ariel: a review of international english literature
ISSN 0004-1327 Vol. 41 No. 3-4 Pages 207–229 Copyright © 2011

"Rage against the rule of fathers": Freud's "Dostoevsky and Parricide" in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*

Franklyn A. Hyde

In an interview with Jane Poyner from 2006, J. M. Coetzee makes this strikingly unambiguous statement—"I don't read much academic criticism" (Coetzee, *J. M. Coetzee* 22). When taken as a general avowal of both his academic and novelistic careers, where an incredible range of critical reference is evident, this can only seem a claim of impossible disingenuousness. Indeed, among contemporary authors, Coetzee's willingness to engage openly with his philosophical reading in an artistic context is perhaps unmatched. Coetzee seems to leave critical markers of varying degrees of obscurity throughout his novels as a kind of diversionary tactic which often further complicates rather than explicates any reading of the texts. There are frequent points at which the fictive surfaces of the novels are abruptly punctured by the traces of philosophical argument; the informed reader then has the uncanny experience of being dissociated from the narrative and forced to acknowledge the presence of an anterior critical argument. The effect is of an odd suspension of the suspension of disbelief itself. Indeed, it is as if Coetzee takes Barthes's assertion that "any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it... [like] a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations" (39) and subverts it such that the novels themselves read as a sequential laying bare of their own conscious and unconscious critical informants.

The examination of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) as presented here is exemplary of this idea: the identification of Freud's "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1928) as a key intertext that operates as componential to Coetzee's portrait of Dostoevsky and the nature of his writing. There can be no doubt that in *The Master of Petersburg* Coetzee is engaging directly with this study: in an interview with David Attwell from just two years

before the publication of the novel, Coetzee admits that "the traces of my dealings with Freud are all over my writings" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 245) before going on to parenthetically cite "Dostoevsky and Parricide" as an example of the "old-fashioned Freud" (245) against which the key essay of the mid-period of his critical career—"Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky" (1985)—was written.

Freud's analysis composes a sweeping act of psychological portraiture. As Nathan Rosen comments in "Freud on Dostoevsky's Epilepsy: A Revaluation" (1988), the outstanding feature of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" is an audacious unifying act which exposes the interwoven character of apparent diversities in Dostoevsky studies: "Freud's achievement was to bring together, to unify and illuminate as no one had done before him, the most diverse strands in Dostoevsky's life and works: relations between father and son, Dostoevsky's epilepsy, his political and religious views, his gambling, and his obsession with crime and moral responsibility" (107). To examine any one of these issues in isolation should be judged impossible. Furthermore, such is Coetzee's use of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" that, as in Freud's essay, in *The Master of Petersburg* each of these individual problems is inseparable from that of parricide in all its symbolic valences.

Freud's central thesis on the personality of Dostoevsky (and his personality as expressed in his fiction) posits a diagnosis of an unresolved Oedipus complex resulting in "hystero-epilepsy" as a symptom of uncontrollable neurosis.[1] Dostoevsky desired his increasingly despotic father dead. His early milder "death-like" attacks represent an unconscious identification with the wished-for dead father. When his father was actually killed this wish was forever thwarted and the normal progress of Oedipal feelings towards a healthy resolution was blocked, resulting in episodes of hysterical non-organic epileptic fits. These fits were accompanied by subsequent acute and long-lasting feelings of criminal guilt as if Dostoevsky *had* in actual fact murdered his father:

> Infantile reactions from the Oedipus complex … may disappear if reality gives them no further nourishment. But the fa-

> ther's character remained the same, or rather, it deteriorated with the years, and thus Dostoevsky's hatred for his father and death-wish against that wicked father were maintained.… Dostoevsky's attacks now assumed an epileptic character; they still undoubtedly signalled an identification with his father as a punishment, but they had become terrible, like his father's frightful death itself. (244)

This is graphically illustrated when Freud relates the story of Dostoevsky's first dramatic seizure: it is incorrectly repeated that this occurred moments after he was informed that his father had been murdered by his serfs. He writes, "The most probable assumption is that the attacks went back far into his childhood, that their place was taken to begin with by milder symptoms and they did not assume an epileptic form until after the shattering experience of his eighteenth year—the murder of his father" (239). The verity of this biographical detail is doubtful twice over: it is suggested by Joseph Frank that there is no evidence that Dostoevsky suffered from the severe attacks which characterized his later years during his early life (*A Writer in His Time* 45) and it is unlikely that the death of Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevsky will ever be satisfactorily proven to be murder.

In any case, Freud insists upon the reality of these disputed events from Dostoevsky's childhood and upon their significant revisiting through hysterical seizures. These fits were to guarantee that Dostoevsky's relationship with patriarchal authority was to remain perpetually equivocal. In Nathan Rosen's words: "Freud sees the seizures as deeply meaningful in Dostoevsky's own life and equally meaningful in shaping his ambivalent attitude to authority" (110). As we have already seen suggested, in "Dostoevsky and Parricide" Freud seeks to account for the most wide-ranging aspects of Dostoevsky's personality and works using the principal tool of psychoanalysis. Specifically, he speculates as to how the twin authorities of monarchy and religion can be understood as substitutions for the symbolic father of the unresolved Oedipal complex:

> We can safely say that Dostoevsky never got free from the feelings of guilt arising from his intention of murdering his father.

