, we might expect literature to be understood as a privileged medium for the articulation of critiques of apartheid in a moral register" (189-190). Barnett argues that international audiences both expected and were attracted by the political nature of South African fiction, yet the overtly political nature of the writing is also regarded as a kind of lack and "an intrusion on the proper tasks of the novelist's vocation" (290). The dominant perspective is that, "The space for the proper subject-matter of the novel, for private inter-personal relationships, is squeezed in a society understood to be uniquely saturated with public, political significance" (290). From this perspective, rather than being criticised for lacking political commitment, "Coetzee's novels are often valued to the extent that they escape the received conventions of politically committed literature" (290). There is a dualism in this reception, where novels can be valued for being politically and morally significant, but are consequently "condemned to a lesser aesthetic judgment" (291). Coetzee's work, in contrast to the work of Gordimer and Brink, was seen as succeeding "in escaping the conventions of politically committed fiction and thus elevating itself to the status of 'art'" (291).

In the interview that concludes *Doubling the Point,* Coetzee tells of his student days when he was sympathetic to the politics of the left, or at least to "the human concerns of the left", but alienated "by its language - all political language" (394). This statement can be read as Coetzee distancing himself from the "obligation" prescribed by those "of the left" to write in an overtly political fashion, but, speaking of himself in the third person, he adds: "As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays down the law, that is not

provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back skeptically at its premises" (394). It can be said that the liberal humanist position also "lays down the law", and insists that literature should "rather be about the general human condition", than about a specific socio-historical-political context such as apartheid South Africa for example. According to Barnett, in this liberal humanist context, allegory is understood as "a trope that uses the particular situation as a way of rendering general or universal themes", an understanding that "often allows writers like Coetzee or Gordimer to be salvaged for the humanist tradition, by arguing that they do not write exclusively about a South African situation but rather about the general human condition" (191-192). Interpreting allegory in this way empties the novels of any specific South African cultural or political significance, and the narrative is seen as elevated "to a universal, moral level" (292). Alternatively, Coetzee is also read as using allegory "as a politically duplicitous escape from historical reality" (292) in a context of state surveillance and censorship.

Barnett's point is that such allegorical readings, common in the genre of general literary reviews, "enables South Africa to be understood as the referent of the novel, but a South Africa which is already constructed in terms of tyranny and totalitarianism, allowing a more general and de-politicised significance to be drawn from the novel" (294). But, this South Africa, "concretised and named as the context and referent of Coetzee's novels" is "at the same time and in the same move [...] idealised as a stage for more general moral dramas of human suffering and violence" (294).

According to such readings, Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg,* even though set in nineteenth-century Russia, is re-attached to South Africa, and, as Barnett comments, "South Africa under apartheid and nineteenth-century Russia are both taken to be emblematic of a general form of 'historical tyranny'". Such readings enable the novels "to be assimilated

to familiar paradigms for understanding apartheid" (294), and conform to that which Coetzee, when explaining his resistance to being interviewed by journalists, describes as "a monologic ideal" (*DP* 65). These readings take no cognisance of post-modern or post-structuralist literary theory, where allegory is not a means of escaping theory, but "rather the trope where the place of language in history becomes the subject of narration itself" (293).

In contrast to "general literary journalism", Barnett identifies "another reading-formation through which South African literature has circulated" (297). In this realm, described as "professional academic literary criticism", it is "the *political* value of literary fiction that is emphasised" (297). Barnett locates this claim first in "the 1970s and much of the 1980s", when "radical academic critics found it difficult to ascribe an unambiguously positive political evaluation to Coetzee's work" (297). Barnett reiterates the charges mentioned above, that Coetzee's novels "do not deal adequately with the urgent demands of representing the reality of life under apartheid and articulating an appropriate political response to it" (297). Coetzee's work did "not easily fit into the dominant realist aesthetic characteristic of much post-war South Africa[n] literature" (297). Barnett asserts that, "Political and ethical ambivalence is a theme of all [Coetzee's] fiction", and that in interviews and his critical essays, Coetzee "cultivates a careful resistance to the standard gestures of the writer's political responsibility" and "marked his distance from instrumentalist conceptions of writing, and from understandings of the subordinated relation of fiction to history which have shaped the realist aesthetics of mainstream opposition South African literature" (297).

In more recent criticism that "coincides with the ascendancy of post-structuralist theories of interpretation", Coetzee's fiction has been positively re-evaluated, particularly in the light of academic critics' "interrogation of the dominate realist aesthetic previously characteristic of so much South African literature" (297). The "value of formal radicalism" in

Coetzee's work is now recognised. More recently, the reception of Coetzee's fiction "is intimately connected to the emergence of post-colonial theories of culture, difference and identity" (298). According to Barnett, literary "post-coloniality" is constructed as having specific defining characteristics, an exemplary feature being "the textual inscription of ambivalence and ambiguity". The writing of Coetzee, "characterised as it is by its overt inter-textual references to canonical novels, by tropes of allegory and mimicry, and by a studied ambivalence of narration", has been "elevated" into "the canon of post-colonial literature" (298). Consequently Coetzee's novels have been appropriated as a basis "for theoretical exposition in colonial discourse and post-colonial theory, and not least the basis for a continuation of debates sparked by Spivak's much contested statement that 'the subaltern cannot speak'" (299).

Notwithstanding Attwell's emphasising that Coetzee is a "regional writer within South Africa" (*J M Coetzee* 25), quoted by Barnett, Barnett observes that post-colonial readings of Coetzee's work construct South Africa not only "as a particular variant of colonialism, but of colonialism theorised primarily as a set of discursive practises for the construction of colonial subjectivities" (Barnett 299-300).

> The coloniser/colonised dyad, which is central to contemporary theories of colonial discourse and post-colonialism, easily reproduces a representation of South African society in terms of a Manichean struggle between the forces of good and evil. South Africa thus becomes just one example of a generic colonialism [...] The historical specificity of apartheid is assimilated to an essentially de-historicised model of oppression. (300)

Whether one agrees with Barnett's conclusion or not, he has put his finger on the tendency of any theoretical perspective to elide difference and, by focusing on the

commonalities foregrounded by the theory, produce that which might be termed a "homogenising effect".

In *The Master of Petersburg,* the political obligations and aesthetic sensibilities of the writer are inherent themes, and are overtly discussed most notably by the fictionalised Dostoevsky, as the writer, and Nechaev, a character based on the radical political activist (a contemporary of Dostoevsky, although in actuality they never met (Coetzee Interview "Voice and Trajectory" 100). Nechaev prizes action above words and ideas. He says, "'We don't talk, we don't cry, we don't endlessly think *on the one hand* and *on the other hand*, we just *do*!'" (104). But towards the end of the book, Dostoevsky reflects on Nechaev, who despite his ostensible passion for justice and concern for the poor, for the "people", can be seen as being "Without feeling, without feelings [...] Lonely, lone. His proper place a throne in a bare room. The throne of ideas. A pope of ideas, dull ideas" (196). Nechaev cannot be characterised in a simplistic fashion, one way or the other. Bald distinctions break down. At times Dostoevsky even finds it difficult to distinguish himself from Nechaev, even though he had thought they were in bitter opposition, "he no longer knows where the mastery lies - whether he is playing with Nechaev or Nechaev with him. All barriers seem to be crumbling at once: the barrier on tears, the barrier on laughter" (*Master* 190). In Coetzee's writing can be found a resistance to resorting to crude oppositions and a resistance to overarching universalitites that elide all difference. Understanding and knowledge seem to inhere in endless paradoxes. Truth is not a simple thing:

> it is not truth he has lost touch with at all: on the contrary, truth has been pouring down upon him like a waterfall, without moderation, till now he is drowning in it. And then he thinks (reverse the thought and reverse the reversal too: by such Jesuitical tricks must one think nowadays!): Drowning

> under the falls, what is it that I need? More water, more flood, a deeper drowning. (*Master* 83)

Closely linked to the concerns of politics and aesthetics in writing, often regarded as being in opposition to one another, is the relationship between history and fiction. As mentioned already, Coetzee distances himself from the view that regards fiction as subordinate to history. In his frequently quoted talk "The Novel Today", delivered at the 1987 Weekly Mail Book Week, he says that the novel can either *supplement* history – it can add to history "the kind of dense realisation of the texture of life" that history has difficulty with (2) – or it can *rival* history. The novel that rivals history would occupy an autonomous place. Such a novel:

> operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history [...] In particular I mean a novel evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologising history. (3)

Attwell asks "why Coetzee sets up the relation in terms that are exclusively and unhappily Manichean?" ("The Problem of History" 107), and suggests that Coetzee's polemical response is as a result of his "charged relationship with the politics of historical discourses" (107). Speaking "in times of intense ideological pressure" ("Novel Today" 3), Coetzee is reacting against implied or direct compulsions for writers to contribute to ideals of nation-building and to submit to the requirements of the political struggle. "Specifically, he is challenging a sense that it is *de rigueur* for the committed anti-apartheid writer to tilt his or

her writing towards a preconceived style of intervention: that is, the documentation of, the bearing witness to, the supplementation of, an agreed history" (Head 11). In the last interview in *Doubling the Point*, in the context of discussing political activism at the time he was a student, he admits (referring to himself in the third-person) that: "Masses of people wake in him something close to panic. He cannot or will not, cannot and will not, join, shout, sing: his throat tenses up, he revolts" (394). In "The Novel Today" one has the sense that his resolute and uncompromising response stems from the same spirit of revolt against that which he perceives as a compulsion and a "language that lays down the law". Attwell suggests that, going beyond supplementarity or rivalry, there is a third possibility: that the novel can have a relation of *complementarity* with history ("The Problem of History" 107). Rather than subordinate fiction to history – a relationship of *supplementarity* – or polarize the two in a relationship of *rivalry*, fiction and history need not be characterised as "text" or "aesthetic" versus "reality" or "engagement": both are narrative or discursive forms that emerge from and engage with material conditions, including the formal conventions relating to their production, function and intention. There may be a tension between fictional and historical discourses, but this tension can be utilised productively and regarded as a relationship of *complementarity*.

In an interview with Coetzee in 1997, Regina Janes asks him what he thinks of the redefinition of the relationship between the novel and history as being one of complementarity. Coetzee sticks to his guns, and adds that he believes that "discursive models in the human sciences" (presumably including history) are not giving way to narrative models, that "the grand discourses have not yet been abandoned in favor of narrative" (101). He then goes on to make the interesting distinction that the historian or sociologist has the

"support that comes with a certain institutional voice", unlike writing fictional narrative that "entails no longer being an expert, no longer being master of your discourse" (101).

This last observation is interesting on several levels. Space permits me to take up only one aspect: the novelist not being "master of your discourse" perhaps enables and is enabled by the notion of play that Coetzee finds essential in storytelling and novel writing: storytellers can always be "making and changing their own rules". And most engagingly and provocatively Coetzee adds: "There is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is [...] While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything" ("Novel Today" 3-4). Coetzee is not simply cocking a snook at critics (who might miss everything), he is carving out a special place for storytelling and fictional narratives, as distinct from other types of narratives and discourses, and he is insisting on this distinction. The distinction is perhaps exemplified in *The Master of Petersburg*. In this novel the main protagonist, Dostoevsky, who in the novel is a reader as well as a writer, is not the master of his own discourse. Nor is it clear that he knows how to read. The novel is deliberately situated as a self-reflexive discourse where truth, or so it seems, is deferred, and the reader is drawn in and forced to participate in the production of meaning, or to acknowledge that meaning is something made, not simply presented or discovered. When does conventional "history" ever do that? I ask this question in defence of Coetzee's claiming this distinction for fictional narrative, as opposed to historical narrative.

To take a more nuanced perspective on the rivalry that Coetzee claims between fiction and history: in an interview with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*, Attwell observes that history in Coetzee's work "seems less a process that can be represented than a force acting

on representation, a force that is itself ultimately unrepresentable" (66). In his response Coetzee comments: "History may be, as you call it, a process for representation, but to me it feels more like a *force* for representation, and in that sense, yes, it is unrepresentable" (67). History, "the great shambling beast of history", can be a force that "short-circuits the imagination" (68) so that, at least in "Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation" (68), but to succumb to this force is to be defeated, and so consequently, or as Coetzee reiterates quoting from a poem by Zbigniew Herbert, *therefore* the task of the writer (of fiction) "becomes imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place" (68). Head comments that Coetzee resists "the easy compromise" of the "obvious option" of attempting a "straightforward representation of history". Coetzee insists that history is "unrepresentable", an insistence that carries "an ethical imperative, an exhortation to resist the dynamic of history" (Head 12-13). In his conclusion to his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", Coetzee concedes that in the end, because of life's (or history's) sheer crudity and naked force, in the end there may be "the capitulation of the imagination to reality" (99). Conceding the overwhelming nature of reality only serves to confirm that it rivals the imagination, even if imagination in the end is overwhelmed. As he says, when speaking about Mrs Curren's authority expressed in the face of history in his novel *Age of Iron*: "What matters is that the contest is staged" (*DP* 250). Perhaps the view that Coetzee wishes to articulate (and it is a view not a "position") he himself expresses most succinctly in an interview preceding his essay on Kafka in *Doubling the Point*: "I believe one has a duty (an ethical duty? – perhaps) not to submit to powers of discourse without question" (200).

Coetzee contends that "the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands. The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral

discourse are not privileged" ("Novel Today" 4). This statement leads naturally to a discussion of authority, not only the authority of the author/writer/text or of the reader/critic, but also of moral or ethical authority.

Taking a long view over Coetzee's first seven novels, Janes comments: "Animating Coetzee's work is the itch/desire to struggle with authority – literary and political, pens and swords. In Coetzee, however, to struggle means not to overthrow an opponent, but to continue an activity – writing, criticizing, analysing, representing, producing texts" (111). Describing the complex problem of literary authority, she says: "There Coetzee exercises power, while he undermines his own authority in order to sustain a system of relationships in which his authority is maintained" (112). This description seems appropriately paradoxical for a text such as *The Master of Petersburg*, a novel in which the fictional Dostoevsky is continually confronted by paradoxes of gnomic solemnity, for example: "*I should not be here therefore I should be here. I will see nothing else therefore I will see all.* What sickness is this, what sickness of reasoning?" (*Master* 118).

Janes notes another paradox: "When Coetzee rewrites Defoe or Dostoevsky, he exerts power over their text. Yet he also undermines his own author-ity by defining his text as contingent upon theirs" (112). In *Master*, not only is power exerted over Dostoevsky's texts, but the historical Dostoevsky's life becomes just another text to be worked over and played with, just as "The father (Dostoevsky) rewrites his dead son (Pavel/Coetzee), eating him up, destroying even his memory" (112), so does Coetzee rewrite the dead Dostoevsky, although because of the strength of the historical record and Dostoevsky's novels that stand outside of his text, Coetzee's reimaginings of Dostoevsky do not have the power to eat him up and destroy his memory, so yes, his own authority is undermined.

