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Introduction

J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) is arguably the most radical reinterpretation of all the fictional Dostoevsky representations analyzed in this thesis. The novel is set in Saint Petersburg in October and November of 1869. Following the sudden and mysterious death of his stepson Pavel Isaev, Dostoevsky returns to the Russian capital from Dresden incognito. He soon becomes increasingly entangled with the various people he encounters. He begins an affair with Pavel's landlady Anna Sergeevna, which is further complicated with the presence of her daughter Matryona.¹ Dostoevsky also learns that his son was involved with an underground revolutionary movement called the People's Vengeance, led by Sergey Nechaev, a young nihilist who might have been responsible for Pavel's death. Furthermore, Pavel's involvement with Nechaev leads to several encounters between Dostoevsky and the police. At the end of the novel, as fires and unrest spread throughout Petersburg, Dostoevsky begins work on what will become the novel *Demons* (*Besy*, 1871-72).

The novel departs drastically from Dostoevsky's biography, or rather, imagines and adds a thoroughly fictional episode to it. In reality, Dostoevsky remained in Europe from 1867 to 1871 and his stepson Pavel outlived him. The novel thus centers on a wholly fictional plot that revolves around the writer's various meetings with the other characters. This fictional license on Coetzee's part is balanced with a close adherence to various details from the writer's life.²

Master is also rich with allusions to Dostoevsky's own stories and his characters, foremost *Demons* and Stavrogin's confession in the censored chapter "At Tikhon's." Pavel's murder in *Master* mirrors Shatov's in *Demons*, which in turn was inspired by Nechaev's real-life murder of Ivan Ivanov, a fellow revolutionary. Ivanov, however, is also the name given to a police spy in *Master* purporting to be a beggar. To complicate matters further, this latter Ivanov

¹ In my citations from *Master*, I follow Coetzee's transliteration of the Russian names to avoid confusing Coetzee's characters with characters from Dostoevsky's work. For instance, the name of Dostoevsky's landlady in *Master* will be rendered Anna Sergeevna, not Anna Sergeevna, Matryona rather than Matriona, and Maria Timofeyevna Lebyatkina instead of Maria Timofeevna Lebiadkina.

² Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (London: Vintage, 1994), 117.

is later killed, presumably by Nechaev's group. In *Master*, Pavel has also, according to Dostoevsky, been involved with a woman called Maria Timofeevna, a disabled woman, "weak in the head,"³ who lives in Tver. This, too, is a clear reference to the character Maria Timofeyevna Lebyatkina, the woman whom Stavrogin marries in *Demons*. Nechaev also served as the model for the character Piotr Verkhovenski in *Demons*. The police Councillor Maximov in *Master* is presumably named after the minor character Maksimov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80). Dostoevsky's landlady Anna Sergeevna in *Master* is the namesake of Dostoevsky's second wife Anna Grigorevna, who in the novel stays behind in Dresden with their newborn daughter. The landlady's daughter, Matryona, is modelled on the girl whom Stavrogin confesses to have molested in the aforementioned excised chapter of *Demons*, "At Tikhon's." And the text which Dostoevsky produces at the end of *Master* is, furthermore, reminiscent of this confession, sharing with it a similar constellation of characters (middle-aged landlady, her daughter, and the male tenant and predator) as well as the themes of pedophilia and suicide.⁴ Coetzee's novel can thus be viewed as a finely woven tapestry of fiction and biography, facts and references, that blend and fuse.

In *Master*, ethical issues come to the fore. It is a novel that dramatizes "the clash between a politics that attempts to program the future and an ethics that attempts to do justice to the singularity of the other human being."⁵ Dostoevsky, in his encounters with the other characters, is perpetually confronted with doubts regarding the rightness of his actions toward others. Pavel's death begs the question, did Dostoevsky do right by his stepson? Or did he fail him, a failure that led to Pavel falling in with Nechaev's revolutionaries? A recurring theme in the novel is the relationship between parents and children. In what ways are parents responsible for the actions of their children? Or are children inevitably set on consuming and destroying their parents and all that they represent? The relationship with Anna Sergeevna and her daughter also forces Dostoevsky to consider what right he has to interfere with their life. His complex erotic connection with the mother spills over on Matryona, which leads Dostoevsky to contemplate what he in real life considered the most severe of all crimes – the corruption and destruction of a small child.⁶ As mentioned above, this will later be the crime which Stavrogin confesses to the monk Tikhon.

To complicate matters further, in *Master* Dostoevsky tries to understand the ideas and actions of Nechaev, the latter's utter contempt not only for the

³ J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Vintage, 1994), 17.

⁴ Mike Marais, "Places of Pigs: The Tension Between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 3, no. 1 (March 1 1996): 88n14, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1177/002198949603100107>.