> They also determined his attitude in the two other spheres in which the father-relation is the decisive factor, his attitude towards the authority of the State and towards belief in God. In the first of these he ended up with complete submission to his Little Father, the Tsar.… Here penitence gained the upper hand. In the religious sphere he retained more freedom: according to apparently trustworthy reports he wavered, up to the last moment of his life, between faith and atheism. (245)

As we shall see, it is in this shifting complex of "father-czar-authority"—and Dostoevsky's vacillation between submission and rebellion—that the full import of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" to the symbolism of *The Master of Petersburg* emerges. The novel takes on this complex association, with the symbolic substitution of the betrayal of the filial bond with political revolution freely circulating throughout the text.

The Master of Petersburg offers us a portrait of the artist in the autumn of 1869—Coetzee refers to this period in Dostoevsky's career in an interview with Joanna Scott as "a time … when he was struggling with the composition of a book, not knowing what it was going to be about, just knowing it was going to be a big book" (91). As it becomes progressively evident in *The Master of Petersburg* itself, the book Dostoevsky is trying to write is *The Devils* (1872) or—as it is alternatively titled in English—*The Possessed* or *Demons*. This is a period in Russian history that Coetzee's Dostoevsky's Stavrogin comes to imagine without conviction as a time when "history is coming to an end; the old account books will soon be thrown in the fire; in this dead time between old and new, all things are permitted" (244). As such, the parallels to the period of South African history during which Coetzee was writing *The Master of Petersburg* could hardly be more acute. Indeed, we can think of *The Devils* as occupying a similar position in the body of Dostoevsky's works as *The Master of Petersburg* occupies in Coetzee's. *The Devils* is bewildering in its complexity, disturbing in what Robert Louis Jackson refers to as the "spirit of madness and confusion [that] seeks to dominate [its world]" ("Introduction" 3), and ultimately stupefying as a response to the contemporary tension between anarchy and rule.

In an overview of Dostoevsky's work it is generally admissible that—at least outwardly—*The Devils* represents a savage criticism of the multifarious spectres of left-wing idealism with which the younger Dostoevsky had been in association before his religious conversion in Siberia and the weakness of the establishment's response to these threats. Taken alongside *The Idiot* (1868), *The Adolescent* (1875) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), *The Devils* makes up the corpus of masterworks of Dostoevsky's mature and—with special import for *The Master of Petersberg*—politically conservative period. In "Dostoevsky and Parricide" Freud describes the eventual establishment of this conservatism in Dostoevsky's life and work as a symptom of the author's persistent ambivalence in his dealings with quasi-paternal authority. This is the major failure of his work. The analyst provocatively claims that

> after the most violent struggles to reconcile the instinctual demands of the individual with the claims of the community, he landed in the retrograde position of submission both to temporal and spiritual authority, of veneration both for the Tsar and for the God of the Christians, and of a narrow Russian nationalism—a position which lesser minds have reached with smaller effort. Dostoevsky threw away the chance of becoming a teacher and liberator of humanity and made himself one of their gaolers. The future of human civilization will have little to thank him for. It seems probable that he was condemned to this failure by his neurosis. (235)

While the entire work of *The Master of Petersburg* relies heavily upon the symbolic associations originated in "Dostoevsky and Parricide," the text can be taken as an effort on the part of its author to save Dostoevsky from the condemnation of his works in Freud's explicit view. Whereas Freud is keen to emphasize the role of Dostoevsky's neurosis in producing certain blockages in his works (characterized by a willing submission to forms of patriarchal authority), Coetzee seems to take this view and invert it such that Dostoevsky's neurosis actually becomes the mainspring of the Bakhtinian anti-authoritative ambiguity of his novels.

Coetzee's novel is based upon a reimagining of the historical circumstances of the composition of *The Devils*. In reality Dostoevsky conceived the novel entirely in central Europe during the period of his exile from Russia. Coetzee instead imagines Dostoevsky returning to St. Petersburg during this period after the reported suicide of his stepson Pavel.[2] What this represents is a counter-historical imagining of a purely fictional "reality" anterior to the text of *The Devils*, on which the fictional Dostoevsky is then shown to draw inspiration in the production of that text. As a logical consequence of this, it is fitting that the symbolism that dominates *The Devils* should come to dominate Dostoevsky's thoughts nebulously throughout the novel.

The symbolism of *The Devils* in question is derived from a kind of typographical reading of the development of Russian revolutionary nihilism against the biblical story of the Gaderene swine in which Christ exorcises a number of devils from a sick man which flee into a herd of swine (Mark 5.2-23)—Russia is the "sick man"; the various revolutionaries throughout the narrative are the "swine." In the first of his invaluable studies of the novel, Michael Marais recognizes the appearance of this symbolism in *The Master of Petersburg* and Coetzee's deepening of the metaphor to the level of a pervasiveness: Coetzee "applies the story of the Gadarene swine not only to Russia and the phenomenon of revolutionary nihilism, but also to Dostoevsky himself and his literary response to this phenomenon. So, in *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky is depicted as a 'sick-man' possessed by devils" (228). Marais continues his discussion to note that "the outward sign of this affliction is his epilepsy, a sickness which the novel relates to demon possession" (228). It is here that the two dominant strands of metaphor in the novel reach a conjunction. Coetzee takes the major figures of the symbolism of *The Devils* and admixes them to a complex discussion of parricide—noticeably, the language of an antagonistic filial relationship comes to dominate the book. When we acknowledge the Freudian diagnosis of Dostoevsky's epilepsy as a hysterical reaction to the unthinkable thought of parricide and note that this link is further related in *The Master of Petersburg* to the problem of political revolution through its association

with the images of sickness and possession borrowed from *The Devils*, there develops a ubiquity of the "sickness" of parricidal fantasy.