I think Janes is correct when she says that "Coetzee makes his use of other texts seem problematic and doubtful, rather than assertive" (112). Some critics consider Coetzee's disregard of the historical record, if one can regard that as a text, to be more than problematic. For example, Zinik describes Coetzee's killing off Dostoevsky's stepson (when the historical Pavel outlived Dostoevsky by nearly twenty years) as "an act of literary terrorism" (19), and Skow regards Coetzee's (mis)use of the historical record as a matter that "leaves a bad taste" and claims that "Coetzee has demeaned his own novel" (55). Frank regards it as "regrettable that he did not include a warning to his readers [...] not to take his fiction as fact" (53). These responses give weight to Janes' delineation of yet another paradox: "Paradoxically, the exertion of power over others' helpless texts undermines the authority of the writer who exerts that power. He seems a parasite rather than a poet, a maker" (112).

Authority, then, is something that can be used, misused, overt or concealed. Janes discusses the paradoxes of authority manifested in Coetzee's texts. She says that "Writing is a succession of choices that must somehow end" (113), a description particularly apt for confessional writing, as is discussed in the next chapter. Coetzee himself, in his essay "Confession and Double Thought", points to the endlessness of confession and the difficulty of bringing about closure. Discussing Coetzee's technique even at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, and noting that Coetzee "undermines his own authority in order to sustain a system of relationships in which his authority is maintained", Janes tries to analyse this process more closely:

> Yet within a sentence that is trying to close, Coetzee forces alternatives to open. In a fiction he is bringing to an end, he closes down firmly on an unstable point. Coetzee chooses to make choices that appear to multiply

> choices (meanings) rather than to reduce or focus them. He thus offers readers a liberty that is as painful as it is specious. Readers are controlled as firmly and as deceptively as the child whose parent says, "You must make your own decision. These are your alternatives, choose one,"[1] show me who you are. The authority of the author seems undermined, given over to the reader, but in fact the author's authority extends even further into the reader than it otherwise would. The reader, like the child, may call it freedom, but that is only to be oblivious to the full extent of authorial or parental manipulation. (Children are less likely to call it freedom than readers, who use authors to replace parents.) The reader or child aware of manipulation still has no choice but to choose, even as he knows unhappily the choice is his own, but not his desire. (113)

This paragraph indicates an author who is firmly in control of the reader. In discussing the relationship between the underground man and Liza, in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Coetzee comments that "one must remember that as a writer of his own story he is in a privileged position to dictate readings" (CDT[2] 279), which would seem to confirm Janes' view expressed in this paragraph. However, the dynamics between writer and readers is not so simple or one-sided. The writer – particularly in confessional texts where the reader is drawn in, and like the one confessing/writing wants to understand, and thus becomes complicit in this process – has the advantage as it were of the reader's willing cooperation. But despite this willingness, despite the possibility of the author manipulating the reader and – more subtly – seducing the reader, the reader may be in a position to read other "truths" than those the writer might desire. The reader discerns another "truth" that "slips out in strange associations, false rationalizations, gaps, contradictions" (CDT 257),

beyond any conscious intentions in the text. Janes herself goes on to say that in the reader-text relationship established in Coetzee's style of writing, "there is neither master nor slave, but a continuous testy grappling" (114). Despite this qualifying comment, I do think that perhaps Janes overstates the reader-text relationship as if it is something that is somehow mediated or managed by the writer. To take up her metaphor of Coetzee as writer as authoritative parent, and the reader as the child to be taught a lesson, even if caught in a double-bind s/he is aware of, Janes does not seem to take into account the child/reader who resists, and who sees the limits to the freedom granted, and declines to perform in such terms. More will be said about the masterly author, the slavish reader, the author who does not know, and the reader who resists, in the following chapter.

Coetzee has been criticised for not being sufficiently politically committed in his writing, and then again, his writing has been salvaged as being in fact *more* politically, or at least more "morally" engaged, than writing with an overt political agenda. Moreover, he has been accused of further occluding the voice of the marginalised (Parry), and praised for highlighting the very fact of this silencing. In *The Master of Petersburg* Coetzee can be seen to be rebutting all these claims, or declining to be aligned with any of these positions. Political commitment and radical activity, for example in the case of the character Nechaev, and emotional and aesthetic anxieties in the case of Dostoevsky, are debated but no simple identifications are declared. What might at one point seem clear, later becomes paradoxical. The questions of who is speaking and on whose behalf and with what authority, and who is silent or silenced, are not easily identified or resolved. The matter of writing is also not salvaged for any party in the politics versus aesthetics debate. Writing has no transcendent qualities. It is not necessarily ethical, and truth, like mastery, remains illusory.

What does remain is the possibility of play. Coetzee prizes art (including writing fiction) for its ability constantly to remake the rules by which it plays. Perhaps what we have exemplified in *The Master of Petersburg* is "Art as polymorphous play, then, playing at inventing rules with which it plays at constraining itself" (*DP* 104). This art is manifestly not outside of history, but creates a space for questioning the normative, questioning the discourses of power and the nature of dissent and transgression. And it provides a space for not having ready-made answers.

Notes to Chapter 1

[1] Inverted commas as in original text.

[2] CDT - abbreviation for Coetzee's "Confession and Double Thoughts".

Chapter 2

Confession, Truth and Knowing

Introduction

The final interview with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* precedes his subsequent book *The Master of Petersburg*, a novel that is overtly intertextual with the life and writing of Dostoevsky. In this interview, Coetzee refers to his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky", and to its relevance to his thinking about how to tell the truth in autobiography. He remarks that he sees this essay "emerging as pivotal" in his work (*DP*[1] Interview 391), and I use both the essay and the interview as an opening to a discussion of the novel itself. Both address aspects of Dostoevsky's writing, including his novel *The Devils*[2] and its suppressed chapter "Stavrogin's Confession: At Tikhon's" – all pertinent to *Master*.

Coetzee regards his essay as a "submerged dialogue between two persons" and the field of their debate is autobiography (392). He identifies the two interlocutors as aspects of himself (of Coetzee at that time) and also as Stavrogin and Tikhon, characters in the chapter from *The Devils*, mentioned above. Rather than characterising the two sides of the debate as two opposing positions, the debate is one of dialogue. The dialogue can be characterised as follows:

> in the terms brought into prominence in the essay, the debate is between cynicism and grace. Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness. The debate is staged by Dostoevsky; the interlocutors are called Stavrogin and Tikhon. (392)

The idea that truth can be told, that there can be an "ultimate truth about oneself" is subjected to skepticism:

> There is no ultimate truth about oneself, there is no point in trying to reach it, what we call the truth is only a shifting self-reappraisal whose function is to make one feel good, or as good as possible under the circumstances, given that the genre doesn't allow one to create free-floating fictions. Autobiography is dominated by self-interest [...] in an abstract way one may be aware of that self-interest, but ultimately one cannot bring it into full focus. The only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot. (392)

"Truth" can be merely a form of self-deception. Coetzee comments that his "essay, if only implicitly, asks the question: Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest?" (*DP* Interview 395).

Confession is a process where self-interest, truth and self-deception can become indistinguishable. Coetzee says that in his essay he follows "the fortunes of a number of secular confessions, fictional and autobiographical[3], as their authors confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived, and how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of whatever they take to be the secular equivalent of absolution" (CDT 252). The difficulties of self-knowledge and self-deception and the difficulty of closure, how to end the endlessness of skepticism, the endlessness of self-interrogation, are difficulties that the Dostoevsky character grapples with in *Master*, as does the reader, and as did Coetzee when writing it.

In this chapter, I draw on observations made by Dennis A. Foster, in his book *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* that are relevant to the problems of truth, self-knowledge and meaning as delineated by Coetzee, and help extend an understanding of some of these difficulties. I also refer to the book *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* by Jeremy Tambling and his discussion of the process of confession.

In confession, both the confessant and the confessor desire to understand both the origins of the narrative, usually transcribed as sin, and its telos, usually portrayed as absolution. Put another way, confessional narrative is truth directed. Do the concepts of sin and absolution enable the subject to come to a better exercising and understanding of his/her own autonomy, or do these conceptualizations serve to marginalise the subject who is inscribed in a discourse of the Other and mediated through language, forever alienated and self-divided? Is truth itself discoverable, or can it only be conferred through the intervention of a transcendent Other? Such questions arise in the following discussion. Any possible answers will be illuminated by the dialogue of cynicism and grace to which Coetzee refers.

Confession and self-knowledge

Coetzee identifies the sequential components of the confessional as being: transgression, confession, penitence and absolution. The confessional can be seen therefore to chart a process. If the ultimate outcome is absolution, which Coetzee maintains is the "indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular" (CDT 252), then an end or closure, a "liberation from the oppression of memory" (252) is achieved.

Coetzee maintains that *transgression*, that is the act or episode that is shameful (if not also criminal) is not fundamental to the confessional process. What is important is that which lies beyond the transgressive act, which is a truth about oneself one does not yet

know. Therefore the *confession,* the second component in the sequence, is about more than simply telling of the transgressive act, for example a theft, but it also entails confessing something one does not know about oneself and the source of the transgression. In his book *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur makes a related observation. "The experience of which the penitent makes confession is a blind experience, still embedded in the matrix of emotion, fear and anguish" (7). This emotion, which would otherwise remain confined within itself, "gives rise to the objectification in discourse", and "through confession the consciousness of fault is brought into the light of speech" (7). The experience that gives rise to the confession "gets transcribed immediately on the plane of language in the mode of interrogation" (8). The "blind experience" cannot be retained in its raw state, but in the confession it is recreated in discourse. Confession is not merely describing, but is a process of narration that casts light on aspects of the self one did not know. Confession involves questioning and explaining, and is ultimately an interrogation of God or of self.

Coetzee refers to Book II of Augustine's *Confessions* in his discussion of the confessional process. Augustine relates how, when he was a boy, he and some friends stole pears, not to eat, but "for the pleasure of committing a forbidden act" (251). Coetzee, quoting Augustine, notes that "they were being 'gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to the evil but the evil itself [...] seeking nothing from the shameful deed but the shame itself [...] We were ashamed not to be shameless'" (251). The significant feature of the act of transgression is the associated shame. The act itself induces shame, but what is really shameful is that in the first place the feeling of shame is what is desired. There is a doubleness here, as the desire for shame is known to be shameful, yet this knowledge does not prevent him from seeking the shameful but instead it

> both satisfies the desire for the experience of shame and fuels a sense of shame. And this sense of shame is both experienced with satisfaction and recognized, if it is recognized, by self-conscious searching, as a further source of shame; and so on endlessly. (251)

The sense of shame is reawakened endlessly even in the telling of it. Confession recreates and vicariously re-enacts the sin which it evokes. Foster, referring to Ricoeur, suggests that one reason why confession remains unfinished is that as confession evokes sin it excites attention, "drawing one to it rather than ushering one to a purged conclusion" (17). The strangeness of the transgressive act has the effect of inducing guilt. It is assumed that guilt must have a cause, and the self-alienating experience, in the language of confession, gets transcribed as sin. Ricoeur says that "the language of confession is the counterpart of the triple character of the experience it brings to light: blindness, equivocalness, scandalousness" (7), and that "sin, as alienation from oneself, is an experience more astonishing, disconcerting, and scandalous, perhaps, than the spectacle of nature, and for this reason it is the richest source of interrogative thought" (8). Foster points out that the etymological root of the word "scandal" is trap or snare. The confessor becomes snared in sin, or as Augustine puts it, in endless shame, or in endless interrogation.

The self-alienating experience is transcribed as sin and the confessor is snared in the sin evoked by confession. Foster takes this metaphor of ensnarement further. Not only is the one confessing ensnared, but in turn the confessor becomes "the scandalous trap" that ensnares the one hearing the confession, so that the listener gets drawn in, being excited by the sin, wanting to understand, and so, becoming involved in a process of interpretation, provides answers that are premature. Thus the listener too gets trapped in an endless

straying from the truth. Foster describes the confessing sinner as being "both penitent and tempter".

> Confession, through the reenactment of sin, sins again, even to the point of drawing the listener into interpretations that inevitably have their own strayings. To become involved with a confession is to experience oneself the alienation motivating the speaker, and thereby to be thrust onto confession's long detour back to a primal state of innocence. (17)

The one confessing is trapped and his/her narrative traps the listener/reader who becomes complicit in the motivations of the speaker/writer. Reading itself becomes an act of complicity.

Augustine acknowledges the two-fold nature of confession. He says, "'I would ... confess what I know about myself; I will confess what I do not know about myself ... What I do not know about myself I will continue not to know until the time when 'my darkness is as the noonday' in the sight'" (252). Coetzee sums up as follows: "The truth about the self that will bring an end to the quest for the source within the self for that-which-is-wrong, he [Augustine] affirms, will remain inaccessible to introspection" (252). Robinson argues that confessional narrative is concerned with reconstruction and it "writes the self into reconciliation with the other" (78). I would argue that confession can be a process of *de*construction, and any new construction will remain equally unknowable as transcendent truth. The question of closure, the deferral of truth that remains "inaccessible to introspection", remains open in *Master*.

As the adult Augustine reflects back on this memory he finds that the shame lives on. Coetzee quotes from Augustine: "'who can unravel such a twisted and tangled knottiness? It is unclean, I hate to reflect on it'" (251). Coetzee describes Augustine's plight as "truly

abysmal", as he wants to know the origin from which the remembered shame sprung, "but the skein is endless, the stages of self-searching required to attain its beginning [are] infinite in number. Yet until the source from which the shameful act sprang is confronted, the self can have no rest" (251).

In the novel *Master,* Dostoevsky attempts to confront the problem of truth, or "how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived" (CDT 252). Strands of self-knowledge are seen to be cross-threaded so often with self-deceptions, that both the character and the reader find a densely woven and knotted fabric that resembles Augustine's "twisted and tangled knottiness". In this narrative, Dostoevsky, other characters, the reader, the third-person narrator, and perhaps the writer named Coetzee, are all constantly confronted with something that is "unclean", and like Augustine we find that we "hate to reflect on it". In reading this narrative we find ourselves complicit with the deceptions, evasions and lies; we are confronted by the unclean as well as tainted by it and implicated in it. The reader is just as entangled in this cross-threaded fabric or skein, as is Dostoevsky himself.

Foster describes the basic model of confession that assumes that the secret to be confessed is understandable by another, that the story is told "as if the language were transparent rather than conventional" (2), and that revealing the secret by telling can lead unproblematically to understanding, judgement, forgiveness and even sympathy. The confessional relation usually "involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor" (2)[4]. In the type of narrative that interests Foster, the confessor speaks of the sinful act or sinful motivations, but "the mysterious loss suffered in sinning remains unrelieved" (3). This type of confessional narrative articulates a sense of loss: loss of faith at the moment of transgression, a sense of

the self as being alien to itself, a desire for a truth which is unattainable, a loss of meaning, a loss of innocence. Foster asks what this type of confession communicates to the listener. The listener, also human, also a sinner, cannot avoid being "infected with the doubt and loss evoked by the narrative of confession" (3). The listener's "own sins and his own estrangement from God's coherent being" are at some level recalled to him (3)[5].

In the confessional relation described by Foster, the confessor calls on the listener's need to understand, and evokes in the listener a sense of loss that is experienced as a desire for truth, which unsettles "the listener's sense of self-possession" (3). The confessor and the listener are in a confessional relation, with the one trying to tell the story and the other trying to understand. The confessor intends to tell the truth, but this intention is a symptom of the narrator's "desire to master his story" (4). The listener, who wants to understand, in fact becomes obliged to understand. Feeling so obliged, Foster suggests, is similar to being seduced, and "the listener abandons his position as one who knows and consents to listen, and thereby he enters the evasive discourse of the narrator, tracing a path that inevitably misses the encounter with truth" (4).

