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DOSTOEVSKY AND NABOKOV: THE MORALITY OF STRUCTURE IN "CRIME AND PUNISHMENT" AND "DESPAIR"

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... Villainy and genius,
two things that do not go
together.
Pushkin, "Mozart and Salieri"
(Tr. by V. Nabokov)

In 1939 Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a short article on Nabokov's novel "La Méprise" (Despair). In this review Sartre stated:

It seems to me that this desperate eagerness to attack and destroy himself is quite characteristic of the manner of Mr. Nabokov. This author has a great deal of talent, but it is of the old school. I am thinking of his spiritual mentors, particularly Dostoevsky; for the hero of this strange, abortive novel resembles, more than he does his double Felix, the characters of the "The Raw Youth," "The Eternal Husband," "Notes from the Underground" . . . But Dostoevsky believed in his characters. Mr. Nabokov no longer believes in his, nor even in the art of the novel. (1)

Even a superficial glance at "Despair" suffices to reveal the extent of the misreading to which the existentialist critic subjected Nabokov's novel. In his prose as well as in his numerous interviews, Nabokov reiterated time and again his fundamental contempt for Dostoevsky, whom he ranked in the category of "mediocre and overrated people." The fame which Dostoevsky's "melodramatic muddle and phony mysticism" achieved was, according to Nabokov, beyond his comprehension. (2) The usually capricious Nabokov was being neither facetious nor intentionally provocative in this case. What from the Western point of view appears to be an outrageous statement is from the Russian point of view a rather tame opinion, one that was shared by a number of writers, including Tolstoj, Chekhov, and Bunin, all of whom Nabokov admired. Simon Karlinsky correctly observed that "while no Western critic or literate person would dare to admit publicly that he dislikes certain aspects of Dostoevsky or is bored by them, Russians themselves never felt any such compunctions." (3) Accordingly, Nabokov was perfectly frank when he bluntly declared:

... I dislike intensely "The Karamazov Brothers" and the ghastly

"Crime and Punishment" rigmorale. No, I do not object to soul-searching and self-revelation, but in those books the soul, and the sins, and the sentimentality, and the journalese, hardly warrant the tedious and muddled search. (4)

Hermann, the hero of "Despair," displays a very similar attitude toward "all that gloomy Dostoevskian stuff" (m r a c h n a j a d o s t o e v s h c h i n a) and, as Andrew Field wittily observed, "the great Fedor Mikhailovich . . . ends as the second, unnoticed corpse of the novel." (5) Thus, he whom Sartre had mistaken for Nabokov's "spiritual mentor" is, in reality, the very target of Nabokov's poignant parody.

Elaborating upon several of Dostoevsky's favorite themes, "Despair" is a novel about doubles, or, to be more precise, about a man who murders his double. The chocolate entrepreneur, Hermann, happens to discern his double in the tramp Felix. This discovery, or more properly, revelation, inspires Hermann with the idea of committing the "perfect crime," and he devises a quite sophisticated plan for the absurd and utterly useless murder of his double. Hermann's "ingenious" plan hinges on a simple switching of the identities of the victim and the murderer. The alleged motive for the crime is, according to Hermann, the "greed of gain." Having provided himself with a new identity, Hermann will continue to live on the insurance money that is to be paid upon his death. This brilliantly conceived plan is, however, marred by a fundamental flaw: the "striking similarity" between the "doubles," so obvious to Hermann, passes unnoticed by everyone else, and the police all too quickly ascertain the victims' true identity. After the world has condemned his crime, Hermann seeks recognition for his genius as an artist - a writer. To justify and defend his "crime of genius," Hermann undertakes to write a mystery tale, and in this way he creates an artistic variant of the crime: the literary double of the murder.

Throughout his tale, Hermann makes repeated jabs at the "famous writer of Russian thrillers" (p. 98) whom he nicknames "Dusty," and attributes to him such opuses as "Crime and Slime" (p. 187) and "Crime and Pun." (p. 211) Dostoevsky's hero, Raskolnikov, becomes in Hermann's scatological rendering "Rascalnikov" (p. 199) (from kal and rascal?). (6) Hermann also masterfully mimics the "Dusty-and-Dusty charm of hysterics" (v s i u p r e l e s t' n a d r y v c h i k a) (p. 198) which epitomizes Raskolnikov's behavior:

"Be gone!" I yelled, stamping my foot. "The things you are doing to me - It's beyond - You dare not humiliate me and take revenge - I demand, do you hear, I demand -" (p. 197)

Thematically, both novels are centered around the criminal and his crime. Both novels present the crime as devoid of any pragmatic purposes. In both cases we observe a striking incongruity between the protagonist and his crime. Raskolnikov, as Philip Rahv puts it, "produces a corpse but no real motive" for his murder, (7) and his blasé indifference toward the actual

loot rules out the possibility that he has killed out of hunger, as Sonja assumes. This is even more true of Hermann, who owns nothing less than a chocolate business. Likewise, the alleged motive for Hermann's crime - the "greed of gain" - withers away as soon as it is mentioned. His real motive is to prove the possibility of the "perfect crime" and to derive an esthetic satisfaction from this proof. In both cases the murder is carried out as an experiment to demonstrate and verify a hypothesis of the hero's own making.

Raskolnikov, in his moral depravity constructs a theory according to which some extraordinary individuals are exempted from all civil and possibly also from all ethical laws. These extraordinary men have the "right to transgress" the taboos considered sacred by ordinary men:

. . . if it is necessary for one of them, for the fulfillment of his ideas, to march over corpses, or wade through blood, then . . . he may in all conscience authorize himself to wade through blood . . . (p. 221)

In a clear allusion to Raskolnikov (who is a caricature of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*), Nabokov's Hermann (a caricature of Raskolnikov) begins his tale with a similar assumption: "At this point I should have compared the breaker of the law, which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer." (p. 137) Thus both heroes issue themselves a *carte blanche* to kill.

Raskolnikov may be said to base his rationalist theory on the assumption that God is dead, and everything is permitted. "Perhaps God does not exist," he says with laughter to the "meek, gentler" Sonja. Sophia Marmeladova, the "eternal Sonechka, so long as the world stands," (p. 37) the embodiment of divine wisdom, epitomizes the evangelical antipode to Raskolnikov. They meet in what Nietzsche ironically called the "queer and sick world into which the Gospels introduce us - as in a Russian novel, and a world in which the scum of society, nervous disorders, and 'childlike' idiocy seem to be having a rendezvous." (8) What was for Raskolnikov only a supposition of God's non-existence is for Nabokov's hero, Hermann, a fait accompli. The "divine business" is for Hermann a "huge hoax": "The idea of God was invented in the small hours of history by a scamp who had genius; it somehow reeks too much of humanity . . ." (p. 111)

Thus, having disposed of the troublesome question of God, Raskolnikov and Hermann proceed with their plans. Both murders are premeditated and painstakingly planned. Raskolnikov rehearses his act well in advance. He explores the site of his future crime, tries out the bell, sews a loop - "an ingenious device of his own" meant to hold the axe - and carefully wraps up in "clean white paper" a still more ingenious device of his - a "piece of smoothly planed board" and a fitting "iron plate" designed to incorporate the silver cigarette case, his sham pledge to the pawnbroker. Hermann also thoroughly prepares for his crime. He carefully studies the site of the murder, orders his victim to a dress rehearsal, plies him

with drink in one of "those stage taverns where Dostoevsky is at home," (p. 98) and, in order to ensure Felix's cooperation, fabricates for his distrustful double two sham scenarios. Before the actual murder, Hermann dons two identical shirts (but one is dirty), two pairs of drawers, and two pairs of socks (one with a hole). He prepares a manicure set, a shaving kit, and a shoe horn (all this to help Felix slip effortlessly into Hermann's identity), and, most importantly, he readies an "admirably oiled" revolver.

The technical awkwardness of these preparations, notwithstanding both murders proceed relatively smoothly, almost en passant, as if they were a mere by-product of the mechanism which the respective theories set in motion. After the crime, however, Raskolnikov begins to be tormented by the idea that people might think him innocent. In his desire to gain recognition for his superhuman but anonymous feat, Raskolnikov provokes suspicion and initiates a lengthy hide-and-peek game with the authorities. He almost divulges his secret to the police clerk, Zametov, and openly discusses and defends his incriminating theory before the prosecutor, Porfirij Petrovich. Raskolnikov's murderous experiment might have succeeded were it not for disastrous flaws in the experimenter himself, flaws which emerge clearly in the second half of the novel. Raskolnikov's intellect, which dominated the first half of the novel, is in the second half sabotaged step-by-step and on all fronts by his own irrational conscience. So masterfully suppressed in the first half, it now rises forth to undermine his proud intellect.