Freud's entire thesis fixes Dostoevsky unconditionally in the position of the "son" whose life and work is defined in relation to a psychologically ever-present patriarchal authority. Coetzee's ironic inversion of this reading pushes Dostoevsky forwards a generation such that he has undergone the familiar transformation from youthful idealist to elderly conservative. He now occupies the authoritative position of "father" himself—from the youthful point of view of Nechaev he is now a "dry old man, a dry workhorse near the end of its life" (156). To illustrate this change, Coetzee alludes to Dostoevsky's leftist background variously throughout the text: there is, for example, definite embarrassment in Dostoevsky's silent response to Anna's mention of *Poor People* (1846), the crusading novel which was published when Dostoevsky was aged just twenty-four and which he later disowned (24–5). This "retrograde" movement from rebelliousness to conservatism is represented ambiguously in the text within the broader scheme of paternal "betrayal" (235). Furthermore, as we shall see, it is in this "betrayal" of occupying the authoritative position of the father that Dostoevsky moves from being the subject of parricidal fantasy to parricide's object.

This point is most obviously suggested in the text in those episodes where Coetzee most directly approaches an open discussion of "Dostoevsky and Parricide." This firstly occurs in the "Maximov" episode. In response to Dostoevsky's reading of the rise of Nechaevism as being affected by "a spirit, [with] Nechaev … not its embodiment but its host" (44), Maximov proffers an argument which may lead us to the impossible conclusion that he is a scholar of Freud:

> I wonder, in the end, whether the Nechaev phenomenon is quite so 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 generation, more unforgiving. In that case, perhaps the wisest course would be the simplest: to dig in and outlast them—wait for them to grow up. (45)

Anthony Quinn recognizes the centrality of the clash between the generations in the text when he states that "the central antipathy of [the novel is] not, as it first seems, the conflict between anarchy and rule, but that between father and son." However, to accept this as an accurate summation of the political and familial tensions in the text misses something of their simultaneousness. Where discussion of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" surfaces in *The Master of Petersburg*, it is seemingly to remind us that at a fundamental level in Dostoevsky's life and work the struggle between revolution and conservatism is inseparable from the struggle between father and son and, vice-versa, the struggle between father and son is inseparable from the struggle between revolution and conservatism.

The effect of these passages is to invite the reader to think of each of the personages of the text as diagrammatically split within the two generations represented by "father" and "son." Indeed, this is one of the defining processes by which Coetzee's Dostoevsky imagines the world: he notes for us the youth of the youthful and the age of the elderly. Notably, these impressions are particularly strong in Dostoevsky's appraisals of Maximov and Nechaev. These characters can consequently be taken to represent the standard of antagonism in the father-son relation throughout the text—on the one side the inscrutable conservative and, on the other, the violent anarchist. Indeed, much of the narrative force of *The Master of Petersburg* lies in an exploration of the questions posed by the doubling of these figures to the actual father-son relation of Dostoevsky and Pavel. To what extent will Dostoevsky have to give up his unconditional love for his dead son and acknowledge himself as an ally of the father figure of "the spider Maximov" (206)? To what extent will he have to acknowledge Pavel and Nechaev as "sparrows of equal weight" (238) and acknowledge Nechaev too as being, in a certain sense, his son?

As this suggests, the "war" between the generations is contrasted to the idealized position of the father in relation to the son in Dostoevsky's attempts to reach his dead step-son Pavel. The ultimate importance of this exploration of the father-son relation lies in Coetzee's portrayal of the impossibility of this ideal. Dostoevsky's attempts to "resurrect"

Pavel from the selfless position of the loving father are all blocked in some way. Throughout, there is a sense of this activity being something "seedy" and furtive—"something that belongs behind … locked doors and curtained windows" (71). In a scene that actively plays upon the Dostoevskian notion of the double, Dostoevsky dresses up in Pavel's white suit: "Hitherto he has worn it as a gesture to the dead boy, a gesture of defiance and love. But now, looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture" (71). Throughout the text, this appeal that Dostoevsky makes to an alterity beyond the limits of his self—and his inability to engage with Pavel in a context unmediated by parricidal fantasy—is presented in tandem with the processes of writing. The uncertain course of Dostoevsky's mourning for his son is portrayed as both the suggested cause and possible solution to his evident writer's block. Consequently, as the crisis in Dostoevsky's writing deepens throughout the text, there develops a sense of his grief as taking the form of a dismal, maddening solipsism. He recognizes himself as "a prisoner in his own breast" (239): "I am I, he thinks despairingly, manacled to myself until I die" (82).

This solipsism is reflected materially in Dostoevsky's gradual acceptance of rivalry and resentment as the defining features of the unhappy reality of his relationship with Pavel. When considering *The Master of Petersburg* as a commentary on Freud's understanding of Dostoevsky it is significant to note that these resentments seem to stem from an obscure sexual jealousy that centres on the mother-figure. Dostoevsky relates the story of Pavel's reaction to his early relationship with Pavel's mother thus: "he clung to his mother like a leech and grudged every minute she spent away from him … half a dozen times in a single night they would hear from the next room that high, insistent little voice calling to his mother to come and kill the mosquito that was biting him" (151). This tension, we are told, was extended into the relationship between Pavel and his step-mother Anya Grigoryevna: "Pavel maintained the fiction that Anya was simply his father's companion.… When [Dostoevsky] would announce that he was going to bed, Pavel would not allow Anya to follow him: he would challenge her to rounds of cribbage" (108). Dostoevsky then generalizes this experience to again make the link between the personal, familial and political:

> Is it always like this between fathers and sons: jokes masking the intensest rivalry? And is that the true reason why he is bereft: because the ground of his life, the contest with his son, is gone, and his days are left empty? Not the People's Vengeance but the Vengeance of the Sons: is that what underlies revolution—fathers envying their sons their women, sons scheming to rob their fathers' cashboxes? He shakes his head wearily. (108)