Foster observes that the writer does not have an authoritative grasp of the situation – neither of the truth of the situation nor even knowledge of his own desires and motivations – and for Foster this loss means we "have lost the Author, the master of meanings, intentions, and language" (4). What we have instead is a figure very pertinent for a reading of *Master*. He concludes that,

> we have something more interesting, even if more insidious: a master who doesn't know, a leader with no course. The writer in this view has no truth, but has a language that has developed out of the labor and accidents of life, something peculiar to him, his to use but not fully to control: a discourse. (4)

Foster argues that the writer and the reader meet in a discourse, and meet in "contention: the writer attempting to perpetuate his discourse, the reader attempting to appropriate it to his own uses. The result is the life of a work in an ever-expanding field of textuality as readers become writers interpreting, imitating, and denying what they read" (4).

In *Master* writers and readers are closely linked. Quite literally Dostoevsky himself is both reader, for example of Pavel's stories and diary, and writer. In Chapter 5, entitled "Maximov", the three-way relationship of reader/writer/text is foregrounded. Maximov as a judicial investigator, lives by "reading" – people, situations, crimes, confessions – "texts" of all descriptions. He also "writes" in that he pulls together disparate elements, makes judgements and draws conclusions. This chapter is intertextual with *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky, waiting in the ante-room to see Maximov has a premonition of an epileptic fit:

> while somewhere at his side falls the nagging shadow of a memory: surely he has been here before, in this very ante-room or one like it, and had an attack or a fainting fit! But why is it that he recollects the episode only so dimly? And what has the recollection to do with the smell of fresh paint? (31)

Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, after waiting some time at the police offices that smell strongly of fresh paint, has a fainting fit apparently because he is ill, but the reader knows that he faints because he overhears people discussing the axe murders he had committed (80-89). The "memory" that Dostoevsky, in *Master,* thinks he recalls is because he is now in part a product of his "own" text. The text now "owns" him and he no longer possesses his own recollections as his memories are now inextricably linked with, or rather *produced* by the text. The writer is written by the text and reads himself in its terms. The writer experiences a loss of self-possession as he is paradoxically possessed by his own words which are now strange or unfamiliar to him – or perhaps familiar in an irretrievable

fashion. "Dostoevsky" as written by the third-person narrator in the Coetzee novel, is dispersed through several "texts" as well as pulled together by them. Dostoevsky is seen not only to write and to read, but to be both written and read.

Just as the writer can, so can the reader be passive in relation to the text. Dostoevsky accuses Maximov of not knowing how to read, because he holds himself at a distance and erects a "barrier of ridicule" between himself and the text, "as if the words might leap out from the page and strangle [him]" (46). The reader is portrayed as protecting himself from the violent activity of the text. Dostoevsky asks Maximov what frightens him when reading about a man who is murdered, his

> 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* the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering. (47)

Dostoevsky suggests that reading is simultaneously passive, as in giving oneself up, and active, as in suffering in sympathy and exulting in the violence. Even the sympathy and exultation are multi-layered: the reader is simultaneously behind the arm of the axe-wielding murderer, is the axe itself and also the skull that is cracked by the blow. The reader exults at the moment of transgression and at the moment at which violent activity of the one becomes the end of activity for the other, and life yields to death. This process that the reader goes through, as delineated by Dostoevsky, is similar to the involvement and range of feelings the listener to a confession experiences.

As already noted, the reader gets drawn in and is excited by the narrated transgression, and in wanting to understand becomes complicit with the narrator. However,

as Foster notes, "despite his own sense of guilt, a confessor commands a power over a listener because he controls the material the other is obligated to use to be the one who understands" (14). Coetzee too, points out that "one must remember that as a writer of his own story he is in a privileged position to dictate readings" (CDT 279). The significant feature of the confessional tradition, even in texts that are not traditionally confessional, is that "they are narrated by characters consumed with guilt and driven to talk about it" (18). Foster describes this "narrative situation [as] disarming: when is one more truthful than when confessing? To what does one listen with a more sympathetic willingness to understand than a confession?" (18). A sympathetic response where truthfulness is assumed is evoked by the confessor, a process that Foster describes as being "nothing less than the languages we use without thinking" (18). In the confessional situation the languages of guilt and sympathy become dynamically unified. This unity is exploited by confessional texts which thereby "find the faults in us that turn virtuous readers into complicit confessors" (18). (At this point the ambiguity of the term "confessor" becomes remarkably apt as the one telling the confession and the one reading it collude.) The reader is disarmed through identification and sympathy and seduced through the desire for answers. The reader is challenged to understand and master the meaning and is also obliged to make sense of it so as to continue to believe in a controllable reality or an organic coherence of meaning.

The desire to understand

Foster argues that our interest in a story is sustained in part by our desire to come to an understanding of what is related, that is, how aspects or occurrences relate to one another or to the whole. Our culture sustains a belief in Reason, and we assume an organic coherence in our understanding. As Foster says, stories are compelling as readers/listeners

"like to be drawn by a story towards some conclusive interpretation" (4). He says that within such an "organic model of reading" all is ultimately understandable. Even something that "can seem to stray beyond the boundaries" will be brought within bounds and "revealed through the illumination of the End" (4-5), a process which contributes to making the story intriguing. Foster goes on to say that for Hegel, this notion of interpretation, of organic unity and that the reader's "own reasonableness can be found everywhere", is "based on the narcissistic delusion of total mastery, on the idea that Reason can fully understand" (5). Reason then, is more than "a mode of thought". It is "a faith in the explicability of the world and, more importantly, in the existence and coherence of the thinking self" (5).

Another way of expressing this desire for understanding is as the desire to know the truth. Coetzee says that his essay "Confession and Double Thought" asks the question "why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest?" (*DP* Interview 395). A question to which Coetzee says he continues "to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of truth" (395). Foster says that there is something primordial about the motivations to understand. He alludes to the primary drives to satisfaction described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The drive to achieve perfection, to experience satisfaction, is "an elaborate deferral of a satisfaction which is lost in the past" (8). This complete satisfaction, a primary experience which Freud identifies as "an inertia (as a lump of rock is inert) and the drive toward perfection, consequently, as the wish to become 'inorganic once again'" (8) is, according to Freud, a repressed desire whose object is unattainable, and "must be replaced by an endless series of substitutions" (8). Foster quotes from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

> 'The backward path [...] is obstructed [...] so there is no alternative but to advance in the direction in which growth is still free – though with no

> prospect of bringing the process to conclusion or of being able to reach the goal'. (8)

The inability to "reach the goal" in this context bears an interesting similarity to Coetzee's comments about the endlessness of confession.

Foster emphasises that the need to understand, the desire for answers, comes together with the experience of loss and alienation (that prompts the confession). Any answers that may be given are likely to be premature and lead to a further deferral of truth. "The answers do not resolve the loss or still the questioning, but deviate further from the path and perpetuate the need to confess" (17).

Transcribing experience

As Foster notes, Lacan articulates the desire for the "primary experience of satisfaction that Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in explicitly linguistic terms. This desire remains always beyond the articulation of speech, we have no way of saying what we want. It remains forever a 'need'" (9). What can be announced or articulated in language is always inadequate to the need. The desire that arcs across the gap between what can be spoken and what is needed "protects the force that prevents a speaker from ever coming to rest in a complacent approximation of the truth" (9).

Fundamental to Lacan's theorizing of the subject is the notion of the division or split. Division occurs in the developmental stages of an individual, for example in the mirror stage, in the Oedipal stage in the form of symbolic castration, and also between the Imaginary stage and that of the Symbolic order of language. Discourse involves movement towards that which is lacking (needed) but cannot ever finally be present. Not only does desire arc across

the gap between what can be spoken and what is needed, but speech itself emerges from that lack and attempts to bridge the gap (9).

If at a level approaching the metaphysical speech emerges from lack, at a more prosaic level, narrative (or writing) emerges from lack at a different level of need. In *Master*, Dostoevsky, after reading sections of the diary of his dead stepson, wishes to say to him: "We do not write out of plenty [...] we write out of anguish, out of lack" (152). The source of the power to write is the sense of lack, and the task of the writer is to fill the gaps, bring together that which is split, scattered or incoherent: "to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts" (152).

This understanding of the source of writing seems to indicate that the writer senses lack as being outside the self and not also within the self. Writing can be an attempt not only at conveying the world as being a coherent place but also as a means of conveying a coherent and autonomous self, as if writing is a straightforward *expression* of this self. But elsewhere in the novel it is clear that the writer experiences himself as divided, fragmented and scattered. The tension between conceiving of the self as being autonomous and coherent on the one hand, and conceiving of the self as being constructed and mediated as well as fundamentally split on the other, underpins the novel's investigation of what it is to be a writer, what it is to write (and to read).

In the Romantic tradition of the great or master writer, writing is seen as the expression of a particular and coherent world view emanating from the genius's particular understanding and vision. In *Master*, this tradition is interwoven with more postmodern notions of the writer, or rather the subject, as being not only alienated from the world, but divided within the self: self-alienated, split and lacking coherence.

Whatever we experience and however we experience ourselves, our understanding of experience is mediated through language, and language is always inadequate to what it expresses; meaning has to be sought through the medium of language or speech. As Foster says, "no matter how one's experiences may be present in memory, the events of these narratives are understandable only when they are transformed into objects for consciousness, into histories rather than sensations" (10). Confession can be seen as "an attempt to objectify the self – present it as a knowable object – through the narrative that 're-structures' (Lacan) the self as history and conclusions" (10). However all confessions, by the very nature of language being inadequate to its subject, fail to achieve the "truth", and because of the gap between the representation (in speech) and its subject (the thing itself), "confession engenders interpretation, drawing the listener into the production of meaning" (10). The person confessing cannot be fully present in his/her own speech, "because the limited possibilities of language determine how a demand can be expressed" (9). The demand is for the desired understanding, the drive for a satisfaction that is not attainable. We can only know endless representations, as truth is constantly deferred in language.

Foster explains that what "begins as a personal sense of sin, of alienation, has inescapable social, political and religious implications", because atonement can only be possible "through the elusive medium of narrative" (14). Experience is transcribed as sin, and sin is transcribed in narrative. This narrative requires interpretation, and "readers are drawn into the economy of discursive exchange". Following Foucault, Foster argues that "each reader, becoming a writer, recognizes the secondariness of his language, that he has only the coin that has been minted by another, not the stuff of reality to articulate his position" (14). The listener/reader cannot maintain a position outside of the speaking/writing confessor. "To become involved with a confession is to experience oneself the alienation

motivating the speaker, and thereby to be thrust on to confession's long detour back to a primal state of innocence" (17), a condition analogous to Freud's suggestion that the drive for understanding is akin to the drive for the primary experience of inertia, the satisfaction of perfection, wholeness or plenitude (Foster 8) – the lack of lack.

Confession and the stable subject

The process of confession, Coetzee and Foster both maintain, is truth directed. Tambling, in the light of Foucault's work on sexuality, observes that in the Christian tradition of confession, each person has the duty to explore who s/he is, what s/he has done, her or his temptations, etcetera, having an obligation towards truth and truth-telling and finding out the "truth" about the self (3). Moreover, "confessional practices help to create the private individual, measured by deep interiority and feelings, and by a personal history" (2). Tambling continues:

> those addressed by a confessional discourse are 'interpellated' (hailed, singled out by name), and are subjected, i.e. made to define themselves in a discourse given to them, and in which they must name and misname themselves; and secondly, made to think of themselves [as] autonomous subjects, responsible for their acts. (2)

Tambling therefore questions that the confessant is in fact the teller/writer "of his own story [...] in a privileged position to dictate readings" (CDT 279), but is rather inscribed in the discourse of the Other, reading himself in its terms.

In confession, the one confessing speaks of inner guilt resulting from "sin", as Riceour also points out. Experiences and feelings are textualised in confession, and this process of speaking even "the most unconscious impulses of the self – those attached to the

body", brings them into an arena of knowledge which denies the body, and, in the discourse of guilt and sin, results in what can be seen as a displacement or misnaming. (In his discussion Tambling is indebted to Nietzsche and Kristeva, as well as Foucault.) The one who confesses – in Tambling's vocabulary the confessant – has the illusion that the speech of the confessional "is the speech of the subject (not of the Other)" and that it belongs to the self (3). Tambling concludes that "the demand for speech [...] is at the heart of confession" (4). In this tradition, the body, "the locus of unconscious experience" is separated from "the knowing and reactive mind", and a further consequence of the discourse of guilt and sin is the encouragement of introspection and the denial of instincts, more particularly of bodily and sexual activities and desires which, in this discourse, are regarded as weaknesses. The fixed ideas about the self "which are made to seem 'natural' and fundamental, help towards the stabilising of the subject" (6).

Tambling focuses on the power of confessional discourse to marginalise those who do not meet the standard of the model: "the stable, inward, deep subject" of the moral traditionalism, which he names as the "(now) bourgeois subject, assumed to be male, normal, heterosexual and white" (6). Those at the centre have the power to name those at the periphery, without ever having to engage in any naming of the centre, because "it is assumed to be rational, natural, normal, simply because of where it is" (6). Not only are the marginalised named as such, but they internalise this naming:

> The history of confession is that of power at the centre inducing people at the margins to internalise what is said about them – to accept that discourse and to live it, and thereby to live their oppression. The creation of the confessing personality may be defined as the production of the reactive spirit: focused on

> guilt, weakness and on the need for reparation. It produces, indeed, the death of the speaking subject. (6)

Tambling is concerned with "the power of confession to secure consent to the rule of a dominant ideology" (7). The pressure to confess and "the societal assumption that a confession would be a meaningful and special way to know the 'truth'" are oppressive. He sees confessional voices as coming "from the 'underground', that ambivalent place, half-resonant of a radical politics of resistance, half of retreat" (and later in the book he discusses confession in Dostoevsky's novels in this context) (7).

To confess then, is to speak in the discourse of the Other. In Tambling's terms, this discourse belongs to the centre and inheres in the dominant ideology. This discourse invokes a self with an illusory autonomy: the self is defined by and inscribed in a discourse where experience is transcribed as sin and mediated through the conventions of confession and made available to interpretation by the confessor/listener/reader.

Tambling examines the self expressing itself in the terms of the Other in the context of the discourse of the dominant social order, where in the specific discourse of confession the narrative presupposes a confessant who is a stable, self-accounting and autonomous subject. However, there is a doubleness in that the supposedly autonomous "I" who confesses, does so by submitting to the discourse of confession. Tambling illustrates this problematic doubleness in his discussion of Augustine's confession. In the confessional narrative, Augustine tells of the past "I", prior to the "I" who has now confessed. Bearing in mind that it was a lack or failure or self-division that gave rise to the confession in the first place, there follows a presumption that this lack can be redressed through confession, so the self becomes "whole" and is no longer divided. But, in his confession Augustine is unable to end his internal strife: the "I" remains "bound by self-division. Confession proves illusory as

a way of ending the contest; indeed, confession is the contest itself whereby the self further and further interrogates the self" (19). The declaration of change can only come from outside, for example from the Church – as a form of absolution – but this sense that something has changed cannot be brought about autonomously, or even within the confessional narrative itself. In confession there is only an endless deferral, through narrative, of truth.