In order to bring Raskolnikov to his senses (вразумит'), Dostoevsky engages a number of human catalysts. The eloquent Porfirij Petrovich whom the author appoints to act on behalf of legality and to punish the criminal, accepts Raskolnikov's challenge, and gradually forces his victim to move in ever narrowing circles around an inescapable "candle-flame." (p. 287) Raskolnikov rejects the alternative offered by Svidrigajlov - escape through suicide, - and he is compelled to continue his progression toward a formal confession and legal punishment. By way of contrast to the articulate prosecutor, Dostoevsky sends to Raskolnikov the tongue-tied Sonia, who acts in the interests of Raskolnikov's salvation. In the light of a different candle she reads to Raskolnikov the gospel story of raising of Lazarus, and moves the murderer to a genuine confession. Unlike his legal confession, Raskolnikov's confession to Sonia includes a promise of repentance. He goes to the Haymarket Square and, contrary to what his intellect tells him, he "kneels in the middle of the square, bows to the ground and kisses its filth," (p. 445) as Sophia has instructed him.

Thus all the appointed agents - the terrestrial prosecutor, the infernal advocate of suicide, and the celestial harlot - accomplish the tasks assigned to them by the author. What Raskolnikov in the first half of the novel viewed as a detached meta-ethical speculation on the right to kill develops in the second half, once the theory has been translated into act, into a concrete and immediate ethical problem. Yet Raskolnikov confesses to himself not the full moral implications of his crime, but only his inability to go on living with the consequences of having acted beyond

good and evil. He declares himself a "louse," moreover an "esthetic louse," and his "laughter turns into despair."

Let us now return to Hermann's crime in "Despair." After the murder, the police discover the corpse of Felix but fail to identify it as Hermann's. No one notices the exquisite likeness Hermann had perceived between himself and Felix, and this turns Hermann's "perfect crime" into a perfect failure. Hermann realizes that the murder was committed in vain, and he goes into hiding. Just like Raskolnikov, he is plagued by the prospect that no one will appreciate the merits of his crime. In order to prove his geniality and to gain recognition for his act of genius, Hermann decides to write a perfect mystery tale. This confession-like tale is the literary double of the murder. Like Raskolnikov's treatise, Hermann's tale attempts to explain his motives and justify the results, but whereas Raskolnikov's article advances his own ethical theory, Hermann's tale is a purely esthetic affair.

From the very beginning Hermann views his future murder as a distinctive type of artistic endeavor, as art itself. The likely model for Hermann's criminal esthetics is Thomas De Quincey, who in his famous triptych "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts," called the murderer an "artist" and his crime his "oeuvre." (9) By raising the crime to the level of esthetics, Hermann successfully eliminates all ethical consequences which might otherwise stem from it. "Any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question," Hermann reassures the reader, "an artist feels no remorse, even when his work is not understood, not accepted." (p. 167)

It would, however, be a mistake to expect Nabokov to treat Hermann as Dostoevsky treats Raskolnikov. Nabokov will not reproach or punish his self-styled extraordinary man on ethical or religious grounds. Pleading total ignorance in psychological and metaphysical matters, Nabokov deals shrewdly in questions of art. Thus, he challenges the hero not for his crime but for his art - the mystery tale. The question, ultimately, is not "whodunnit?" but rather "where is the hidden artistic mistake?" - the mistake that will ruin both the opus and its author. On re-reading his manuscript, Hermann involuntarily becomes the detective of his own tale, and discovers the all too obvious clue. The "S-T-I-C-K," forgotten in the car and bearing the name and home town of the victim, is the fateful object that engenders Hermann's despair and gives the title to his tale. At least ten times in the course of Hermann's tale the reader is reminded of this obtrusive stick, and ten times the mystery writer fails to take notice of it.

Listen, listen! I bent over the shattered remains of my marvelous thing, and an accursed voice shrieked into my ear that the rabble which refused me recognition was perchance right... (p. 213)

This is, then, the conclusion of Hermann's peculiar detective, and alas, defective tale.