On the one hand, there surfaces a history of tension between Dostoevsky and Pavel and, on the other, there is the revealed expression of this tension in what Dostoevsky comes to learn of Pavel's political activities—the narrative drive can again be understood as a kind of uncovering of Pavel's proximities to Nechaev and the People's Vengeance, and Dostoevsky's growing acceptance of Pavel as the archetypical rebellious Freudian "son." At one point he admits to Matryona: "It's nice to think that Pavel was not vengeful. It's nice to think well of the dead. But it just flatters him. Let us not be sentimental—in ordinary life he was as vengeful as any other young man" (113). It is later suggested that the course of Dostoevsky and Pavel's individual case is significantly representative of the struggle between rule and anarchy in Russia. The link is later recognized by Dostoevsky himself when he identifies the "name of his sickness. Nechaev, voice of the age, calls it vengefulness, but a truer name, less grand, would be resentment" (234). Eventually, Dostoevsky is forced to accept that the circulation of power in tsarist Russian society makes it impossible to reach his son in a fashion unmediated to some degree by parricidal desire. In a repetition of the major scheme of symbolism of the novel—that of the Gaderene swine that Coetzee preemptively borrows from *The Devils* throughout *The Master of Petersburg*—Dostoevsky admits that "Pavel has ceased to speak to him … the only voices he hears now are devil-voices" (126).

As a corollary to this frustration of the idealized father-son relation, there is a frustration of the idealized nuclear family as constituted in Dostoevsky's attempts to insert himself symbolically into Pavel's household as a husband to Anna and a surrogate father to Matryona. Again, it is made clear that the division between youth and age is an open

function of Dostoevsky's own conscious view of the world; early in his ambiguous relationship with Anna and Matryona he is aware of "the generations fall[ing] into place: Pavel and Matryona and his wife ranked on one side, he and Anna Sergeyevna on the other. The children against those who are not children" (63). In parallel to the ambiguous sexual relationship that develops between Dostoevsky and Anna Sergeyevna, there surfaces Dostoevsky's disturbing imaginings of a sexual relationship with Matryona. It is with some justification that Anna comes to complain to Dostoevsky that he is using her "to get at someone else" (59):

> He has no difficulty in imagining this child in her ecstasy. His imagination seems to have no bounds. He thinks of a baby, frozen, dead, buried in an iron coffin beneath the snow-piled earth, waiting out the winter, waiting for the spring. This is as far as the violation goes: the girl in the crook of his arm, the five fingers of his hand, white and dumb, gripping her shoulder. But she might as well be sprawled out naked. One of those girls that give themselves because their natural motion is to be good, to submit. (76)

Again, it is significant to note that images from Dostoevsky's works appear componential to the symbolism of Coetzee's text: in his vision of the frozen baby, Coetzee's Dostoevsky seems to be "recalling" Ippolit's strange confession in *The Idiot* in which he relates the death of Surikov's child and his lack of pity towards the family (393). Here, this image performs in conjunction with the entirely abusive dynamic that is expressed in Dostoevsky's "violation" of Matryona. Dostoevsky's literary mind is plainly transgressive—"His imagination seems to have no bounds" (76). Oddly, this fantasy signals, like the parricidal fantasy which characterizes the relationship between anarchy and rule, a violent confusion of the generations. This confusion is now, however, disturbingly linked to the transgression of paedophilia.

The conjunction between *The Master of Petersburg* and "Dostoevsky and Parricide" is particularly acute here in Coetzee's willingness to engage with Freud's controversial theory of Dostoevsky as "a sinner or

a criminal" (235). Pointedly, in his readiness to repeat the rumour that Dostoevsky had confessed to the sexual assault of a young girl, Freud recognizes in Dostoevsky a capacity for paedophilia.[3] Furthermore, we can detect Dostoevsky's open exploration of this theme throughout his work. In his 2004 book *The Dostoevsky Encyclopaedia* Kenneth Lantz notes that "the attraction of a mature man to a young or barely pubescent girl is a scenario repeated in almost all of Dostoevsky's mature writings.… The mature sensualist is attracted by the innocence of the child or child-figure and by the opportunity to violate that purity" (61–2). From these numerous examples, Freud cites the most obvious instances of sexual assault upon immature women in "Stavrogin's Confession" and *The Life of a Great Sinner* to support this view (235–36n). To a certain extent, Freud obviously regards these "confessions" as Dostoevsky's own. We may additionally note that, as in Dostoevsky's works, the inappropriate relationship between an aging male character and a young woman occurs with remarkable frequency in Coetzee's work. *Disgrace* (1999) offers us an acute example: there is a strong suggestion that the abusive relationship between David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs approaches the ultimate taboo of the paedophilic: on the night of first seducing Melanie, Lurie notes that her "hips are as slim as a twelve-year-old's" (19). "*A child!* he thinks: *No more than a child!*" (20).

It is significant therefore that Coetzee's most severe examination of the limitations of Freud's understanding of Dostoevsky occurs in the episode entitled "Matryona" in which Coetzee's Dostoevsky suffers an epileptic fit. This scene can be taken as representative of Coetzee's broader commentary on Freud's diagnosis of Dostoevsky's illness as hysterical in origin and later understandings of Dostoevsky's illness which favour a diagnosis of organic epilepsy. The detailing of Coetzee's portrait suggests an affinity with the second of these points of view. It is interesting to note, for example, that the onset of the fit occurs when Dostoevsky is asleep alone: in epileptology this signifies genuine organic epilepsy rather than a hysterical fit which usually takes place in the presence of others. This also means that the attack appears apropos of nothing: there is no traumatic interjection of an unassimilable reality into the subject's experience which often char-

acterizes the onset of an epileptic fit in Freud's view of Dostoevsky and, indeed, the onset of an epileptic fit in Dostoevsky's fiction. (The prime example of this is the seizure that Smerdyakov suffers after killing his father in *The Brother Karamazov*. It is, of course, of primary importance that there is some suggestion that this fit might have been "shamming" [551].)