In other words, self-mastery cannot be achieved through an effort of will or through will to truth, but grace must precede this achievement. Ironically, even though confession may seem to be an exercise in autonomy, proclaiming the stability of a self-accounting self, self-fashioning through narrative does not bring the desired coherence. The creation of the self as subject cannot be formed through an operation of the will. Rather, there is the sense that "the self must be formed passively, through the negative power of confession, through submission to another, which is the denial of autonomy" and requires a commitment to an obedience to "truth" (Tambling 32).

In writing about Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot,* Coetzee makes the same observation that "no act of will seems able to compel the truth to emerge" (CDT 287), not even at a moment preceding one's own death, a moment when a clarity of vision might be expected. Coherence (of the self) is always undermined by the possibility of "a doubling back of thought, the characteristic movement of self-consciousness" (282). Because the confessant is "unable to rescue himself" (287), the conclusion that "Dostoevsky's critique of confession" brings us is "to the brink of a conception of truth-telling as close to grace" (287).

Despite this understanding of the limits to secular confession – where transcendence though sought cannot be willed – we find the desire to understand ourselves as autonomous and able to access truth rather than merely construct our own (always provisional) truth,

remains strong even in the face of such skeptism. Foster also maintains that narrative cannot be seen as being merely expressive of a coherent self. But because, in our culture, we commonly (want to) see ourselves as autonomous beings, we continue to regard writers as expressing themselves and to see readers as bringing their own coherent objectivity to bear on the text. Because we insist on our own autonomy, and being, as Foster puts it "constituted independently of the words we speak" (13), we fail to understand how limited is "our ability to control or possess our own language. To a great extent, our statements contain us, not we them" (13).

The difficulty of knowing

Foster describes those narrative situations that "exploit the reader's reliance on a dualism of being and non-being, I and not-I" that structure language (18). These "writers systematically disrupt the distinctions their readers require in order fully to understand, even though they claim that the distinctions are vitally important" (18). An example from *Master* that illustrates this point is the dualism father-son. The distinction between father and son, often in the context of rivalry, is one that preoccupies the Dostoevsky character. The distinction between the father and child preoccupies Dostoevsky at a time when his stepson, Pavel, has predeceased him. In a period of paralyzing grief, he has a sense of inertia so profound that he feels that he is the one who has died and is buried and it is rather Pavel who lives. In this state of confusion, when everyday dualisms, or binary oppositions, are disrupted, in other words when conventional norms are deconstructed, Dostoevsky muses on the man who raped and murdered his own daughter.

One of the many distinctions the fictional Dostoevsky strives to make clear is that the father is the nurturer of the child. But this distinction is disrupted as fathers are also shown

to be double, as they are also devourers of their children. Dostoevsky remembers a fellow-convict, from the period when he himself was in a Siberian prison having been convicted of treason. This convict had "violated his twelve-year-old daughter and then strangled her" (124). After the murder the man had been found holding the dead body of his daughter. I quote the following passage from *Master* because it is a clear example of the type of writing that Foster describes as claiming to rely on distinctions while systematically disrupting them, and doing so in such a way that "the contradiction forces the reader into an interpretive dilemma: the desire to resolve the confusion is aroused while the means to resolve it are undermined" (18).

> Why does it recur now, this image of a man at the water's edge with a dead child in his arms? A child loved too much, a child become the object of such intimacy that it dare not be allowed to live. Murderous tenderness, tender murderousness. Love turned inside out like a glove to reveal its ugly stitching. And what is love stitched from? He calls up the image of the man again, looks intently into the face, concentrating not on the eyes, closed in a trance, but on the mouth, which is working lightly. Not rape but rapine - is that it? Fathers devouring children, raising them well in order to eat them like delicacies afterwards. *Delikattessen.* (125)[6]

The image of love "turned inside out like a glove" serves to undermine the distinction between nurturing activities associated with love, and violent activities such as rape and murder, by making such activities seem merely to be "inside-out" versions of each other. Dostoevsky himself struggles with this conflation of love and not-love. In this struggle for meaning he rejects the notion that the crime against the child is the "murderous tenderness" of rape. He seems to feel that however murderous it is, tenderness still applies in the act of

rape. Finding this notion difficult, he goes on to counterpose rapine with rape, a subtle distinction that perhaps indicates that the child is raped not as an individual by an individual, but that child-rape by fathers is systemic. Rapine is "the sudden seizure of someone's property" (*The New Oxford English Dictionary*), and in this case children are the father's own property that he raises well in order to eat. Such a view not only arouses confusion in the reader, but indicates confusion in the mind of Dostoevsky. Any simple way of restoring conventional distinctions is obliterated by the one word *delikatessen* that not only elides distinctions but creates a unity where there should be none. In German, the noun *delikatessen*, meaning a delicacy, can be broken down into *delikat,* meaning subtle, dainty, tasty and *essen*, meaning eat, have a meal. In one word the child becomes the delicacy to be eaten and the distinction of being/not being is elided.

Foster says that such books offer the reader "the possibility of refusing *understanding* (the mastery of meaning) as purpose of narrative" (19). Although such writers may pose as masters of their texts, such mastery is finally disclosed as being illusory for both writers and readers. Coetzee makes this loss of mastery over truth explicit. Following the passage quoted above, Dostoevsky goes on to muse as follows:

> He shakes his head as if to rid it of a plague of devils. What is it that is corrupting the integrity of his grieving, that insists it is nothing but a lugubrious disguise? Somewhere inside him truth has lost its way. (125-126)

Mastery of meaning

In reading *Master*, the reader is forced to interact with the tangles of truth and deceit and to seek actively for a way of unraveling that which gets mixed together. The reader, in a sense, desires to master the meaning of the text.

Foster comments that it is "only the desire for a masterful author that makes one into a slavish reader" (19). The term, master "implies being in control of one's meanings, finding a discourse adequate to one's intentions" (135). The master is able to control his and other's representation, or in other words "he controls the constitutive forms of reality" (135). Foster does not discuss a contest for mastery at this point, but *Master* can be seen to be rich in examples of such competition between rivals for just this kind of mastery; for example the Dostoevsky character and Maximov, the judicial investigator into his stepson's death, and their rival claims to interpreting Pavel's life and death, as well as the more obvious rivalry between Dostoevsky and Nechaev with their rival claims to "truth". Such rival interpretations can also be examined in the broader context of the rivalry between the two forms of narrative dubbed "fiction" and "history". Mastery, as Foster says, "is always a form of domination" (135).

Foster implicitly advocates resisting mastery, but to resist "it is not enough to claim that no one is master" (134). To do so is "to tacitly accept the discourse of the absent master" (134). He acknowledges that the implications of what he is saying go beyond the limits of literary study, and enter the social and political as "the question of discourse and mastery touches on the possibility of knowing how one is placed in the world" (135). As there is no discourse in our culture "free of the intimations of mastery", it is not possible to adopt a discourse divorced from such intimations. What is possible, he argues, "is an analytic that does not accept the offer to follow out the story one is told, to listen to the confession, and to understand it" (135). Such an analytic response he offers as a form of resistance. This response can be seen as resisting the dominance of another, as well as resisting one's own desire to assert mastery over a text, but of course this mastery is also over meaning in a profound sense. Foster articulates the philosophical implication: "any

pursuit of a positive knowledge in the imitation of a science will produce the complicity that elevates the arbitrary to the transcendent" (135).

In any such analytic process, not only is truth deferred, but to escape from discourse is just as impossible as knowing the "truth", that is, of mastering meaning. Such an analytic can turn one away from knowing, or desiring to know, and instead to examine "the sources of knowledge in the discourses constructed by culture", but such a practice does not "enable one to escape those sources into some mythic existential freedom" (135). The no less mythic and "compulsive often destructive pursuit of masters and mastery" is that which this analytic may enable one to avoid.

Tambling also argues for the necessity of resisting confessional modes constructed by power relations. In understanding the confessional relationship primarily as a master/slave relationship where the one desires recognition and being valued by the Other, and consequently submits to the desire of another, Tambling warns there is a risk of essentialising relationships. To avoid such an essentialising, one needs to add to this understanding "a recognition of how things have come to be and also to be represented the way they are" (206). One needs to look not only at relations of meaning, but look beyond language as signification and also examine relations of power and how they structure discourse. Like Foster, Tambling argues that the context is ultimately social and political: "in thinking of the reality of confession, it seems important to note, in closing, that these practices are topical and important in political, legal and medical terms" (207).

Confession is a process where truth about the self is sought. This process is complex and endless not only because notions of "truth" and "self" are far from being transparent, but also because they are embedded in structures of language and discourse and relations of power. Knowledge and meaning are contested at different levels of language, narrative and

society. In the novel *Master*, the issues of "truth" and "self", of "knowledge" and "meaning", are taken up, one could even say they are debated, at all these different levels, as well as at and through different levels of consciousness, conscience and affiliation. In this debate the dialogue between cynicism and grace frequently surfaces. Whether there is any closure to this dialogue will be discussed in the next chapter.

Notes to Chapter 2

[1] *DP* - Abbreviation for Coetzee's *Doubling the Point.*

[2] Also known as *The Possessed* and as *Demons.*

[3] Coetzee has stated that the field of debate between cynicism and grace is autobiography. In his discussion he includes texts that are novels. The term "autobiography" is used in the context of the discussion "how to know the truth about the self", rather than as a term to distinguish "autobiography" as a genre distinct from "fiction".

[4] The word confessor can be used for both the speaker and the listener. Coetzee gets around the problem by referring to the speaker as the confessant, and the listener as the confessor. In the meantime I use the terminology used by Foster.

[5] Foster uses the "he", "him", etcetera, as if the masculine pronouns are generic for he/she, him/her. I regard this practice as problematic, but in order to avoid clumsy expression I retain the terminology used by the writer from whom I am quoting.

[6] The ambiguity of the father as devourer/nurturer of children portrayed here in *Master* has intriguing similarities with the ambiguous origins and motives of the mythic Saint Nicholas/Father Christmas figure. Saint Nicholas, patron saint of children, according to Arlette Bouloumié in her essay on the ogre in literature, is a "very ambiguous rescuer, who seems to be using his miracles to atone for a crime he was tempted to commit" (918). The crime was to eat a traditional delicacy, the salted flesh of piglets, as well as the flesh of small children indiscriminately. Bouloumié goes on to relate that Father Christmas is traditionally accompanied by,

> bogeymen and ogres who punish naughty children and threaten to steal them and carry them off to distant lands. *Le Robert* suggests an etymology of the

> French word for 'bogeyman' or 'ogre' ('croque-mitaine') which is reminiscent of the image of the ogre 'From the French verb "croquer" (to eat) and the French noun "mitaine" (glove) unless this is a derivative for the Dutch word "metjen" (little girl), which in German is "Mädchen"'. These lovers of human flesh are Father Christmas's doubles, and they clearly reveal an inherent ambivalence. (919)

Not only the images, but even the vocabulary, is similar to that used by Coetzee. The fathers, as described in this passage in the novel, rather than having their fleshing-eating doubles, are themselves double.

Chapter 3

Aspects of Confession and *The Master of Petersburg*

Introduction

In this chapter, aspects of *The Master of Petersburg* are discussed in light of the preceding chapters. The novel is not strictly speaking a "confession", but it does have many characteristics of a confessional narrative. Firstly, the main protagonist, Dostoevsky, is consumed by guilt, and wishes to talk about it. He feels guilt as a husband, as a father and even feels guilt at the nature of his grief. He does confess small and large transgressions in the course of the narrative. For example, he confesses travelling under a false name and passport. He confesses that he was not an adequate father to Pavel, even when Pavel was a child. He also feels guilt at what it is to be a writer, admitting that to write is transgressive of "normal" standards of behaviour and identification, and he also confesses that, ultimately, writing is a form of betrayal.

Dostoevsky displays the hyper-self-consciousness of the confessant. He subjects his actions, feelings and desires to intense scrutiny, and he is motivated to do this in order to understand things about himself he does not necessarily know, and in order to discover the truth about himself. As more about his actions, thoughts and transgressions are narrated, even though by a third-person narrator, his self-interrogation seems endless, and the question as to whether he is self-deceived or not interests the reader who becomes implicated in the process of finding out and interpreting.

In the tradition of the confessional, the reader understands the articulations and confessions as emanating from a Dostoevsky who is a coherent being (self) with a desire to find a coherent understanding of his circumstances. The reader not only understands this

coherence, but also desires that this character maintains coherence and the reader participates, as it were, in the character's desire to understand his circumstances coherently and meaningfully. The *desire* for coherence however, is not enough to prevent Dostoevsky's simultaneous awareness of fragmentation that undermines coherence. The fictional Dostoevsky, even as he strives for coherence, feels himself, and at times also his world, to be breaking down. Sometimes this feeling is so extreme that the distinctions between the "I" and the "not-I" collapse. Such a sense of breaking down serves, somewhat paradoxically, to strengthen the obligation to retain coherence and the will to resist breaking down. In his struggle for self-understanding Dostoevsky endeavours to find truth, even if this truth may be painful and not in his self-interest. Yet even if he accepts a truth that is painful and he acknowledges sin, how is he to know, and how is the reader to know, that he is not self-deceived?

The reader may be able to discern the "truth" as it "slips out in strange associations, false rationalizations, gaps, contradictions" (CDT 257), of which Dostoevsky is unaware and which are implicit in the narrative, which is not to say that the reader is able to trap truth in the net of such contradictions that s/he is able to discern. The "truth" that the reader determines may be just as premature and provisional as any other "truth". The writer, narrator, protagonist and the reader are complexly interrelated and not always separable from one another. No-one has an overriding authority, nor an authority that is not provisional or incontestable.

In *Master,* Dostoevsky experiences himself as self-alienated and alienated from God. He feels himself to be snared in sin. He desires to understand the meaning of Pavel's death and to know the truth about his death. He also desires to understand the truth about writing, and he confesses that writing is ultimately an act of betrayal. He embraces his understanding

of his own sinfulness as a truth about himself from which he does not flinch. In his confession he goes even further by asserting that there can be no forgiveness for his sin. The question he asks in another context is whether it is "the truth or just a boast?" (235). This question is relevant to his confessing to writing being an act of betrayal, a sin from which there can be no forgiveness. This question will be taken up later in the context of the discussion of "Stavrogin's Confession: At Tikhon's" from *The Devils.*

Dostoevsky's understanding of writing as betrayal, as sin, as evil, can be seen as part of his desire to assert an autonomy for himself that is separate from God, an autonomy that in fact rivals God. The claims he makes for writing are more profound than the banal revelation that a writer must venture into the belly of the beast, into the heart of darkness, venture where angels fear to tread. More than merely straying, he claims that writing is a betrayal of innocence, not the innocence of the writer, but the innocence of the reader who engages with the evil in the text. Writing also betrays and perverts those whom and that which he writes about: writing rivals history; history is betrayed, perverted, made over in the writer's text. Again the question can be asked: is this the truth or is it a boast? In claiming to rival God, the "writer", in the form of the fictional Dostoevsky, claims an autonomy outside language, outside history, and if it is indeed an act of betrayal, outside any overriding truth.