Discussing the danger posed by "extraordinary people," Raskolnikov reassures the prosecutor that there is "really . . . nothing to worry about, because the supermen never go far. They might sometimes be scourged (i k h m o z h n o i n o g d a p o s e c h ') for their zealotry, to remind them of their place," (p. 222) Raskolnikov admits. The infamous "stick" in "Despair" thus serves as the symbol of Hermann's downfall as well as the instrument with which Nabokov chastises his hero for his talented yet flawed accomplishment. "Despair" shows the suffering of an original, self-disciplined artist," wrote the poet V. Khodasevich in 1937.

(Hermann's) downfall is brought about by one error, one misstep, which, once admitted into the text, gobbles up the fruits of his creative labors . . . Hermann is driven to despair because he alone is responsible for his downfall, because he is only talented but not a genius. (10)

Thus far I have dealt only with the more obvious thematic parallels between the two novels. However, an analysis of the less apparent aspects of the novels' respective structures will reveal yet another set of correspondences between "Crime and Punishment" and "Despair."

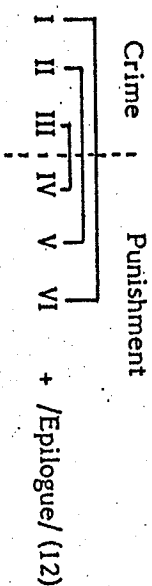
A number of critics have based their analyses and interpretations of "Crime and Punishment" upon the notion of duality which determines the novels' structure. The symmetry of the title, the twin murders, the doubling and antithetical parallelism among the various characters (e. g., Svidrigajlov and Sonja as representing the evil and good halves of Raskolnikov), as well as the name of the protagonist (from r a s k o l - split, schism) all suggest that a broad range of explicit and implicit binary opposition is operating in the novel. Crime vs. punishment, reason vs. faith, rational vs. irrational, conscious vs. unconscious, legality vs. morality, law vs. grace, and human vs. divine are among the most important oppositional pairs around which the novel is polarized.

In its turn, the arrangement of the novel into six parts reiterates this intrinsic duality and reveals Dostoevsky's symmetrical design of the novel. Edward Wasiolek, who has convincingly demonstrated that Dostoevsky was a skilled craftsman, highly conscious of the formal pattern in his art, sees the well-balanced structure of "Crime and Punishment" as a "flattened X" which results from the crossing of "two sets of antitheses." Wasiolek maintains that

The structure of balanced antitheses corresponds to the quantitative divisions of the novel. Parts I-III present the predominantly rational and proud Raskolnikov; Parts IV-VI, the emerging "irrational" and humble Raskolnikov. The first half of the novel shows the progressive death of the first ruling principle of his character; the last half, the progressive birth of the new ruling principle. The point of change comes in the very middle of the novel. (11)

This compositional balance is achieved by means of the symmetrical

distribution of certain key episodes throughout the novel's six parts. The recurrence of these episodes in the two halves of the novel, as David Bertha has convincingly shown, is organized according to a mirror-like principle, whereby the "left" half of the novel reflects the "right" half. The whole process may be schematized in the following way:



Thus, Marmeladov's drunken confession to Raskolnikov in the tavern (I) is mirrored in Svidrigajlov's drunken confession to Raskolnikov, also in a tavern (VI). Raskolnikov's dream of the killing of the mare prior to the murder (II) is mirrored by Svidrigajlov's dream of the disgraced girl who drowned herself, which precedes his suicide (VI). Raskolnikov's murder (I) is reflected in Svidrigajlov's self-inflicted murder (VI), and his sham confession to Zametov (II) has its inevitable double in his genuine confession to Sonja (V). The death of Marmeladov (II) has its counterpart in the death of Katerina Ivanovna (V). Sonja's visit to Raskolnikov (III) finds its mirror-image in his visit to her (IV), and both visits, incidentally, occur in the incognito presence of Svidrigajlov. Raskolnikov's first confrontation with Porfirij Petrovich (III) is mirrored in his second confrontation with him (IV). Raskolnikov's treatise on the "extraordinary man" and his "right" to kill another human (III) is counterbalanced by Sonja's reading of her "extraordinary man" and his power to resurrect the dead (IV).

The marked boundary falls between Parts III and IV. At their juncture is the figurative as well as real "threshold" of the novel. It is here that Dostoevsky places the window pane which functions as mirror surface separating and connecting the two halves of the novel. On its transparent surface the symmetrically distributed motifs meet their inevitable counterparts. Part III ends with Raskolnikov's dream in which he once more steps across the threshold of the pawn broker's apartment but fails to kill this time. His victim shakes with mirth while a fly is buzzing and bumping against the window pane. In the middle of this dream Svidrigajlov materializes, as he quietly steps across the threshold of Raskolnikov's room, to the accompaniment of a fly buzzing and bumping against the window pane. "Can this be the dream continuing?" asks Raskolnikov when reality supersedes dream at the beginning of Part IV. At this point the optical mechanism for the novel's "fearful symmetry" is all in place.