Yet, despite this seeming rejection of Freud's diagnosis, Coetzee still seems prepared to participate in the broader symbolic associations of "Dostoevsky and Parricide." Coetzee's Dostoevsky seems to remain a willing participant in what Frank calls the "family tradition" (*A Writer in His Time* 49) of linking his epileptic seizures obscurely to notions of the relationship between father and son. At the onset of this attack Dostoevsky experiences a premonitory aura:

> He is like a child at Easter, on fire for the household to wake so that he can share his joy with them. He wants to wake her, the woman, he wants the two of them to dance through the apartment: 'Christ is risen!' he wants to call out, and hear her respond 'Christ is risen!' and clash her egg against his. The two of them dancing in a circle with their painted eggs, and Matryosha as well, in her nightdress, stumbling sleepy-eyed and happy amid their legs, and the ghost of the fourth one too, weaving between them, clumsy, big-footed, smiling: children together, newborn, released from the tomb. (68)

Coetzee's portrait is accurate here: the experience of an ecstatic aura was famously a constituent element in the list of symptoms of Dostoevsky's epilepsy. In most cases the epileptic suffers from acute feelings of anxiety and dread immediately before a fit; cases of the aura taking the form of an experience of intense joy or perfect tranquillity are extremely rare. In Freud's assessment the occurrence of the ecstatic aura in Dostoevsky's epilepsy is explainable as a reflection of the joy Dostoevsky felt upon receiving the news of his father's death, with the lengthy period of depression and guilt which follows the attack signifying his bad conscience at having "killed" his father by wishing him dead. Thus, contained in the two stages of the attacks themselves is the problem of Dostoevsky's duel

movement away from and towards paternal and quasi-paternal authority—firstly, in rebellion and, subsequently, in submission.

However, as a function of Coetzee's tactic of reimagining Dostoevsky as the "father," Freud's interpretation is inverted. The ecstatic aura no longer represents a joyous response to parricide but, instead, a sublime reaction to the resurrection of the son—liberation is *from* rather than *by* death. Supporting this is the Christian imagery naturalistically introduced here—"Christ is risen!" (68). As we have seen Freud lament, the historical Dostoevsky of this period had assumed the "retrograde position" (235) of a committed Christian. Coetzee illustrates this position in *The Master of Petersburg* through a complex borrowing of Dostoevsky's own accounts of his illness as they were worked into his fiction. In Dostoevsky's fictional work the significance of the ecstatic aura is also related to the perfection of an experience of religious truth. In *The Idiot* Myshkin claims that at the onset of an attack he is "somehow able to understand the extraordinary phrase that *time shall be no more*" (227). In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee repeats this biblical allusion (Rev. 10.6) when Dostoevsky considers his epilepsy in the following way: "*Time shall have an end. There shall be no more death*" (118). In *The Idiot* Dostoevsky's linking of epilepsy to an experience of religious rapture continues with Myshkin's specifically non-Christian observation that the ecstatic aura could be understood as "the same second in which the jug of water overturned by the epileptic Muhammad did not have time to spill, while he had time during the same second to survey all the dwellings of Allah" [227].)

Further to this religiosity, the initial vision Dostoevsky is subject to in *The Master of Petersburg* encompasses the impossible perfection of the surrogate family into which he is shown attempting to insinuate himself throughout the narrative. At this point in the text, the difficulty of reconstituting a paternal relationship is presented as an absolute. The vision of the aura gives way to the fit itself:

> It is not merely that clouds begin to cross this new, radiant sky. It is as if, at the moment when the sun comes forth in its glory, another sun appears too, a shadow sun, an anti-sun slid-

> ing across its face. The word *omen* crosses his mind in all its dark, ominous weight. The dawning sun is there not for itself but to undergo eclipse; joy shines out only to reveal what the annihilation of joy will be like. (68)

As such, the progress of the attack from aura to seizure would represent the diametric opposite to its progress in "Dostoevsky and Parricide": in Coetzee's version, in the initial phase there is a comforting giving over of authority to the paternal authority in the form of Christian sentiment and in the subsequent attack there is a disconcerting blotting out of the surety of this authority. Ultimately, for Dostoevsky, the attacks are not fixable within any symbolic economy—they are described "not [as] 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 effect is a kind of ontological blankness which is reminiscent of perhaps the most famous image in the entire canon of Coetzee's work: that of Friday in the sunken ship in section IV of *Foe* (1986), where silence is related finally to "truth" (153–7). In place of the vision of familial communion is substituted the problem of solipsism and the impossibility of knowing the other as other: Dostoevsky is bound again to recognize himself as "a prisoner in his own breast" (239).