⁵ Attridge 1994, 119.

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values of the older generations, but for all values. For Nechaev, the end, the razing of the old order instated and upheld by the fathers, justifies any means. His denial of any ethical stance forces Dostoevsky to face the larger social and political ills and injustices of nineteenth-century Russia. Is it, perhaps, not Nechaev that has been possessed by the destructive spirit of revolution? Is it society itself that is possessed and diseased? From where does this spirit come? How is responsible for its existence?

The above ethical issues facing Dostoevsky in *Master* are also connected with what may be called an ethics of writing and reading. As mentioned above, the events in the novel ultimately result in the writing of *Demons*. What, then, are the ethical implications of aesthetics? Of creative work? What responsibility does the writer have when turning people in the creative act into aesthetic objects? How does the consciousness of the self, the author, relate to the creation of the hero, the other? How does literature affect the reader? And to what extent is the writer responsible for these affects? What are the tangents between ethics and aesthetics?

Dostoevsky in *Master* is constantly struggling to decipher and negotiate the many complexities that ensue when he faces the other. The ethical issues, for him as a writer and as a person, can therefore be described in terms of self and other – the ethical demands upon the self when facing alterity: to what extent are we responsible for others? For others' actions? In *Master*, Coetzee superimposes the ethical issues he explored in his earlier work, such as the experiences of apartheid-era South Africa, with its politically enforced segregation of people into “a society of masters and slaves,”⁷ onto Dostoevsky's society of political, social, and economic inequities. Coetzee thus directs his Dostoevsky to consider the “deformed and stunted relations between human beings” and how they result “in a deformed and stunted inner life.”⁸ Dostoevsky is then, as life is willed into art, faced with the writer's complicity in a literature that can be said to “suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity”⁹ as the life which surrounds him. This leads to the central question: how, in a society that debases and do violence to people, can a truly human literature be created, if at all? And is it possible to write, to represent, without simply reproducing and replicating the injustices and violence that imbue society? With Coetzee's invocation of spirits and ghosts in *Master*, this the writer's ultimate conundrum can be aptly described with Coetzee's own words: “[h]ow do we get from our world of violent phantasms to a true living world?”¹⁰ It is complex questions such as these that *Master* turns to, time and again, and which I will focus on in the following analysis.

⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 96.

⁸ Coetzee 1992, 98.

⁹ Coetzee 1992, 98.

¹⁰ Coetzee 1992, 98.

Coetzeean Ethics

Coetzee's longstanding interest in ethics is reflected by the vast body of critical and scholarly work devoted to the issue.¹¹ The following discussion of various aspects of Coetzee's view on ethics will focus foremost on those aspects which have direct bearing on *Master*. These include the role of reason in ethical choices, how ethics relate to politics, the ethical demand invoked by the presence of the other, our responsibility for the other, and how the writer can be said to be complicit with that which she represents.

Reason and Experience

Central for understanding Coetzeean ethics is his skepticism toward reason and the supposition that ethical choices are grounded in reasoned thinking. As Derek Attridge puts it, Coetzee's stand on reason underscores "the total irrelevance of the faculty of reason to the ethical domain."¹² Ethics for Coetzee are prerational, deriving from desires, feeling, and instincts. Rational ethics only comes into play afterwards "to articulate and give form to ethical impulses." These impulses, however arbitrary they might seem, are not random; on the contrary, they originate from our life experiences and our deliberations of these experiences.¹³ Coetzee's disdain of rational models for explaining ethical decision-making stems from what he perceives as the inability of rational thinking to encapsulate the complexities of lived human experience.¹⁴ To subject ethics to rational thinking runs the risk of rendering ethical choices void, as it turns ethics into a rational weighing of benefits and losses, into calculus.¹⁵

Coetzee terms his alternative to rational ethics "an ethics of the appeal." In "The Old Woman and the Cats," this ethics and its impulsive, non-rational

¹¹ To mention but a few studies and anthologies that focus exclusively or partly on the ethical aspects of Coetzee's work: *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004); *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (2010); *The Ethics of Exile: Colonialism in the Fictions of Charles Brockden Brown and J. M. Coetzee* (2005); *J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* (2017); *Cosmopolitan Fictions: Ethics, Politics, and Global Change in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and J. M. Coetzee*; *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression: A Reconsideration of Metalepsis* (2017); *Writing in Crisis: Ethics and History in Gordimer, Ndebele and Coetzee* (2004); and *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Power* (2016).

¹² Derek Attridge, "'A Yes without a No': Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction," in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105.

¹³ Attridge 2017, 105.

¹⁴ Attridge 2017, 98.