The delicate question which must be addressed is how to interpret this compositional symmetry without stretching too far the significance of the novel's formal structure. It may be argued that the perfectly balanced composition of the novel is coterminous with the basic antinomy of

"crime" and "punishment." According to the logic of law, justice is established through an equational procedure which places the "crime" on one side of the scales and balances it with "punishment" on the other. To use Raskolnikov's own words, such a legalistic equation is "just as arithmetics." (справедлива как арифметика). The symmetrical arrangement of the six parts of the novel thus reiterates this legalistic equation, with Parts I-III corresponding to the "crime" and Parts IV-VI reflecting the "punishment." In this sense, at the end of Part VI, legal justice has indeed been achieved, and it is the blind justice of law, based on Old Testament arithmetic which counts "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." Although formally it is impeccable, such a legal justice is utterly unacceptable to Dostoevsky, for whom 2 + 2 equals 5 and any equation, rational or legal, remains invalid, deficient, and flawed.

For Dostoevsky, no ethics can be written in modo geometrico, and morality and legality are not synonymous. Therefore, genuine justice or the true balance between "crime" and "punishment" cannot be achieved on the rational scales of civil law but only on the transcendent and irrational scales of divine grace. The ultimate justice is not retributive but redemptive, and it is based upon the principles of New Testament ethics: "not under law but under grace," for "Christ is the end of law," (Rom. 6:14, 10:4) In "Crime and Punishment," however, this final transition from law to grace, from the lower to the higher meaning of justice, takes place only in the notoriously troublesome and seemingly unmotivated epilogue.

The addition of this relatively brief coda at the close of the lengthy novel destroys at once the formal symmetry which was constructed so meticulously in the six preceding parts. There is indeed a jarring imbalance between the 500 pages of the novel's six parts, which cover nine and a half days of Raskolnikov's life, and the 15 pages of the miniature epilogue, which are supposed to account of an entire seven years of the hero's new life. At Dostoevsky's fiat the irrational epilogue upsets the balance between "crime" and "punishment" as well as between the novel's mirror-reflected halves, leaving the reader with the promise of a new balance. It is here in the asymmetrical and irrational seventh part that Lazarus will rise, the "living life" (живая жизнь) and the New Jerusalem will begin, or, as Nabokov puts it, "Bedlam will turn back into Bethlehem." (13)

Let us return to "Despair" in order to ascertain what relevance Dostoevsky's assault on rationalism and symmetry has for Nabokov's novel. In the murder of his double, as well as in the execution of his tale, Hermann is guided by a similar principle of symmetry.

For the narcissistic Hermann, the mirror comes to represent the supreme esthetic idol, and mirror-likeness - becomes the key to artistic success. The mirror-like symmetry which Hermann perceives between himself and his double (Felix is left-handed) consequently dictates both the nature of Hermann's crime and the structure of his tale. His ideal is to write a tale that would resemble a "game of patience arranged beforehand":

... first I put down the open cards in such a manner as to make its success a dead certainty; then I gathered them up in the opposite order and gave the prepared pack to others with the perfect assurance it would come out. (p. 132)

Hermann forces the composition of his tale about doubles to reflect its own theme. According to Hermann's scheme, his tale should consist of ten chapters with a happy ending in Chapter X. The two halves (I-V, VI-X) naturally reflect each other. A number of motifs in Chapter II (the yellow post, the theft of the car, the shaving brush alias the pine cone, etc.) are mirror-reflections of their doubles from Chapter IX. Chapters II and IX fall on either side of this axis with mirror-like precision. The yellow post to which the tale and its events frequently return serves as a landmark for the text's symmetrical topography, which may be schematized as follows:

I (II) III IV V VI VII VIII (IX) X + /XI/

Hermann also employs a number of other devices which reinforce the symmetrical structure of his tale. (14) In Chapter IV, for example, we find Hermann standing on a bridge watching the autumn leaves fall into the water:

When a slow leaf fell, there would flutter up to meet it, out of the water's shadowy depths, its unavoidable double. Their meeting was soundless. The leaf came twirling down, and twirling up there would rise towards it, eagerly, its exact, beautiful, lethal reflection. (p. 72)

This scene anticipates the inescapable obliteration of his reflection, i. e., the killing of his double, and it calls to mind Raskolnikov on the Voznesenskiy Bridge watching a drunken woman jump into the water and contemplating his own suicide (pp. 144-146). The image of the falling leaves in Chapter IV has, of course, its counterpart in the image of the game of patience in Chapter VII mentioned above. Both examples involve absolute symmetry and expose the formula of the tale's prismatic composition. Not unlike the autumn leaves, or the playing cards, the pages meet their own reflections half way through Hermann's manuscript. Their soundless and unavoidable meeting takes place on the mirror-surface which divides Chapters V and VI.

As I have tried to demonstrate, Dostoevsky's attack on the formalism of reason and law leads to the destruction of the compositional balance in "Crime and Punishment." By appending the asymmetrical epilogue to the novel's symmetrical structure, Dostoevsky asserts through the composition of his novel that 3 + 3 equals 7. If we compare the concluding portion of "Crime and Punishment" with the closing of "Despair," we cannot fail to notice that Nabokov ventures a similar assault on the principle of symmetry, and in effect he asserts that 5 + 5 equals 11. For Dostoevsky, the formal balance was unable to produce true justice, and for Nabokov, the mechanistic symmetry of Hermann's tale cannot attain a true esthetic effect. However, what Dostoevsky attacks on ethical grounds, Nabokov assaults on a purely esthetic basis.

In Nabokov's novel "The Gift," the accredited hero-writer Fedor states that "any genuinely new trend (in art) is a knight's move, a change of shadows, a shift that displaces the mirror." (15) If Hermann may be called a "mirror-worshipper," then Nabokov is certainly a "mirroroclast." Having confronted the hero with his error, Nabokov actually forces Hermann to ruin the tale's symmetry. Hermann's tale can no longer end with a happy conclusion in Chapter X, as planned, and he must add an extra chapter. In the asymmetrical Chapter XI - the irrational epilogue - Hermann's tale "degenerates into a diary, the lowest form of literature" (p. 218) or, more precisely, into the "diary of a madman." With a sleight of hand, the deus ex machina (Nabokov) destroys the invisible mirror Hermann had placed between Chapters V and VI, and shifts the axis around which Hermann's solipsistic cosmos had rotated, a change which was anticipated in Hermann's early reference to a "shattered mirror," which he terms "the weirdest of ~~effects~~ ^{effects}." (p. 34) After this fatal blow to his tale, Hermann's passion for mirrors turns into hatred: "There is, thank God, no mirror in the room, no more than there is the God I am thanking." (p. 220)

With Hermann's assault on God we come to the crucial point of the novel. Claire Rosenfield diagnosed Hermann's leading motive as a "modern perversion of the primitive's longing for immortality." (16) It can be added that Hermann hopes to attain this immortality through art. In a fit of "cacographic debauchery" Hermann writes his infamous tale and deems himself a creator. First he creates a man in his own image and likeness whom he kills. Hermann then proceeds to record the events in his manuscript. Unfortunately, in his demijurgic hubris - and this is the real cause of his fall - Hermann has forgotten that he himself is a creature in somebody else's creation, and that above his word and world there exist another word and world: that of his author. "Despair" is, in the last analysis, a novel by Nabokov in which the main character behaves with loathsome cadishness as he tries to usurp for himself the authority of the author, and to behave in such a way in the temple of Nabokov's art is an unforgivable sin. Nabokov is a merciless judge of the universe his hero has created and watchful guardian over his own poetic cosmos. He forbids killing ("Poets never kill") (17), he loathes mechanistic principles in art, and abhors literary pretenders. Hence, Hermann's sacrifice (Felix) as well as his sacred text (the tale) are rejected by the anthropomorphic deity - the author. The "author ex machina" destroys Hermann's creation and forces despair and madness upon the one who dared to raise his hand against his maker. Hermann's mock-Karamazovian sally against God is in fact an implicate attack against the primacy of the author. It is the key to a proper understanding of the novel.