We may further note the significance of Coetzee's economical use of the familiar sun/son pun in his image of an "anti-sun" (68) eclipsing a sun. Interestingly, this vision seems to be borrowed from the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses* (1922) in which Bloom watches a cloud obscure "wholly slowly wholly" (61) the sun and is reminded of the death of his son Rudy. As in Joyce, this image seems also to refer to the eclipse that takes place during Christ's crucifixion (Luke 23.44–5). Indeed, this is one of the more striking images from Coetzee's repeated usage of the Christian narrative of death and resurrection throughout the text. When taken as an exploration of Freud's explanations of Dostoevsky's personality and works, we can identify in these images a metaphorical repetition of the replacement of the idealized father-son bond with the realities of the "war: the old against the young, the young against the old" (247) which defines political reality in Dostoevsky's Russia. As I

have already suggested, much of *The Master of Petersburg* is concerned with the gradual eclipsing of Pavel as idealized son by the figure of the murderous Nechaev. As such, this image can be taken as emblematic of the broader invasion of political reality into previously discrete spheres of personal life. Earlier in the text, Dostoevsky is surprised by the face of Nechaev when he tries to summon Pavel:

> The face that appears to him instead, and appears with surprising vividness, is that of a young man with heavy brows and a sparse beard and a thin, tight mouth, the face of the young man who sat behind Bakunin on the stage at the Peace Congress two years ago. His skin is cratered with scars that stand out livid in the cold. 'Go away!' he says, trying to dismiss the image. But it will not go. 'Pavel!' he whispers, conjuring his son in vain. (49)

Of course, the scenes in which this confrontation is most apparent are those in which Dostoevsky actually meets Nechaev: the most notable of these is the lengthy encounter which extends over "The cellar" and "The printing press" episodes. Indeed, the "engineering" of these meetings is the stated aim of Coetzee's project. In interview with Joanna Scott, he claims that the sole purpose of his reinvention of the circumstances of the death of the historical Pavel Isaev was to "bring Dostoevsky face to face with Nechaev, which was something that didn't happen in real life.… It allows me to engineer a meeting between two very important historical figures" (92). Throughout these passages, Coetzee's invocation of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" is again uncannily obvious. As in the "Maximov" episode, a certain sense of unreality is created when it appears that the agonists are functionally conversant in Freud's text. Nechaev, for example, seems to be deliberately offering us an acute gloss of Freud's diagnosis of Dostoevsky's neurosis when he tells the author: "I know about your father … what a petty tyrant he was, how everyone hated him, till his own peasants killed him. You think that because you and your father hated each other, the history of the world has to consist of nothing but fathers and sons at war with each other" (188–9).

As with Dostoevsky, Nechaev too seems strangely fixated on organising personal and political problems around the basal structure of the

father-son relationship. Within this relationship, he seems able to consider consciously himself as an archetypical Freudian "son" and relate his view of his own anti-tsarist political violence to the violence of parricide. Referring to the starving children that he uses for further goading Dostoevsky, Nechaev asks the author: "When they look at you do you know what these hollow-eyed children see? … They see fat cheeks and a juicy tongue. These innocents would fall upon you like rats and chew you up if they did not know you were strong enough to beat them off" (186). When we note the persistent presentation of the axis of youth and revolution in the text, there develops a ready comparison here to Coetzee's previous novel *Age of Iron* (1990), in which the last days of apartheid are represented as a "time when childhood is despised, when children school each other never to smile, never to cry, to raise their fists in the air like hammers" (51). Furthermore, much of Nechaev's contempt for Dostoevsky seems to be provoked by the author's "betrayal" of his own youthful leftist background. This is most pertinent when Nechaev makes a dismissive reference to Dostoevsky's time in Siberia and asks him: "Is there no spark in you? How can you abandon Russia and return to a contemptible bourgeois existence?" (180).

It is this confrontation with Nechaev that finally gives Dostoevsky the impetus to break his writer's block in the final chapter of *The Master of Petersburg*. The two short sections of prose he produces are Coetzee's own imagined drafts for "At Tikhon's" or "Stavrogin's Confession," a chapter of *The Devils* deemed too shocking for publication by Dostoevsky's journal editor and consequently absent from the collected text. The original text of "Stavrogin's Confession" exists in two forms: that which was returned to Dostoevsky from his editor and a revised version which was undertaken to meet the editor's demands. Despite his efforts to make the text acceptable, Dostoevsky was instead eventually forced to rewrite parts of the novel to accommodate the absence of this material.[4] As I have suggested, the entire text of *The Master of Petersburg* can be taken to represent a reimagining of the historical circumstances of Dostoevsky's approach to writing *The Devils*. As such, the material that Dostoevsky produces here is intimately connected to the narrative of *The Master of Petersburg*. Indeed, the entire "Stavrogin" episode signifies Coetzee's

Dostoevsky's use of the "reality" of *The Master of Petersburg* as the material for the fiction of *The Devils*.

As in Coetzee's address "The Novel Today" (1984), in which the discourses of the novel and history are understood as being in enmity, the idea of the simple interaction of historical "reality" with "fiction" is deliberately skewed here. The effect is of an endlessly multiplying complexity. *The Master of Petersburg* becomes, at base, a study of the limits of authorial "mastery." Throughout the text, the realities of the historical Dostoevsky's biography have been set in contest with the fiction of Coetzee's imagined chronology; now both versions are set in contest with Coetzee's Dostoevsky's rendering of "Stavrogin's Confession." When this material is related back to the notion of the exercise of literary authority as being somehow linked to the intergenerational struggle, a key point emerges: Dostoevsky understands the conversion of the "facts" of *The Master of Petersburg* into the fiction of *The Devils* as "betrayal.… *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use" (235). Principally, this betrayal is Dostoevsky's perversion of turning Pavel into the character of the enigmatic aristocratic sociopath Stavrogin, a final admission of the proximity of his step-son to the revolutionary movement:

> Is he going to have to give up his last faith in Pavel's innocence and acknowledge him in truth as Nechaev's comrade and follower, a restless young man who responded without reserve to all that Nechaev offered: not just the adventure of conspiracy but the soul-inflating ecstasies of death-dealing too? As Nechaev hates the fathers and makes implacable war on them, so must Pavel be allowed to follow him. (238)

Facing this question directly provides the creative spark which finally allows Dostoevsky to write: "As he asks the question … he feels something stir in himself too; the beginnings of a fury that answers Pavel, Nechaev, answers all of them. Fathers and sons: foes: foes to the death" (239). Dostoevsky's conscious and unconscious understanding of the world as a perpetual battle between paternal authority and juvenile rebellion is now portrayed not as the limiting factor of his political and

literary consciousnesses—as it is understood by Freud in "Dostoevsky and Parricide"—but, on the contrary, as the mainspring of his work and the guarantee of its ambiguity. In his examination of Freud's discussions of Dostoevsky, Rosen claims that "each of [Dostoevsky's] novels could be regarded as a rebellion or a need to rebel against an authority figure, whether that figure is the personal father, the state, or God. Thus writing each novel became an act of parricide" (114–5). In forwarding this notion Rosen is, of course, deliberately offering us a striking inversion of Freud's position in which Dostoevsky's work is flawed in the concession it makes to patriarchal and pseudo-patriarchal authority. It seems in the final chapter of *The Master of Petersburg* that Coetzee is also seeking to further this inversion. As product of this interest in the latent ambiguity of Dostoevsky's work, it seems significant that the section of *The Devils* that Coetzee has Dostoevsky produce at the end of the novel is not what we may think of as the most obviously "political" element of that novel, but rather the element that can be seen to undo much of the text's easy politicism. In line with this, it is noteworthy that Coetzee does not choose to stage Dostoevsky drawing on his experiences with Nechaev to create the political figure of Peter Verkhovensky, but instead stages Pavel being translated into the unreadable figure of Stavrogin.

In Dostoevsky's original versions of "Stavrogin's Confession," Stavrogin admits to a string of extraordinary crimes which include the violation of his landlady's daughter and his bizarre marriage to the mentally ill Maria Lebyatkin. It is these two episodes that Coetzee's Dostoevsky briefly sketches. In the first of these confessions the victim of the violation is a fourteen year old named Matryosha. In the original version of "Stavrogin's Confession" returned to Dostoevsky by his editor, Stavrogin sexually assaults Matryosha; in Dostoevsky's reworked version, he merely induces the girl to kiss him. Stavrogin states that afterwards "it must have seemed to her that she had committed a terrible crime and was guilty of a mortal sin. 'She had killed God'" (688). It subsequently proves that this guilt is in fact deadly: Matryosha is driven to commit suicide while Stavrogin sits both impatiently and passively in the adjoining room. In reading this episode as it is rendered in *The Master of Petersburg*, we are, of course, to recognize the "truth" behind

this story as derived from the perfectly innocent relationship of Pavel and Matryona. The violation seems deepened in Coetzee's version, since, within the symbolic economy of the novel, Pavel and Matryona are frequently portrayed as brother and sister, adding an incestuous element to Dostoevsky's original.

The second of the stories from "Stavrogin's Confession" that Dostoevsky drafts in *The Master of Petersburg* concerns Stavrogin's strange abuse of Maria Lebyatkin. In the historical Dostoevsky's original versions, Stavrogin describes his marriage to Maria as a kind of dark joke against himself, saying that "the idea of the marriage of Stavrogin to a low creature like that excited my nerves. One could not imagine anything more outrageous" (694). Maria is consequently drawn into the havoc surrounding the Verkhovensky group. Stavrogin then "accidentally" commissions her murder. In *The Master of Petersburg*, the basis for this story has already been related to Matryona by Dostoevsky. In stark contrast to "Stavrogin's Confession," Pavel's behaviour in Coetzee's Dostoevsky's "real" version is exemplary. Once Maria mistakenly conceives of the marriage proposal, to spare her embarrassment he visits her in a gallant and entirely innocent fashion all through the summer. Dostoevsky proudly relates how his behaviour toward her is said to be "a lesson in chivalry" (72). When we take an ironic commentary of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" to be a leading rationale behind Coetzee's portrait of Dostoevsky, the significance of Coetzee's choice of material is clear: as becomes apparent when the "facts" of *The Master of Petersburg* are finally mapped back over the fiction of *The Devils*, each of these final acts of storytelling in *The Master of Petersburg* represents a final and wilful "betrayal" (250) of the parent's position of trust.

Even within an oeuvre as frequently perplexing as that of Coetzee, we may feel that *The Master of Petersburg* can be judged as especially oblique. Indeed, in this disturbing novel Coetzee seems to have created an even more abstract version of what the narrator of *Notes from Underground* (1864) calls "the most abstract and intentional city in the whole round world" (17). Where Derek Attridge discusses the novel's unrelenting "strangeness" (118) and the discomfort it produces as a normative function of the text's literariness, we may additionally note that this strange-

ness and discomfort can be further accounted for by the exceptional degree to which Coetzee's artistic vision encompasses the exploration of propositional philosophical source material. In *The Master of Petersburg*, the critical material of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" is interleaved into the context of the fictional narrative in such fashion as to issue a disturbance to the ordinary signifying processes of both texts. As well as adding referential weight to Coetzee's rendering of Dostoevsky, and providing the novel with a richness of symbolism and a grandeur of mythology which comes from somewhere exterior to the novel, Coetzee's references to "Dostoevsky and Parricide" also act as a kind of limiting device to his own authority. Similarly, Freud's text is paradoxically given more and, by turns, less authority. As well as offering deference to Freud's reading of Dostoevsky in "Dostoevsky and Parricide," elements of *The Master of Petersburg* can ultimately be read as providing an inlaid critical commentary on Freud's psychoanalysis of Dostoevsky. To corrupt a famous metaphor from *The Brothers Karazamov*: intertextuality can be understood as "a knife that cuts both ways" (659)—the effect is a destabilizing along both sides of the blade.