Dostoevsky has understood that truth cannot be attained through introspection. The divided self cannot find an end to self-division through self-interrogation that proves endless. Self-mastery, mastery of meaning, cannot be achieved through a will to truth. So, he has to attempt to trap truth through random acts such as gambling, through falling through levels of consciousness such as in an epileptic seizure, or in imagining the moment preceding death. No act of will can compel the truth to emerge, so he submits to the uncontrollable

randomness of gambling, of falling, of seeking possession by the Other. These are all attempts to at least glimpse truth, find some kind of grace from outside of himself. He seems to use these as alternatives to submitting to the God who is apparently absent. All these attempts fail.

He wants to reject the notion of the difficulty of knowing. He cannot bear and finds difficult the possibility of not knowing, of accepting that truth is always provisional, constantly deferred. Coetzee says in the interview in *Doubling the Point* that precedes his essay on confession, "not all of us have the power to accept, pessimistically (Freud) or with equanimity (Derrida, it seems), the prospect of endlessness" (249). The fictional Dostoevsky goes further, not being able to bear that mastery is an illusion, that one can never truly know, and failing to find truth by chance, he attempts to seize truth through force. He establishes the cynical truth that the innocence of a child can be corrupted. This "truth", obtained through means that deny any basis for values, paradoxically, confronts him with a profound realisation that one has a soul that can be lost. He escapes endless self-analysis with its concomitant torturing contradictions through a deliberate act of evil, and pays with his soul. Losing the soul can only be understood outside the parameters of reason. Being aware of losing one's soul is a way of knowing that is outside the capabilities of cynicism.

Without obtaining some kind of truth, he cannot write. Writing is conceived of as an act of fathering. If he cannot obtain the knowledge, the truth, the power to enable him to write, to simultaneously conceive and father the text, then he must seize this power for himself. He must force an ending on the endlessness of self-interrogations. If the power of grace is denied him, then the power of cynicism remains. Paradoxically the cynical corruption of innocence enables him to find an understanding of that which lies beyond

cynicism: that which can be termed the soul. The "truth" that enables him to write, involves him losing his soul.

In this over-simplified synopsis of the trajectory of the writer's impulse to end the endlessness of confession, more questions are raised than are answered. I now go on to discuss some of these questions.

Possession, falling and gambling as means of escaping limits

As discussed in the previous chapter, the guilt that gives rise to confession is regarded as originating in sin. To sin is to be opposed to God. In *The Symbolism of Evil,* Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between defilement and sin, where the spiritual space for sin is determined by a personal relationship to a god; where "the penitent experiences the assault of demons as the counterpart of the absence of the god" (48). To be separate from and in opposition to God is commonly described in terms of being possessed.

The contest for mastery can be seen to be even more complex when taking notions of possession into account. Rivalry for mastery between two parties becomes even more difficult if a demonic "third force" also enters the dynamic. In the novel Dostoevsky is seen both as *being* possessed (in numerous ways) as well as trying *to* possess. The first intimation of possession comes early in the novel when he first visits the room of his dead stepson, Pavel, where he finds his white cotton suit which he holds to his forehead: "Faintly the smell of his son comes to him. He breathes in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering me" (3-4). Dostoevsky's attempts to come to terms with the death of his son and with his grief are often manifested in his experiencing himself, or desiring himself, to be possessed by Pavel, and conversely, in trying himself to possess Pavel. The experience of grief itself is

described as possession by demons or the devil. At one point where his grief and pain modulate into a kind of rage:

> He lies down on the bed, his arms tight across his chest, breathing fast, trying to expel the demon that is taking over him. He knows that he resembles nothing so much as a corpse laid out, and that what he calls a demon may be nothing but his own soul flailing its wings. But being alive is, at this moment, a kind of nausea. He wants to be dead. More than that: to be extinguished, annihilated". (16-17)

It is difficult to fail to be moved by the exquisite anguish in this description of grief that is both delicate and excessive in its detail. But later in the course of his grief, Dostoevsky discovers a new anxiety: "He shakes his head as if to rid it of a plague of devils. What is it that is corrupting the integrity of his grieving, that insists it is nothing but a lugubrious disguise?" (125). Not even the intensity and sincerity of his feelings can guarantee that his understanding is true and his feelings are uncorrupted.

In the early stages of his grief, Dostoevsky frequently experiences himself as dead. Sometimes even Pavel seems more alive than he. Bound up with notions of possession is a second complex theme which is that of falling. In one context falling is between the two realms of the living and of the dead, falling from a state of aliveness into death:

> At moments like this he cannot distinguish Pavel from himself. They are the same person; and that person is no more or less than a thought, Pavel thinking it in him, he thinking it in Pavel. The thought keeps Pavel alive, suspended in his fall. (21)

Pavel quite literally died by falling, from a tower. Other motifs of death by falling haunt the narrative: one being the falling of the axe that cracks the skull, where the

suspended moment as the axe falls is the moment of suspension between life and death. In his frequent rehearsing of this moment, Dostoevsky interchanges himself with Pavel:

> Because I am he. Because he is I. Something there that I seek to grasp: the moment before extinction when the blood still courses, the heart still beats. Heart, the faithful ox that keeps the millwheel turning, that casts up not so much as a glance of puzzlement when the axe is raised on high, but takes the blow and folds at the knees and expires. Not oblivion but the moment before oblivion, when I come panting up to you at the rim of the well and we look upon each other for a last time, knowing we are alive, sharing this one life, our only life. (53-54)

In this passage, as in others, "I" and "he" (or "I" and "not-I"), are no longer fixed in their separateness. There is such identification between the two that the usual gap disappears. In the previous chapter, in the context of confession, it is discussed how confessant and confessor, writer and reader, can move to a position where each becomes interested in the same and they become complicit with one another.

Reading and writing are, in the novel, at times overtly linked with possession. For example Maximov says to Dostoevsky: "you speak of reading as though it were demon-possession" (47). And about writing: at one point Dostoevsky channels the sexual energy and curiosity that Anna Sergeyevna stimulates in him, to fantasise about her setting him free to write a book of evil, "and to what end? To liberate himself from evil or to cut himself off from good?" (134). He asks these questions of himself as though the writing of the book can be either a process of exorcism, or a confirmation of his possession by evil.

Falling is used metaphorically in the novel, as in falling into writing and in falling into sin, and is also used quite literally, as in falling to one's death. One can fall, literally and

metaphorically, from life to death, and one can also fall through different levels of consciousness. Falling into an epileptic seizure (the fictional Dostoevsky, as did the historical Dostoevsky, suffers from such attacks) as well as falling into sleep, or falling into a heightened state of awareness through sexual intercourse, are seen as falling between different levels of consciousness, and also as falling into a new and unusual state of "oneness" with a potential for knowing truth and for achieving a transcendence. Falling to one's death, falling into a seizure, into sleep or into sexual ecstasy, can be to escape self-consciousness, to experience the death of the self-conscious self and, paradoxically, also to experience the self as more complete. When Nechaev takes Dostoevsky to the top of the tower from which Pavel fell to his death, Dostoevsky:

> grips the railing, stares down *there* into the plummeting darkness. Between *here* and *there* an eternity of time, so much time that it is impossible for the mind to grasp it. Between *here* and *there* Pavel was alive, more alive than ever before. We live most intensely while we are falling – truth that wrings the heart! (121)

In his essay, Coetzee discusses a passage from the novel *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky. One of the characters, dying of tuberculosis, makes a confession prior to his threatened suicide. This character Ippolit, argues:

> that in the face of death the division of the self brought about by self-consciousness can be transcended in, and the endless regression of self-doubt overtaken by, an overriding will to the truth. The moment before death belongs to a different kind of time in which truth has at last the power to appear in the form of revelation. The experience of time out of time is

described most clearly in Myshkin's epileptic seizures, when, in the last instant of clarity before darkness falls, his

> mind and heart were flooded by a dazzling light [...] These moments were precisely an intense heightening of awareness ... and at the same time of the most direct sensation of one's own existence to the most intense degree. (258-259)[1]

Reflecting on such moments, Myshkin thinks of the words "There shall be time no longer" (259). With these works Ippolit later prefaces his confession. (CDT 284-285)

This passage from *The Idiot* is recalled in *Master*. The fictional Dostoevsky, "trying not to look down", is at the top of the tower from which Pavel fell:

> A metaphor, he tells himself, that is all it is – another word for a lapse of consciousness, a not-being-here, an absence. Nothing new. The epileptic knows it all: the approach to the edge, the glance downward, the lurch of the soul, the thinking that thinks itself crazily over and over like a bell pealing in the head: *Time shall have an end, there shall be no death.* (118)

Epileptic seizures can be thought of as potentially bringing moments of clarity, but conversely the fictional Dostoevsky also views them as a burden. These seizures do not bring any answers, "nor do the trances themselves provide illumination. They are not visitations. Far from it: they are nothing – mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him as if by a whirlwind that leaves behind not even a memory of darkness" (69).

The fictional Dostoevsky desires a state of wholeness and satisfaction, beyond the usual binaries of good/evil, life/death, even of writer/reader or writer/text. He seeks a transcendent truth that perhaps can be accessed at that privileged moment just prior to literal

or metaphorical death. In some instances he uses notions of falling and possession opportunistically, even if unconsciously, in an attempt to force the moment into being a revelatory experience. He wishes to manipulate such powerfully ambiguous moments to attain a state akin to grace. He wills these moments – even though these moments are not within his grasp but present themselves to him – to grant him access to truth and transcendent grace.

As discussed in Chapter 2 above, will to truth cannot achieve transcendence, but only a constant deferral of truth. Transcendence can only come from outside and cannot be achieved through an act of will. The fictional Dostoevsky instinctively knows that he cannot consciously achieve transcendence. He therefore, and paradoxically, tries to achieve it though conscious attempts at being unconscious, to be actively passive: he tries to expect the unexpected.

In *Master,* one night in the early stages of his grief, Dostoevsky is woken from a sleep which he had entered "with the intent of finding his way to Pavel" (79), by the wail of a dog. He finally decides to go and find the unknown dog because, or so he "reasons", he will only find Pavel by not looking for 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. (80)

He goes to the dog but does not rescue it. He resents being presented with the responsibility of rescuing it, especially if it does not bring him to his goal, which is to find Pavel. He does not take up "his non-ontological responsibility for the other" (Marais 326). Self-consciously

scrutinising his actions he sees his failure to rescue the dog as a lost opportunity in his pursuit of Pavel and of wholeness and grace. He feels:

> a growing certainty that he will never again go out in the night to answer a dog's call, that an opportunity for leaving himself as he is behind and becoming what he might yet be has passed. I am I, he thinks despairingly, manacled to myself till the day I die. (82)

Marais situates Dostoevsky's failure to rescue the dog in the context of his (Dostoevsky's) failure of love and ethical responsibility towards the Other. Basing his argument on Levinas's ethical principles, Marais asserts that Dostoevsky is wrong to regard his failure to rescue the dog as a missed opportunity because the ethical responsibility to love the Other is infinite, it "is radically anti-teleological in that it is never completed, that is, can never be a *fait accompli*" (327). The fictional Dostoevsky, by not "'betting on all the numbers' [...] by 'gambling' selectively and conditionally [...] evades the ethical imperative of responsibility for all" (328). Marais argues that to bet on all the numbers, to commit oneself to being ethically responsible to the infinite Other requires a "leap of trust" (329). However, in *Master*, Dostoevsky seems to feel that betting on all the numbers is a kind of cheating that negates the need for faith, is in fact the antithesis of trust in God:

> Betting on all the numbers – is that still gambling? Without risk, without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere in the fall of the dice, what is left that is divine? Surely God knows that, and will have mercy on the gambler at heart? (84)

Faith itself is a kind of gamble. Kossew discusses the concept of faith as gambling as a recurrent issue in many of Dostoevsky's novels, as "the idea of the individual's freedom to

test God is explored" (Kossew 80). If one bets on all the numbers, faith is in a sense denied. Faith entails taking a chance on the unknowable, testing oneself and ultimately testing God.

The fictional Dostoevsky, after leaving the dog, decides to gamble on another chance. Even though he experiences himself as being mired in passivity in his state of grief, he nevertheless makes an active choice to refuse to submit to making a commitment of unselfish charity. His cynical self-interest remains so intact that he needs to know at least the odds, before he makes his choice. Instead of trusting only faith, he also trusts his powers of interpretation:

> He is waiting for a sign, and he is betting (there is no grander word he dare use) that the dog is not the sign, is not a sign at all, is just a dog among many dogs howling in the night. But he knows too that as long as he tries by cunning to distinguish things that are things from things that are signs he will not be saved. That is the logic by which he will be defeated. (83)

In spite of his desire for wholeness, Dostoevsky does not have the capacity for grace within himself, nor is he able to claim grace from outside through reason or through an effort of will, nor is he able to submit to the authority of the Other. Instead he tries to use tricks of consciousness or games of chance as if to trap truth and catch it unawares. However, even though he understands the paradox, ultimately he is unable to efface the self in order to find the "truth" about the self.

Contradictions, self-deception and responsibility

The paradox of denying the self in an attempt to find the truth about the self is played out in many different ways. Yielding up self-consciousness whether it be by submitting to another level of awareness, as already discussed, including by merging one's identity with an

Other, as for example Dostoevsky desires to become one with Pavel, raises questions about authority and responsibility. Desires are not straightforward and may even be contradictory. Dostoevsky is not master of his desires, nor does he even recognise contradictions that are obvious to the reader. The reader can judge that Dostoevsky romanticises his relationship with Pavel, and his need to protect and nurture him now that he is dead seems in contrast to their relationship when Pavel was alive. However, even in his grieving he at times sees Pavel as a rival from the younger generation. He feels Pavel to intrude between him and his sexual desire for Anna: "*If only he were not here!* Then the thought disappears around a corner" (130). Matryona (also known as Matryosha), from the same generation as Pavel, competes with Dostoevsky for her mother Anna's attention. Once again Dostoevsky thinks: "*Yet if only she were not here!* This time he does not suppress the thought" (130). And later, "lying in Pavel's bed he cannot refrain from a quiver of dark triumph" (135). Noting such contradictions and self-deceptions, the reader has a sense of authority over the Dostoevsky character. Dostoevsky is read as not reading (interpreting) his own situation honestly and being blind to insights accessible to the reader.

Dostoevsky deliberately tries to conjure up Pavel, to possess him, but either Pavel simply does not come, or he is replaced by an image of Nechaev: "*Pavel!* he whispers over and over, using the word as a charm. But what comes to him inexorably is the form not of Pavel but of the other one, Sergei Nechaev" (60). Not only is there an identification and rivalry between the generations, between father and son, but within a generation there is an identification and rivalry between Nechaev and Pavel, and a simultaneous merging of the boundaries between them. Dostoevsky feels a gap opening up between himself and Pavel; although to the reader the gap has been apparent all along. Because he conjures Nechaev and not Pavel, he feels betrayed by Pavel and he is angry with him (60). The alert reader

would interpret the "appearance" of the other young man rather as Dostoevsky betraying his own consciously expressed desires as, in spite of himself, Nechaev looms more strongly in his own imagination than does Pavel. In Dostoevsky's desire to possess or recognise Pavel, that is to possess the Other, he simultaneously desires recognition by this Other. This "Pavel", this "Other", would be the expression of Dostoevsky's desire for wholeness that remains forever a need. In some instances he desires to possess Pavel, but in other instances he experiences himself as being taken-over by Pavel. The desire can be seen to be for mastery over meaning and a desire for ending division, for finding plenitude as he and Pavel become one, and life and death become united.