... I cannot, nor wish to, believe in God: the fairy tale about him is not really mine, it belongs to strangers, to all men; it is soaked through by the evil-smelling effluvia of millions of other souls that have spun about a little under the sun and then burst; it swarms with primordial fears; there echoes in it a confused choir of numberless voices striving to drown one another; I hear in it the boom and pant

of the organ, the roar of the orthodox deacon, the croon of the cantor, Negroes wailing, the flowing eloquence of the Protestant preacher, gongs, thunderclaps, spasms of epileptic women; I see shining through it the pallid pages of all philosophers like the foam of long-spent waves; it is foreign to me and odious and absolutely useless.

If I am not master of my life, not sultan of my own being, then no man's logic and no man's ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossibly silly position: that of God's slave; no, not his slave even, but just a match which is aimlessly struck and then blown out by some inquisitive child, the terror of his toys. There are, however, no grounds for anxiety: god does not exist, as neither does our hereafter... (pp. 111-112)

Pride is the worst sin of all; it is according to this principle that Dante places Satan, who "contra 'l suo fattore alzò le ciglia" (against his maker dared to raise his hand), in the lowest circle of Hell. (18) In no uncertain terms the incensed author shows to his blasphemous hero, who rejects both God and the afterlife, that his posthumous whereabouts will be in Hell. Nabokov gives the first clue to Hermann in the form of a charade:

"Otgadaj: moe pervoe znachit 'zharko' po-francuzski. Na moe vtoroe sazhajut turka, moe tretje - mesto, kuda my rano ili pozdno popadem. A celoe - to, chto menja razorjaet." (p. 49)

(Guess: my first means 'hot' in French. On my second, one sets a Turk; my third is that place where we'll end up sooner or later. And the whole is my ruin.) The answer is shokolad (chocolate) from chaud - kold - a d. Thus heat, impalement and Hell await Hermann in the afterlife.

Nabokov's second clue to his hero takes the form of a "very singular and very nasty dream" which Hermann is doomed to dream over and over again.

I dreamed I was standing in the middle of a long passage with a door at the bottom, and passionately wanting, but not daring to go and open it, and then deciding at last to go, which I accordingly did: but at once awoke with a groan, for what I saw there was unimaginably terrible; to wit, a perfectly empty, newly whitewashed room. That was all, but it was so terrible that I never could hold out... (p. 56)

This dream is actually a literary charade. The sterile room calls to mind Raskolnikov's "eternal solitude on a yard of space" (na arshine prostvane), and it provides a titillating allusion to Svidrigajlov's dismal vision of eternity:

Eternity is always presented to us as an idea which it is impossible to grasp, something enormous, enormous. But why should it necessarily

No matter how metaphysical some of Nabokov's works may appear, there is little room for God in his art. The hierarchy of his poetic cosmos is, however, constructed according to a theological model, and to create his peculiar meta-poetic myth Nabokov resorts often to a literary stylization in which the theological terms are translated into categories of poetics. In this aesthetic universe the only legitimate deity is the author himself. If there is any traceable link between man and God in Nabokov's "theological poetics," it can be found only in the individual act of creation which both God and the creative artist share. The creator/creature chain implicit in "Despair," - Hermann created Felix, Nabokov created Hermann, - may be extended by analogy one further step upward, toward the ultimate Creator of whom Nabokov never spoke but in whose direction he often hinted. These gestures are very difficult to read, and Nabokov was extremely secretive as to their true meaning. Naturally, Nabokov's creed must have been very different from that of Dostoevsky, who in his letter to Fonvizina wrote the famous lines:

... if anyone proved to me that Christ is not the truth, and indeed it were a fact that the truth is not in Christ, I would prefer to stay with Christ rather than with the truth. (20)

Nabokov, who was also a remarkable entomologist, naturally sided with the truth. He maintained, however, that "the greater one's science, the deeper the sense of mystery," and that men "shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought." (21) To the ultimate question: "Do you believe in God?", the agnostic Nabokov, who explained "God's popularity by an atheist's panic," (22) gave a surprisingly equivocal gnostic answer:

To be quite candid - and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary chill - I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more. (23)

In the summer of 1977, Nabokov died and took with him his secret. Like most of his fellow Russian writers in the diaspora, Nabokov was baptized into the Orthodox Church, but he is perhaps the only one not to die a Christian death. According to his last will, Nabokov was cremated and buried without the Orthodox rites. However, from the fact that Nabokov did not die as a Christian, I would hesitate to conclude that he died without God.