Notes

1 In citing "Dostoevsky and Parricide" it is of primary importance to state that Freud's understanding of Dostoevsky's epilepsy as an outward symptom of neurosis has been variously dismissed. To Freud's credit he is willing to openly admit that his observations must remain conjecture: "firstly, because anamnestic data on Dostoevsky's alleged epilepsy are defective and untrustworthy, and secondly, because our understanding of pathological states combined with epilepitform attacks is imperfect" (237). Indeed, the two strands of uncertainty that Freud identifies in his own analysis have made up the two dominant strands of the criticism of "Dostoevsky and Parricide" since its publication. The first spur of attack concerning Freud's knowledge of the historical details of the occurrences of Dostoevsky's epilepsy is dominated by Frank: in the first volume of his incomparably authoritative biography Frank questions searchingly the historical materials on which Freud's portrait of Dostoevsky is based, eventually dismissing Freud's case history as "purely fictitious" (28). The second spur, concerning the debate amongst epileptologists as to the organic, hysterical or compound nature of Dostoevsky's epilepsy, is equally controversial. See also Rice and Rosen.

2 To preface any discussion of *The Master of Petersburg* the critic is bound to acknowledge the deliberate historical inaccuracies on which the narrative turns.

There is no evidence that Dostoevsky broke his exile of 1867–76 to make a clandestine return to St. Petersburg. In actual fact the historical "Pavel," Pasha Isaev, survived his stepfather by nearly twenty years and his fictive self by more than thirty. The meeting Dostoevsky's visit enables, that between himself and the nihilist Sergei Gennadiyevich Nechaev, never took place either inside or outside of Russia. When challenged by Councillor Maximov on this issue, Dostoevsky claims his only contact with Nechaev was seeing him at the inaugural Congress of the International League for Peace and Freedom in autumn 1867. By the historical record, Dostoevsky did attend this meeting, Nechaev did not.

3 The germ of this rumour is an allegation made by Dostoevsky's first biographer Nikolai Strakhov in a letter to Tolstoy dated 26 November 1883: "I cannot consider Dostoevsky either a good or happy man.… He was evil, envious, debauched, and he conducted his whole life in the kind of turmoil that made him pitiful.… He was drawn to vilenesses and boasted of them. Viskovatov once started to tell me how Dostoevsky … had screwed a little girl who had been brought to him by her governess" (qtd. in Jackson 105–6). In *Stir* Frank unearths possible reasons for Strakhov bearing Dostoevsky a grudge before dismissing this accusation as "scurrilous" (194).

4 This material was left unpublished during Dostoevsky's lifetime. It was discovered among his papers in 1921 and first published the following year. See Frank, *A Writer in His Time* 622–4. Page numbers for "Stavrogin's Confession" refer to David Magarshack's translation of *The Devils* to which Dostoevsky's revised version is appended.

Works Cited

Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004. Print.

Barthes, Roland. "Theory of the Text." Trans. Robert Young. *Untying the Text*. Ed. Robert Young. Boston: Routledge, 1981. 31–47. Print.

Coetzee, J. M. *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.

——. "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky." Coetzee, *Doubling*. 193–232. Print.

——. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.

——. *Doubling the Point: J. M. Coetzee, Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992. Print.

——. *Foe*. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.

——. Interview with Jane Poyner. *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Ed. Jane Poyner. Athens: Ohio State UP, 2006. 21–24. Print.

——. *The Master of Petersburg*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995. Print.

——. "The Novel Today." *Upstream: A Magazine of the Arts* 6.1 (1988): 2–5. Print.

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

Dostoevsky, Fyodor Mikhaylovich. *The Adolescent*. 1875. Trans. Andrew MacAndrew. New York: Norton, 2003. Print.

——. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880. Trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. Print.

——. *The Devils*. 1872. Trans. David Magarshack. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. Print.

——. *The Idiot*. 1868. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 2003. Print.

——. Notes from Underground *and* The Double. Trans. Ronald Wilks. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009. Print.

——. *Poor People*. 1846. Trans. Charlotte Hobson. London: Hesperus P, 2002. Print.

Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976. Print.

——. *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986. Print.

——. *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*. Princeton: Princeton UP 2010. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. "Dostoevsky and Parricide." 1928. Trans. D. F. Tait. *Writings on Art and Literature*. Ed. Neil Hertz. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 234–55. Print.

Jackson, Robert Louis. *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993. Print.

——. Introduction. *Dostoevsky: New Perspectives*. Ed. Jackson. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984. 1–18. Print.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. London: Penguin, 1992. Print.

Lantz, Kenneth. *The Dostoevsky Encyclopaedia*. Westport: Greenwood, 2004. Print.

Marais, Michael. "Places of Pigs: The Tension between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*." *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Sue Kossew. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998. 226–38. Print.

Quinn, Anthony. "Dostoyevsky and Drains." Rev. of *The Master of Petersburg*, by J. M. Coetzee. *The Independent*. 25 Feb. 1994. Web. 21 Jan. 2011.

Rice, James L. *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay on Literary and Medical History*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985. Print.

Rosen, Nathan. "Freud on Dostoevsky's Epilepsy: A Revaluation." *Dostoevsky Studies* 9 (1988): 107–25. Print.