A further complexity concerning authority stems from the possibility that we are not necessarily in control of our own ideas. Rather than we possessing ideas, ideas can possess us. Maximov, whose job entails finding out the truth through investigation and ultimately judging where responsibility lies, has Dostoevsky tell him the following observations about the radical political activist, Nechaev: "'Nechaev is not a police matter. Ultimately Nechaev is not a matter for the authorities at all, at least for the secular authorities'" (43). He goes on to say that Nechaev is only the embodiment of an idea, or rather "'it is outside ideas. It is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment but its host; or rather he is under possession by it'" (44). Maximov responds to Dostoevsky: rather than Nechaev being "possessed by a demon" (44), he wonders "whether the Nechaev phenomenon is quite as much of an aberration of the spirit as you seem to say. Perhaps it is just the old matter of fathers and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier in this particular generation, more unforgiving" (45). In this response Maximov raises other themes of the novel: generational rivalry (particularly in the form of radical political activism) and forgiveness (especially between fathers and sons).

Authority of the writer

Emblematic of the writer is the mythological figure of Orpheus. *Master* contains numerous allusions to Orpheus the musician/poet whose gifts enchanted even the gods, so that he was able to go to the underworld in an attempt to bring his dead wife Eurydice back to the world of the living. Orpheus was able to transgress the boundary between life and death. This transgression was possible due to his powers as an artist and because of his great love for his wife. In the novel, Dostoevsky repeatedly tries to bring back the dead Pavel, usually by repeating his name, and the connection with Orpheus is explicit:

> He thinks of Orpheus walking backwards step by step, whispering the dead woman's name, coaxing her out of the entrails of hell; of the wife in graveclothes with blind, dead eyes following him, holding out limp hands before her like a sleepwalker. No flute, no lyre, just the word, the one word, over and over. (5)

Repeating a name, a word, is a technique that can induce a trance-like state, another level of consciousness. Orpheus can be regarded as a shamanistic figure, roaming or voyaging between different levels; he journeys from life to death in the tradition of the shaman (Lambert lecture). Dostoevsky's epileptic seizures can be seen in the light of this tradition: the belief that the trance state, the falling into another level of consciousness confers special powers and insights.

In the myth, Orpheus breaks the condition by which he is able to bring Eurydice back from the dead. He must not look back at her. As he leads her out of the underworld, he is unable to control himself, and he looks back and so loses her forever. Dostoevsky, as his grief progresses and his identification with Pavel intensifies, speaks of visions of himself in relation to the dead Pavel: "The rule: one look, one only; no glancing back. But I look back

[...] Forever I look back. Forever I am absorbed in your gaze [...] Two realms signalling each other (54)". Whilst in his extremity of grief, Anna Sergeyvna comes to him one night, and through their lovemaking he "plunges into sleep as into lake. As he sinks Pavel rises to meet him [...] he knows he is dying, he knows he is past hope, he calls to his father because that is the last thing left he can do" (56). Dostoevsky later thinks of Anna having sex with him that night as "falling, but never irrevocably falling. No: to fall and then come back from the fall new, remade, virginal, ready to be wooed again and to fall again. A playing with death, a play of resurrection" (63). He tells her much later that he sees her as "'a conductress of souls'" (139), he also tells her: "'You have it in your power [...] You can bring him back. For one minute. For just one minute'" (140). He makes Anna into an Orpheus figure. Sex and love become the means of crossing over to another level where the dead can be found, where resurrection seems possible.

Anna replies to Dostoevsky saying, "'You love him so much [...] you will certainly see him again'" (140), as if love itself has this power of resurrection. When with Nechaev at the top of the tower from which Pavel fell, Dostoevsky imagines the blood and the bones on the pavement below. He imagines gathering up the broken body and embracing it:

> that is what it means to believe. To believe and to love – the same thing.
>
> 'I believe in the resurrection,' he says. The words come without premeditation. The crazy ranting tone is gone from his voice. Speaking the words themselves he feels a quick joy, not so much at the words themselves as at the way they have come, spoken out of him as if by another. *Pavel!* He thinks.
>
> 'What?' Nechaev leans closer.
>
> 'I believe in the resurrection of the body and in life eternal.' (122)

Love and belief are here seen to have a power to resurrect the dead. This extract is doubly intertextual with the Orpheus myth. Orpheus could visit the underworld to resurrect the dead. His great love for Eurydice was redemptive. After his failure to bring Eurydice back, he was consumed with grief and he was ultimately torn to pieces by the Thracian women, his body parts were scattered, though his head floated away down a river and continued to sing. The image of embracing Pavel's scattered body parts seems intertextual with the scattered body parts of Orpheus. Orpheus, the poet/writer figure was able to transgress normal boundaries, had the power to resurrect the dead, but was himself finally, and literally, fragmented, but nevertheless he continued to sing. In *Master*, the Orpheus figure is also analogous in some respects with Christ: redemptive love offers a route to resurrection; the body is tortured and destroyed but for believers there is faith in the resurrection and eternal life.

Pondering on the vengeance between fathers and sons, Dostoevsky wonders how the story of "the tiny child" who is wandering with him, "searching for the light, searching to emerge", will be told. "How can he find the child lost within himself, allow him a voice to sing his sad song?" (126). The metaphor is complex, as the child is both inhabiting him and is in some way incarcerated by him. He is thinking not only of the communication between father and son, but between generations. The communication he is thinking of is that of storytelling and of redemption:

> *Piping on a bone.* An old story comes back to him of a youth killed, mutilated, scattered, whose thigh-bone, when the wind blows, pipes a lament and names his murderers. One by one, in fact, the old stories are coming back, stories he heard from his grandmother and did not know the meaning of, but stored up unwittingly like bones for the future. A great ossuary of

> stories from before history began, built up and tended by the people. Let Pavel find his way to my thigh-bone and pipe to me from there! *Father, why have you left me in the dark forest? Father, when will you come to save me?* (126)

Waiting to be told is not only the story stored up in his body, but also many more stories than the one he wants to tell of Pavel, or allow Pavel to tell. In some ways we ourselves are composed of stories, to our very bones as it were, and when we speak it is the previous generations that speak through us. In this passage, history does not so much rival stories, but is seen as comprising stories. Stories are not so much created as lived. History and stories are intertextual just as we are interrelated and we ourselves are "intertextual".
If this "message" is what this passage communicates, it also demonstrates its own dense intertextuality, for example, with the historical Dostoevsky and his confidence in the significance of the lives and traditions of the ordinary Russian people as opposed to the ideologies and theories of the intellectuals; with the Orpheus myth; and with stories from the Christian Bible. The last two lines of the above quotation contain echoes of Christ on the cross calling to God the Father, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).

Dostoevsky notices that Matryona has abandoned the shrine that she had made for Pavel, and he wonders if she guesses that he no longer hears Pavel's voice, "that the only voices he hears now are devil-voices" (126). He lights the candle and kneels before the icon, "The Virgin's eyes are locked on her babe, who stares out of the picture at him, raising a tiny admonitory finger" (126). Jesus is now aligned with the generation of children who may be forsaken or even abused by fathers. Dostoevsky is later to conceive of violating Matryona, and to conceive the chapter "Stavrogin's Confession" which

includes the raped child admonishing Stavrogin with a tiny raised fist (*The Devils*, 690). Just as Orpheus is alluded to in complex and almost contradictory ways, so too is Jesus. Jesus is not only a redemptive figure, but can also be admonishing, and ultimately he, like everything else, can also be betrayed.

In a further reference to Orpheus, after gaining possession of Pavel's diary and reading it, Dostoevsky reflects on the dead young man who is recalled to him at times in the young men he sees in everyday life:

> On the streets of Petersburg, in the turn of a head here, the gesture of a hand there, I see you, and each time my heart lifts as a wave does. Nowhere and everywhere, torn and scattered like Orpheus. Young in days, *chryseos*, golden, blessed.
>
> The task left to me: to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts. Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be. And the truth? Stiff shoulders humped over the writing table, and the ache of heart slow to move. A tortoise heart. (152-3)

The tortoise or turtle is also allusive of Orpheus, as the sound-box of his musical instrument was made from a tortoise-shell (Lambert lecture). The tortoise/turtle image in the novel is metaphoric of the writer. Prefiguring the later confession that writing is betrayal, in a dream early on in his grieving, Dostoevsky dreams of being "a great old turtle" swimming in water, searching for something, calling. (He later dreams again of the dead Pavel being underwater). Perhaps he is calling Pavel's name, but "with each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water" (17). He swims up to Pavel, who is lying on his back underwater. "From his turtle-throat he gives a last cry, which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to

kiss the face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting" (18). This nightmarish doubleness of the father as both protector and potential devourer of the child haunts Dostoevsky and haunts the novel. If to write is to father a text, the ambiguity of the turtle "bite" is suggestive of the writer/father as betrayer.

In the final chapter of the novel, when Dostoevsky is waiting for the moment when he can start to write, the turtle metaphor reoccurs. He speaks of falling:

> not to emerge from the fall unscathed, but to achieve what his son did not: to wrestle with the whistling darkness, to absorb it, to make it his medium; to turn the falling into a flying, even if flying is slow and old and clumsy as a turtle's. To live where Pavel died. To live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him. To hold it all within him: Russia, Pavel, death. (235)

Later when he writes the first story, though he sits calmly, "he is a man caught up in a whirlwind" (245). He is:

> buffeted by currents, before the grip of the wind slackens and for a moment, before he starts to fall, he is allowed utter stillness and clarity, the world opening up below him like a map of itself.
>
> Letters from the whirlwind. Scattered leaves, which he gathers up; a scattered body, which he reassembles. (246)

The Orpheus allusion is central to the conception of the writer as one who transgressively falls between levels and in the process achieves a certain power that enables him to reassemble that which has been scattered. In so doing he achieves a form of resurrection. He resurrects from these parts that which would otherwise not exist. But, "he has to give up his soul in return" (250).

Truth or boast?

The final chapter of *Master* is called "Stavrogin", the name of the character at the centre of the novel *The Devils*, who despite being central, seems unknowable although the reader knows things *about* him. In *The Devils*, Stavrogin is at the centre of the activities of a group of nihilists, including a fictionalised version of Nechaev (the character Peter Verkhovensky in the novel), although in some ways Stavrogin too possesses characteristics similar to the historical Nechaev.

In this final chapter, before he begins to write, the fictional Dostoevsky confesses to a kind of madness and a sickness that he names "resentment" (234). He "chooses" to face the darkness, to absorb it. That which he thinks of as his own madness, "his own sordidness and contemptible infirmity" he makes "the emblematic sickness of the age" (235). He thinks in paradoxes. Sometimes the madness of resentment and vengeance is his own, sometimes it is as if from outside of him:

> The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; or what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence [...] He is the mad one; and the one who admits he is the mad one is mad too. Nothing he says is true, nothing is false, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed. There is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall. (235)

The contradictions and paradoxes that he inhabits (or inhabit him) speak of madness or of special insights: nothing is true/nothing is false; he must be on watch/not watch; God speaks/does not speak. Is Pavel's name true/false? Are Pavel and Nechaev the same/ different? Is Pavel innocent/vengeful? He believes that there will be no second word (from

Pavel) and that the second word will come, "he fears that Pavel has spoken. He believes that Pavel will speak. Both. Chalk and cheese" (240).

Dostoevsky seems to be seeking for something beyond these contradictions. He cannot write, but should he write it will be to overcome the paradoxes, to yield to the impossible in order to do the impossible. Contrary to conventional ideas about writing being faithful to truth, he understands it to be "not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal", betrayal of love, of Pavel, "the mother and child and everyone else. *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him" (235). The tone of this declaration is almost that of a manifesto: it has a proud defiance and his question again has relevance; "is it the truth or just a boast?". Dostoevsky is confessing the worst possible sin, that writing is betrayal of all, even of love, for which he believes there is no forgiveness.

In the suppressed chapter from *The Devils*, "Stavrogin's Confession: At Tikhon's", Stavrogin confesses to raping the child Matryona, an act that results in her suicide while Stavrogin waits in the building until he is certain that she has killed herself; and he confesses to marrying Maria Lebyatin, "who in those days had not yet gone mad but was just an ecstatic idiot who was madly in love with [him] in secret" (*The Devils* 693-4), because such an outrageous act excited him. Stavrogin understands his sins to be terrible and he fears that for these sins there is no forgiveness. Tikhon, the monk to whom he hands his written confession, unexpectedly discusses the style and not only the content of Stavrogin's confession. He points out to Stavrogin: "You were not ashamed to confess your crime, why are you ashamed of repentance?" (699). And he adds, "you seem to be admiring your psychology and clutching at every detail merely with the intention of surprising your reader by a callousness which is not in you. What else is this but a proud

challenge by an accused to the judge?" (699). Again the question "is this the truth or just a boast?" is relevant. Bakhtin observes that, "the entire orientation of Stavrogin in this dialogue is determined by his dual attitude toward the other person: by the impossibility of managing without judgement and forgiveness, and at the same time by a hostility toward him and resistance to his judgement and forgiveness" (262). Stavrogin both knows and rejects the notion that self-sufficiency is impossible. Confession is necessarily directed outwards at another. Bakhtin regards confession as a demonstration of:

> interaction among consciousnesses, in order to show the interdependence of consciousness that is revealed during confession. I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance). Justification cannot be *self*-justification, recognition cannot be *self*-recognition. I receive my name from others, and it exists for others (self-nomination is imposture). Even love for one's own self is impossible. (287-288)

Stavrogin, even as he prepares to hand his written confession to Tihkon, says, "'I want you to know that I shall not reveal anything to you, no secret, for I can perfectly well do without you'" (*The Devils* 680). As Bakhtin points out, "without recognition, and affirmation by another person Stavrogin is incapable of accepting himself, but at the same time he does not want to accept the other's judgment of him" (244).

As part of rejecting the judgement of the Other, perversion and betrayal are used by both Stavrogin and the fictional Dostoevsky as acts of defiance against being merely ordinary – Tikhon says to Stavrogin, "'you don't want to be merely lukewarm'" (680) – and as acts of defiance against God[2]. Stavrogin's confession potentially is little more than

an act of "heroic" defiance: in wanting to make his sins public he seeks a public notice of his coldly calculated crimes and of his suffering. Tikhon finds him out. In Stavrogin's confession he spots "the worm of vanity in [...] self-abasement" (CDT 282). Instead of publishing the confession, he suggests for Stavrogin a private penance involving personal sacrifice. Tikhon raises the "possibility that [Stavrogin] may merely be a dissolute, rootless aristocrat with Byronic pretensions who wants to attain fame by the short cut of committing an easy abomination and confessing it in public" (CDT 290). In a rage, Stavrogin rejects Tikhon and his recommendations and leaves, with Tikhon fearing that he will go out to "commit a new crime as a way out, and you will commit it solely in order to avoid publication of these pages" (*The Devils* 704). Tikhon proved to be a more authoritative reader than Stavrogin had bargained for. He had gambled on trapping Tikhon (and God) into forgiveness rather than judgement, but instead "Tikhon opens up the gap Stavrogin has sought to close between the subjects's self-knowledge and the truth" (CDT 289). Stavrogin remains enmeshed in his sin.