NOTES

1. A. Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1967, pp. 231-232.
2. V. Nabokov, Strong Opinions, N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1973, p. 266.
3. In F. Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment: A Norton Critical Edition

be enormous? Imagine, instead, that it will be one little room, something like a bath-house in the country, black with soot, with spiders in every corner, and that is the whole eternity. (p. 245)

We will not reproach Hermann who concludes that "God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter" (p. 112) for returning to his creator a ticket to such an eternity. Thus, unlike the finale of "Crime and Punishment," at the close of "Despair" no Lazarus will be risen, no New Jerusalem will begin, and Bedlam will remain Bedlam. It is amusing to note that in the foreword to the English edition of "Despair," published some thirty years after the novel first appeared, the unforgiving author returns to remind the hero of his proper place.

Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann. (My emphasis)

The last word of the author condemns the hero for eternity.

Thus we can conclude that despite the obvious differences between Raskolnikov and Hermann and despite the contrary endings of the two novels, the structure of "Crime and Punishment" and "Despair" contain an implicit yet distinct morality and message. Raskolnikov's theory and his act were designed to prove that God does not exist and that an individual can live and act beyond good and evil. What Raskolnikov actually produced, however, was a "negative proof" of the opposite. The novel ends with a distant but no longer dissonant reconciliatory chord between the hero and God; the sacrilege has turned into theodicy. Hermann, not unlike Raskolnikov, acts and creates in his demiurgical hubris as if he alone were the ultimate master of the universe. When faced with his failures and confronted with the countenance of his creator, Hermann may choose to acknowledge the existence of his deity. Unlike Raskolnikov, however, Hermann rejects this god, his religion and the afterlife.

The attitude toward the creator differentiates not only Raskolnikov and Hermann but also Dostoevsky and Nabokov. While for Dostoevsky art and religion were inseparable, and his own works were fully in the service of his religious faith, for the "pure artist" Nabokov even a remotely religious message in art was unacceptable. For Nabokov, any socio-political or religious message would betray the nonutilitarian maxims of art which he so ardently defended in his works. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that from Nabokov's point of view both Dostoevsky and Cherysheski would fall into a similar category if judged by the criteria of pure esthetics alone, (19) and Hermann's sallies against the tyranny of God and against the heavenly "communism of souls" in more ways than one echo Dostoevsky's attacks on the terrestrial bliss promised by the Socialists.

- (ed. G. Gibian, tr. J. Coulson), N. Y.: Norton, 1975, p. 632. All citations are to this edition with page numbers given in the text parenthetically.
4. Strong Opinions, p. 48.
 5. Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 230.
 6. All English citations are to Capricorn Books edition of *Despair*, N.Y., 1970; all Russian citations are to Petropolis edition of *Otchajanie*, Berlin 1936. The pagination is given in the text parenthetically.
 7. P. Rahv, "Dostoevsky in Crime and Punishment," in: *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (ed. R. Wellek) Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 19-20.
 8. *The Portable Nietzsche* (ed. and tr. W. Kaufmann), N. Y.: Viking, 1956, p. 603.
 9. *The Collected Writings*, vol. 13 (ed. D. Mason), N.Y., 1968, p. 17. (Reprint)
 10. "O sirine," (On Sirin) in: *Vozrozhdenie* (Renaissance), Paris, Feb. 13, 1937.
 11. "On the Structure of Crime and Punishment," in: *PMLA*, March 1959, vol. LXXIV, No. 1, p. 132-133.
 12. See "Structure Versus Symmetry in Crime and Punishment," in: *Fearful Symmetry*, Proceedings of the Florida State Comparative Literature Conference (forthcoming).
 13. V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, N. Y.: Capricorn Books, 1970, p. 84.
 14. See my article "The Shattered Mirror: A Study of Nabokov's Destruction Method in *Despair*," in: *Structuralist Review*, Winter, 1981, vol. II, no. 2, pp. 25-38.
 15. p. 251.
 16. "Despair and the Lust for Immortality," in: Nabokov: *The Man and His Work* (ed. L. Dembo), Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967, p. 73.
 17. V. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, (ed. A. Appel), N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1970, p. 90.
 18. *Inferno*, XXXIV, lines 34-36.
 19. Cf. Nabokov's devastating attack on Chernyshevskij in Chapter IV of *The Gift*.
 20. *Feb. 20, 1854*.
 21. *Strong Opinions*, p. 45.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 45.