In *Master*, the reader has the power to interpret the narrative even as s/he is confined by the narrative. The reader may absorb Dostoevsky's interpretation and confession of writing as perversion, betrayal and selling one's soul, even while being aware of the contradictions and gaps in the narrative. The reader may go further and try to rehabilitate Dostoevsky, by turning his confession of perversion into a kind of victory for truth. Another way to respond is to resist complicity and at the very least try to resist the seductions of the confessional narrative and becoming complicit in the boast that writing rivals God. Even more radical a response would be to do as Foster recommends and resist a defining interpretation.

An interpretation that rehabilitates

In her essay "*The Master of Petersburg*: Confession and Double Thoughts in Coetzee and Dostoevsky", Rachel Lawlan provides an example of an interpretation that rehabilitates Dostoevsky's view of writing and the writer in a positive light. She finds in reading *Master*, "a sense of hope and life. The effort of truth-directed writing brings new life in itself, holding off death" (155). It is difficult to see just how the writing that the fictional Dostoevsky produces in the final chapter of the novel can be termed "truth-directed". The first story he writes, "The Apartment" is about exposing a child to adult sex "as one creates a taste for unnatural foods", a story which shadows his own thoughts about "seducing" the child Matryona and "foreshadows" the child rape of "Stavrogin's Confession". The second story, "The Child", contradicts his prior telling to Matryona of Pavel's generous behaviour to Maria Lebyatin, and instead he retells Pavel's behaviour as a cruel joke. In these stories Dostoevsky projects aspects of himself and his fantasies on to a version of a "Pavel" who is becoming like the Stavrogin of *The Devils*. Both stories are written for Matryona to find and to read, and Dostoevsky confesses that this writing "is an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. With it he has crossed a threshold" (*Master* 249). Dostoevsky is depicted as feeling his way towards betrayal, perversion and to giving up his soul in his writing, rather than feeling his way towards grace. Even with the understanding that grace is an impossibility, "that the longing for grace must remain a desire, something *to feel his way towards*" (Lawlan 154), and even with this "he" being Coetzee rather than the fictional Dostoevsky, I find it difficult to understand the last chapter of the book as a celebration of truth-directed writing. Both the stories of the final chapter are "perversions" and are surely the opposite of "truth-directed"? Lawlan states that "to read the book is not itself a gloomy experience"

(155) although earlier she says that the view in the novel that grace is not possible "is profoundly pessimistic" (153). Perhaps her interpretation stems from a desire to evade such apparent pessimism?

An interpretation that resists complicity

Stephen Watson, in "The Writer and the Devil: J.M. Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg*", is unequivocal in his response to the conclusion of the novel:

> The novel is emphatic, indeed vehement, in its final paragraphs: Dostoevsky, in order to write his books, has sold his soul to the devil. His betrayals, we are led to believe, are in a real sense unforgivable. The price of the knowledge – the creative energy – he has sought is nothing less than his own damnation. In reality, it is the writer, not the terrorist Nechaev, who is the Devil and the prince of nihilists. For the likes of Dostoevsky – such is the suggestion — there is no possibility that there might be any redemption, such as there was, for instance, for the murderer Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. (54)

Watson goes on to ask, "is this a conclusion that can be taken seriously?" (54). In Dostoevsky's profound self-condemnation it is possible to speculate that Coetzee himself suffers from "some unresolved grief [...] seeking that form of release that self-laceration can sometimes provide those lacking other means to forgiveness or self-forgiveness" (54-5). Watson suggests also that Coetzee is provoking the reader to reconsider whether "creativity" is always and automatically "good" in itself, that whatever a writer/artist does is redeemed by the work created. The myth of the artist/writer as "arch-transgressor" (55), where breaking through normal boundaries is thought to be liberating and transfiguring is

subjected to ethical scrutiny. Crossing boundaries can open one not just to amorality, but to actual evil: "to write one has to transgress, to be divided, even double. But to be double is to open oneself to the possibility of being overtaken by another voice. This voice may be anything but benign; it may even be that of the Devil himself" (56).

Watson gives further consideration to a more psychological reading of the Dostoevsky character in *Master*. Dostoevsky is suffering "a grave personal loss" after the death of his stepson, and "from one point of view, Coetzee's novel may be seen as a study in depression" (56). The psychological complexity of Dostoevsky's grief is finely told and, as Watson remarks, has "genuine poignancy" (57). The attention to the relentlessness of the process of grieving can also be seen as part of "some unresolved grief in the author himself" (55), particularly in the light of knowing that Coetzee's own son, at a similar age to the fictional Pavel, died by falling from a building (personal communication with David Attwell, February 1999). Watson notes that the fictional Dostoevsky is courageous in confronting "the Devil himself" and so commands "a measure of indulgence from those less courageous themselves" (57). To me the term indulgence seems misplaced. Someone attempting to grapple with larger issues at great personal cost, even if ultimately he is self-deceived, inspires a more complex response than mere indulgence: perhaps a paradoxical mixture of respect, sympathy, revulsion and baffled awe, and even at times impatience?

In *Master* there is "an awareness of guilt and forgiveness – a drama of sin and redemption – so acute that the novel is literally freighted with an emotion which can only be described as religious" (57). Watson regards the sufferings described in the novel as "the sufferings of human beings who consider themselves to be *souls*" (59).

> In charting the harrowing of Dostoevsky's soul, condemned as it is to tell the truth about itself, especially its more intolerable aspects, the novel

> becomes a latterday form of spiritual autobiography, an involuntary confession. With its central protagonists's ceaseless drive to reveal the truth about himself, the disturbing traces of struggles, victories, wounds, dominations, enslavements, humiliations, the novel remains tied at the deepest level to the Christian tradition and that 'obligation of truth' which is central to that tradition. (59)

To conceptualise the "religious" and "souls", involves thinking outside of the "limits of knowledge, at least the type of knowledge proposed by Enlightenment philosophy" (Lundén 18). Lundén contends (in his dissertation *(Re)educating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's* Dr Copernicus, *Coetzee's* Foe, *and Byatt's* Possession) that outside these limits certain novels "create room" for "a knowing which privileges the emotional, the spiritual, the mystical, the affective, and the intuitive" (18). To this "different mode of knowing", Lundén appends the term "residue" (18). Lundén examines three novels, one of them being Coetzee's *Foe*, and he argues that "this different way of knowing is also that which the novels force the reader to understand as eluding poststructuralist philosophy" (18). The novels are constructed so as to allow the reader to find that the "unintellectual residue" is outside the limits of theory and cannot be accounted for by theory. I think it is interesting to consider the "religious" issues of grace, redemption and Dostoevsky's giving up his soul in *Master,* in terms of a residue that is outside theory. Some aspects of this "residue" can be captured in the vocabulary of Christian theology (as Watson comments, "the book remains tied to the terms of religion" (60)), but maybe there is a lack of a vocabulary for this "other" knowledge in a secular context rather than that such ways of knowing are necessarily excluded by the secular.

Watson notes that "the bulk of South African writing gives much evidence of that atheism of the imagination" where "crucial questions of existence, such as [human beings'] very awareness of themselves as spiritual beings" are left out (60). He comments that "Coetzee's work is very far from exhibiting this form of truncated imagination" (60). Watson goes on to say:

> There are times in his [Coetzee's] recent fiction, particularly in *The Master of Petersburg*, when it really does seem as if the spiritual needs of human being are not simply the alienated form of their longing for social justice and fraternity; when these emerge, clearly, as an expression of ineradicable psychic drives as well as the consequence of facts about our human situation which no amount of social engineering can hope to change. (61)

Watson's interpretation marks the absence of God, rather than a rivalry with God. Perhaps "spiritual needs" and "psychic drives" are similar to the primordial need for satisfaction, for plenitude, discussed in Chapter 2 above.

Resisting interpretation

In the final chapter of *Master*, entitled "Stavrogin", Dostoevsky ponders again the paradoxes surrounding how to make God speak. He sits at the table in Pavel's room for hours. He glimpses himself in the mirror and finds a presence that is both familiar and strange. He wants to confront the stick figure and make "the image grow clearer" (237). He wants to know the figure's name and wonders: could it be Ivanov, could it be Pavel? In the figure he detects "something excessive" (238). He moves beyond conflating Nechaev with Pavel, even beyond Pavel as he was. As he focuses on the phantasm opposite him and imagines a Pavel "grown wholly beyond boyhood to become the kind of cold-faced,

handsome man whom no love can touch" (240), a man resembling the Stavrogin of *The Devils*, "he feels a chill coming" (240):

> Confronting it is like descending into the waters of the Nile and coming face to face with something huge and cold and grey that may once have been born of woman but with the passing of ages has retreated into stone, that does not belong in his world, that will baffle and overwhelm all his powers of conception.
>
> Christ on Calvary overwhelms him too. But the figure before him is not that of Christ. In it he detects no love, only the cold and massive indifference of stone. (240)

Reading this passage, I am reminded of Freud's description of the primary experience of satisfaction that is lost in the past as "an inertia (as a lump of rock is inert) and the drive toward perfection, consequently, as the wish to become inorganic once again'" (quoted by Foster 8). As Foster notes, this wish or need "remains always beyond the articulation of speech" (9). Dostoevsky is desiring to find the language to say (write) what is still an inarticulate need. His need is for wholeness, for plenitude. The need is for something primordial. And so rather than *he* doing the fathering, as a writer might, the question arises: "Is he required, rather, to put aside all that he himself is, all he has become, down to his very features, and become as a babe again? Is the thing before him the one that does the fathering, and must he give himself to being fathered by it? (240-1). Dostoevsky concludes that "if that is the truth, the way to resurrection, he will do it", but the phantasm, rather than remaining indifferent, seems to take on a demonic aspect: "following this shade he will go naked as a babe into the jaws of hell" (241).

And just before he begins to write and the pen begins to move, Dostoevsky, for the second time in the book has an image of the dead Pavel's seed being drawn from his body, "just like the goddess-fiend drawing out the seed from the corpse [of Shiva], saving it" (241). His fears, that his biological succession ends with Pavel's death, distort the fact that Pavel is his stepson and not his biological son, but Pavel's succession turns out to be through the fatherhood of Dostoevsky's writer's imagination. As a writer, he both conceives and fathers the text much as the "goddess-fiend" draws the seed from the corpse of the young man. Paradoxically Pavel fathers the father's text, a kind of reverse Oedipal effect.

But the writing that follows is, as Dostoevsky himself recognises, a betrayal and a perversion. "His writing is a form of treachery to everyone and everything he has known in Petersburg; they are used, abused, revealed and distorted. Nothing is left secret, and nothing is truthfully told. Mourning, he discovers, is a writing, a rewriting, a betrayal" (Attridge 34). For Dostoevsky to be open to what he needs to write, he needs to make use of the younger generation. Attridge understands that it "becomes apparent that what is required for writing, for literature, to begin is the sacrifice of their innocence" (35), that is the innocence of the young such as Pavel, Matryona and even Nechaev. He says that to consider such a sacrifice to be necessary "is a bleak view of the price to be paid for inventiveness, for being receptive to the other" (29). Dostoevsky moves through a series of betrayals "to the final betrayal, the madness, the inhumanity or ahumanity that enables a great work of fiction to come into being" (35). This final betrayal goes deeper than "the inevitable violence done to the other in apprehending and representing it" (35), as the writer,

> Dostoevsky is himself possessed, he has given up his soul to the devil. 'Stavrogin' names the absolute otherness that has taken him over, obliterating every human and social responsibility, everything we might call ethical. It is the completely new, but it is of course also the very ancient, the ahuman that pre-exists the human. (36)

Attridge finds *Master* disturbing because "it presents a vision of the writing process, and more generally of creativity, of inventiveness, of the achievement of the new, that sets it against the ethical realm, as having nothing to do with ethics, or with human responsibility, only responsibility to the new thing that is coming into being" (36). According to Attridge, in the novel "writing is the creation of public fiction, and the ethical is what has to be sacrificed" (36). He postulates that Coetzee "has let his own voice be taken over by a strange and at times dismaying mode of utterance", and it "speaks of the role of literature, of art, in a country like South Africa, a country struggling to be born anew. It is not a reassuring account" (37).

Attridge remarks that the novel causes "discomfort", as it tests its hypothesis without flinching, and he hopes that the novel retains its power as a "sinister, Stavrogin-like work" (37), although he does not doubt that "after a certain interval, our cultural institutions will massage the novel into a more appealing" shape (37).

It can be said that the confessional aspects of the novel – that which is confessed to – discomfort the reader. The reader can cope with the discomfort by resisting it and in various ways. As has already been discussed, a process of rehabilitation can make the novel more palatable, by what Attridge calls a "process of accommodation" (37). The discomfort can also be resisted by rejecting the conclusion that the writer betrays all in an

attempt to rival God, as for example Watson does by saying God is truly absent, rather than merely silent. An absent God cannot be trapped.

Attridge asks the question, "what is my responsibility as the reader of the new work?" (37). He says that the reader should remain attentive and open to the text, "neither passively yielding to its seductions nor actively managing its meanings" while "knowing – but without being blocked by the knowledge – that one's efforts will always be inadequate, will always involve sacrifice and betrayal" (37). Reading involves giving oneself up, and in a way is a kind of gambling, being open to the "other's coming [...] accepting the risk of the unknown" (38). Reading with such open attentiveness can lead one to be complicit with the impulse to escape limits or, to put it another way, to transgress. It is difficult to understand how such an openness differs from "passively yielding to [the text's] seductions" (37) which Attridge says the reader must not do. If "reading properly" entails being fully responsive to the other, how can it be determined that such openness does not result in being possessed by the other?

Attridge ends his essay with a series of questions as he resists a final interpretation of the text. He does not attempt to master its meaning. He does not judge nor does he forgive. But by resisting interpretation, by trying to achieve a semblance of openness to the other, is he really accepting "the risk of the unknown" (38), or is he in fact withdrawing from risk, from gambling, from transgressing the limits and the possibility of falling?

Notes to Chapter 3

[1] Coetzee is quoting from Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot.* Trans. David Magarshak. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.

[2] As if echoing Stavrogin/Dostoevsky's perversion and betrayal as acts of defiance against being merely ordinary, "merely lukewarm", Janes comments on Coetzee himself: "Coetzee's skepticism serves perhaps to mask a dread of banality, the fearful ordinariness of the values his novels profess" (113). His skepticism, Janes goes on to say, "permits Coetzee to be simultaneously uncommitted and serious, ethical yet unprogrammatic, *moraliste* without moralizing" (113). These comments by Janes can be examined in the light of Coetzee's comments about Dostoevsky's characters, the underground man and Stavrogin, who are both defiant of conventions, but "Dostoevsky's ethical critique is that these are merely ways of making oneself into the hero of a story for the modern age – merely ways of being interesting" (DP 244). Coetzee observes that psychoanalysis has "no ethical weight", and implies that there is an ethical imperative both for individuals, and for stories, to "aspire to more than merely to be interesting" (DP 245), presumably to aspire to a condition of ethical seriousness, if not responsibility. Coetzee's skeptism does not lead him to doubt that ethical responsibility/behaviour is imperative, but it does permit him to ask, how are we to be ethical in a secular context?

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The novel ends with Dostoevsky's confession of betrayal. He feels himself to be in contest with God, and "he is outside himself, perhaps outside his soul" (249). At the moment of awareness, when "Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall" (249), the truth that is revealed to him is: "*I have lost my place in my soul*" (249). With all the play on different forms of possession in the novel, Dostoevsky finally loses possession[1] of himself as he feels emptied of meaning.

He is completely self-alienated – he does not recognize his hat, his shoes, nor would he recognise his face in the mirror (250). He is taken over by a stranger, or by the Devil. Writing is portrayed as an act of self-sacrifice as one opens oneself up to other voices and other "truths". Writing as sacrifice is made explicit in the allusions to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross: Dostoevsky wonders whether he tastes vinegar or gall (250).

At this point of realization he feels empty. He feels no pain, even when comparing himself with "a soldier shot on the battlefield feeling no pain, wondering: am I dead already?" (250). He does not experience a powerful sense of revelation, he is skeptical even of his own feelings. Rather than writing (and confession) feeling like an expression of an autonomous self, he is contained by his interpretation of himself as lost through falling into sin. As Foster says, "To a great extent, our statements contain us, not we them" (13). Instead of mastering meaning, he is mastered by the discourse of confession of sin: falling into sin and losing one's soul, and he remains trapped in this sense of "sin".

He does not trap God as he remains snared in sin, and even the feeling of emptiness gives way to the endless shame that he begins to taste: "It tastes like gall" (250). Alienated

from self and from God, self-divided and self-loathing, he is trapped. He both writes and reads himself as soul-less. As readers are we to do the same?

Snodgrass writes of an interpretation of the Orpheus myth that:

> warns of the awesome responsibility of godlike talents, which become too great a burden for mortal grasp. This view of the myth faults Orpheus for *ate*, or insane obsession, and *hubris* the overweening pride that was the deadliest of sins in the ancient world. Because he allowed his emotions to overrule his head and insisted that Eurydice escape her mortal lot, he overstepped human bounds and challenged the will of the gods. For so deadly a crime, his punishment – a false renewal of hope and a second death for Eurydice – brought him to the edge of despair and a savage death. (317)

In *Master*, Dostoevsky's intense mourning and his desire to bring back Pavel after his death are similar to Orpheus's "longing and grief" (Snodgrass 316) leading to his attempt to resurrect Eurydice, feelings so overwhelming that Dostoevsky is indeed in the grip of an "insane obsession". In Dostoevsky's case, his ambition to challenge and to trap God can be interpreted as hubris. In his deliberate challenges to God in his attempts to bridge life and death and in his betrayal of love (both human love and love of God) he does overstep human bounds. The writing he "falls into" in the final chapter of the book can be regarded as a "false renewal of hope", and in these writings is "a second death" for Pavel, as his father betrays him completely. Dostoevsky is despairing, and his "savage death" is in the form of the loss (or death) of his soul.

The reader of *Master*, in the vocabulary of Foster, can use an "analytic that turns away from knowing and looks at the sources of knowledge in the discourses constructed by culture", not to "escape those sources into some mythic existential freedom", but to enable

one to avoid the "pursuit of masters and mastery" (135). In so doing, the reader can resist or forego the pleasures of being seduced by the confessional narrative (or as Foster terms it *dialogue* between the one confessing and the one listening/reading) telling of originary sin, and instead situate such a narrative (dialogue) "within a web of language", so that teller and listener might "engage the complexities of the web itself" (135).

In this essay I have tried to situate the novel's telling of the ultimate confession, that writing is betrayal leading to the loss of one's soul, in the tradition of confession that is largely Christian, but has strands of older Western traditions intriguingly and complicatedly interwoven. In so doing, I have neglected the important dimensions of political and social responsibility and betrayal debated at length in the novel by Dostoevsky and Nechaev.

In his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" Coetzee discusses the dialogue between cynicism and grace. Coetzee describes cynicism "as a denial of any ultimate basis of values" (*DP* 392), and Stavrogin (in *The Devils*) can be regarded as incarnating cynicism. In *Master* cynicism is seen to deny a value system that re-emerges in spite of its suppression. To deny any ultimate basis of values is ultimately a form of self-deception, as it is for both Stavrogin in *The Devils*, and for the fictional Dostoevsky. Even nihilism (characterized as ugly cynicism in *The Devils*) in *Master* is portrayed (through the character Nechaev) as a complex political response that cannot be rejected in a simple reflex action. It is beyond the scope of this essay to debate the portrayal of Nechaev and the radical politics he seems to espouse, but he cannot be characterised as having no value system.

And what of grace in the novel? If grace is "a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness" (*DP* 392), grace is a condition that eludes Dostoevsky, and indeed most of the characters in the novel. Coetzee suggests that "the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world" is through charity (*DP* 249). He says that we (as "children

unreconstructed") are "to be treated with the charity that children have due to them (charity that doesn't preclude clear-sightedness)" (249). "Charity" is a word with distinct Christian resonances. The word includes meanings (and I refer to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* here) of giving help to others, particularly to those in need, and "typically in the form of money", as well as "kindness and tolerance in judging others". The archaic meaning is "love of humankind, particularly in a Christian context: *faith, hope, and charity*". Betrayal then, so prominent in *Master*, is a profound opposite of charity.

Coetzee's suggestion that grace is allegorized in the world through charity perhaps needs to be understood in the context of his discussion of "the authority of suffering and therefore of the body" (248). In the context of the endlessness of skeptism, "Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain that it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" (248). Coetzee understands the power of the suffering body to be "undeniable". It is useful to contrast this assertion with the lack of pain felt by Dostoevsky at the end of *Master*. His suffering, asserted by himself as one who is sacrificing his soul, has no authority by contrast with the authority of the suffering body.

Coetzee stresses the charity due to children, and in *Master* cruelty to children is a recurring theme. The betrayal of children and the rape of children are extreme horrors that conventionally can be interpreted only in terms of evil or extreme cynicism or cruelty. In the novel, the fate of the *soul* of the betrayer or the perpetrator of evil is foregrounded, as it is in "Stavrogin's Confession". The victim of the crime of rape confessed to by Stavrogin (a crime toyed with by Dostoevsky in *Master)*, is the child, and the crime is perpetrated on her *body*. Dostoevsky's image of the Siberian convict with his dead child in his arms is a perversion of the Pieta. The dead *body* of the child is the counter to the *soul* of the

perpetrator of the crime. Traditionally the soul with its potential for transcendence is superior to the body. In this instance however, the body has an integrity and transcendent power that the soul of the perpetrator lacks. In "Stavrogin's Confession", the child he rapes and whose suicide he practically stage-manages, appears to him as a physical presence and admonishes him with her tiny fist, a haunting presence that can be interpreted as the power of the suffering body.

A traditional symbolic depiction of charity is in the form of a mother breastfeeding her children. In *Master,* Dostoevsky meets a poor young mother, who prostitutes herself in order to feed her children. She is named Sonya, a name that has resonances for Dostoevsky as she has the same name as the character in *Crime and Punishment* who is forced to prostitute herself in order to feed her starving step-siblings. She is charitable to children and to those in need, and in *Crime and Punishment* she is overtly allegorised as grace in the world. (She is the one to lead the murderer Raskolnikov to confess his crimes as a necessary first step towards forgiveness and redemption.)

In *Master,* Dostoevsky observers Sonya breastfeeding her children. If we are to read the image of the breastfeeding mother as a symbol of charity, charity itself is corrupted by Dostoevsky's actions. Dostoevsky is ostensibly searching for truth – about the death of Pavel, the truth of their relationship, truth about himself, and truth about the nature of writing. He is, one might say, hungering for truth (even if ultimately revealed to be perversions of truth). By contrast, the children of Sonya and Sonya herself hunger only for food. Dostoevsky hungers for transcendence, Sonya and her children hunger for food to stay alive, to keep body and soul together. The hunger of the soul and hunger of the body are juxtaposed and conventional oppositions are disrupted in the manner described by Foster,

when he describes writers who "systematically disrupt the distinctions their readers require in order to fully understand" (18).

Body and soul, charity and betrayal, are seen to be shamefully tangled together. Dostoevsky asks Sonya to expose her breasts to him, which she does without a word, and for this he gives her money. The breasts with which Sonya feeds her starving children have a sexual significance for Dostoevsky that inheres within the discourse that he simultaneously inhabits and makes. He gives Sonya money as a perverted simulation of charity, which is a corrupt act of betrayal and a kind of violence. The "innocence" of the breast that nurtures the child is betrayed and the charitable act of giving money to the poor is corrupted. All are inscribed in a pre-existing discourse where neither the body nor charity is untainted, and grace is precluded.

If the suffering body claims its own power, it is, in part, to resist incorporation into discourses of betrayal. Is this the power of the demeaned body of the young prostitute, the abused body of the raped child and the broken body of the murdered child? In a secular context is this the message of the suffering body of Christ?

In a secular context how are we to avoid betraying the suffering of the powerless, whose only voice is through the medium of the abused, tortured, disfigured or murdered body? How are we to be ethical in a secular context?

> In his discussion of the authority of suffering, Coetzee says:
>
> (Let me add *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defences against the being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.) (*DP* 248)

In the light of this statement, writing can be seen to be a way of making meaning in the face of suffering. It is easy to describe writing pejoratively as a hubristic attempt to assert mastery over meaning, but faced with suffering, what is the writer to do? Faced with suffering, the questioning as to how grace can be achieved in a secular context can be forged through anguish. Achieving grace can be perceived as an ethical imperative. Whether or not there is any ethical imperative in the process and practice of writing is a key question in *Master*. Is the convention that writing is always already a form of absolution tenable? I think that the novel compellingly indicates that it is not. However, other readings differ. Clearly, some of us do not know how to read.

Notes to Chapter 4

[1] The fourth meaning of *possession* in *The New Oxford English Dictionary* is: "*archaic* maintain (oneself or one's mind or soul) in a state or condition of patience or quiet [...] [ORIGIN: Often with biblical allusion to Luke 21:19, the proper sense 'regain your soul' being misunderstood]". The full verse, Luke 21:19 is as follows: "In your patience possess ye your souls". This verse is in a context of a time of "wars and commotions" (21:9), when, "ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends' and *some* of you shall be put to death" (21:16) In a subsequent verse it says: "For these are the days of vengeance" (21:22). These turbulent times precede the coming of the Son of man, the kingdom of God, when "your redemption draweth nigh" (21:28).

Whether Coetzee was conscious of this Chapter from Luke when writing the novel, I do not know, but it does seem intertextual with the novel, or at least to have its echoes in the novel. Pavel is betrayed by parents, kinsfolk (Nechaev also claims Pavel as kin (119)) and friends, who between them cause his death. The sickness of the present age in *Master* is named: "Nechaev, voice of the age, calls it vengefulness" (234). Perhaps Pavel maintains possession of his soul, while Dostoevsky, the betrayer and challenger of God, loses his.

Works Cited

Primary Works

Coetzee, J.M. *The Mastr of Petersburg*. London: Minerva, 1994.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crme and Punishment.* Trans. Jessie Coulson. Ed. George Gibian. 1989. New York Norton, 1964.

--- *The Devils [The Possessed].* Trans. David Magarshack. 1953. London: Penguin, 1971.

Secondary Works

Attridge, Derek. "Expeing the Unexpected in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* and Derrida's RecerWritings." *Applying: To Derrida.* Ed. John Brannigan et al. London: Macman, 1996. 21-40.

Attwell, David. *J.M. Cetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing.* Berkeley: U of California P, 19

--- "The Problem History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee". *Rendering Things Visible: Essayn South African Literary Culture*. Ed. Martin Trump. Johannesburg:avan, 1990. 94-133.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Prems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and transl. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: bf Minnesota P, 1984.

Barnett, Clive. "Conactions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetz" *Journal of African Studies* 25.1 (1999): 287-301.

Bouloumié, Arlette. "The Ogre in Literature." *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archtypes*. Ed. Pierre Brunel. Trans. Wendy Allatson, Judith Hayward and Trista Selous. London: Routledge, 1992. 912-924.

Brunel, Pierre. "Orpheus". *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archtypes*. Ed. Pierre Brunel. Trans. Wendy Allatson, Judith Hayward and Trista Selous. London: Routledge, 1992. 930-938.

Coetzee, J.M. "The Novel Today". *Upstream* 6.1 (1988): 2-5

--- "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985). *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews.* Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1992. 251-293.

--- "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1987). *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews.* Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1992. 251-293.

--- *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews.* Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1992.

--- Interview. "Voice and Trajectory: An Interview with J.M. Coetzee". By Joanna Scott. *Salmagundi* 114/115 (1997): 82-102.

Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories.* Craighall: Ad. Donker, 1988.

Foster, Dennis A. *Confession and Complicity in Narrative.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

Frank, Joseph. "The Rebel." Rev. of *The Master of Petersburg*. *The New Republic* 16 Oct. 1995: 53-56.

Head, Dominic. *J.M. Coetzee.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

The Holy Bible. [King James version.] The British and Foreign Bible Society. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, n.d.

Huggan, Graham and Stephen Watson. Introduction. *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee.* Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1996.

Janes, Regina. "'Writing Without Authority': J.M. Coetzee and His Fictions." *Salmagundi* 114/115 (1997): 103-121.

Kossew, Sue. "The Anxiety of Authorship: J.M Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and Andre Brink's *On the Contrary* (1993)." *English in Africa* 23.1 (1996): 67-88.

Lambert, Michael. "The Myth of Orpheus: Singer, Shaman, Lover". University Lecture, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 17 March 1999.

Lawlan, Rachel. "*The Master of Petersburg*: Confession and Double Thoughts in Coetzee and Dostoevsky." *Ariel* 29.2 (1998): 131- 157.

Lundén, Bo. *(Re)educating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's "Dr Copernicus", Coetzee's "Foe", and Byatt's "Possession".* Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1999.

Marais, Michael. "Towards a Levinasian Aesthetic: The Tension between Implication and Transcendence in Selected Fiction by J.M. Coetzee." Diss. Rand Afrikaans U, 1997.

The New Oxford English Dictionary. 1998.

Parry, Benita. "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee." *New Formations.* 21 (1994): 1-20.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil.* Boston: Beacon, 1969.

Robinson, Duane Robinson. "The Confessional Novel in South Africa: A Study of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Menan Du Plessis' *A State of Fear*." Diss. U of Natal, Durban, 1993.

Skow, John. "Parallel World." Rev. of *The Master of Petersburg*. *Time* 19 Dec.1994: 54-55.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Voyages in Classical Mythology.* Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1994.

Tambling, Jeremy. *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990.

Watson, Stephen. "The Writer and the Devil: J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg.*" *New Contrast* 22.4 (1994): 47-61.

Zinik, Zinovy. "The Spirit of Stavrogin." Rev. of *The Master of Petersburg* by J.M. Coetzee. *Times Literary Supplement* 4 Mar. 1994: 19.