¹⁵ Attridge 2017, 94.

aspects are clearly delineated by the protagonist Elizabeth Costello.¹⁶ When her son John, who is visiting his mother in Spain, complains of the many cats that roam her house, Costello explains her choice to take in the cats not as a rational decision, but as an ethical impulse:

That was when I made my decision. It came in a flash. It did not require any calculation, any weighing up of pluses and minuses. I decided that in the matter of the cats I would turn my back on my tribe – the tribe of the hunters – and side with the tribe of the hunted. No matter the cost.

What underlies her succor is the interpellation of the other, in this case a starving cat. Facing the other, seeing the other, an ethical demand is put on Costello, which she experiences as an appeal: “The cat in the culvert made an appeal to me, and I responded.” Her response is unmediated, “without question, without referring to a moral calculus.” She disregards the prize she pays for responding to the other’s need as well as any potentially negative outcomes of her choice.

A similar event of ethical appeal and demand from the other is experienced by Dostoevsky in *Master*. Apparently expecting in some unclear way the return of his now deceased stepson Pavel, perhaps reincarnated in another person or in an animal, Dostoevsky feels an ethical imperative similar to Costello’s, a responsibility which transcends reason. (Attridge refers to Dostoevsky’s unnamed waiting or expecting of Pavel as a “Beckettian situation.”¹⁷) Nevertheless, Dostoevsky attempts to stave off the enormous ethical responsibility which Pavel’s death appears to place upon him. To do so, he utilizes reason: “Why me? he thinks as he hurries away [from a dog chained to a drainpipe which he has chosen not to let free]. Why should I bear all the world’s burden?”¹⁸ Of course, to carry the weight of the world is an unreasonable demand, irrational even. But reason fails him; his responsibility for Pavel is absolute, in life as in death:

It is no good. His reasoning – specious, contemptible – does not for one moment take him in. Pavel’s death does not belong to Pavel – that is just a trick of language. As long as he is here, Pavel’s death is his death. Wherever he goes he bears Pavel with him, like a baby blue with cold [...].¹⁹

If Dostoevsky was in life absolutely responsible for Pavel, then it follows that he is equally responsible for him in death. Not even this finality can sever the ties that bind father to son: “He feels the cord that goes from his heart to his

¹⁶ I am here greatly indebted to Attridge’s succinct reading in “‘A Yes without a No’” of Coetzee’s work regarding the ethical stance the latter takes up in his novels.

¹⁷ Attridge 1994, 120.

¹⁸ Coetzee 1994, 21.

¹⁹ Coetzee 1994, 81.

son's as physically as if it were a rope. He feels the rope twist and wring his heart."²⁰ It is for the father to acknowledge that his dead child is "above all lonely, and in his loneliness needs to be sung to and comforted, to be reassured that he will not be abandoned at the bottom of the waters."²¹ Furthermore, the fact that Pavel is dead leads Dostoevsky to the conclusion that he must transcend his own base self. With Pavel," the lost child calling from the dark stream,"²² Dostoevsky must not fail his dead son: "I don't want Pavel to be ashamed of his father, now that he sees everything. That is what has changed: there is a measure to all things now, including the truth, and that measure is Pavel."²³

Dostoevsky thus feels an exigent duty to protect Pavel, perhaps even more so in death. Imagining Pavel falling to his death, Dostoevsky desperately wishes to protect his son from realizing and facing the finality of his own death: "It is from knowing that he [Pavel] is dead that he wants to protect his son. As long as I live, let me be the one who knows! By whatever act of will it takes, let me be the thinking animal plunging through the air."²⁴ As Pavel is lost to him in death, lost "at the bottom of the waters,"²⁵ Dostoevsky must somehow anticipate Pavel's return:

Because it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the this, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect.²⁶

Thus, his responsibility for Pavel becomes a responsibility for all humanity.²⁷ In order not to fail Pavel in the event of his return, Dostoevsky therefore must heed any appeal, leading him to an insight similar to Costellos's above:

It is not my son, it is just a dog, he protests. What is it to me? Yet even as he protests he knows the answer. Pavel will not be saved till he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought the least thing, the beggar men and the

²⁰ Coetzee 1994, 23.

²¹ Coetzee 1994, 111.

²² Coetzee 1994, 235.

²³ Coetzee 1994, 167.

²⁴ Coetzee 1994, 21.

²⁵ Coetzee 1994, 111.

²⁶ Coetzee 1994, 80.

²⁷ Mike Marais has also noted this passage in *Master* and its connection to both Levinas and Derrida, terming it the "aporetic nature of infinite responsibility." Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Brill | Rodopi, 2009), 137-138.

beggar women too, and much else he does not know of, and even then there will be no certainty.²⁸

Dostoevsky's reflection on the ethical demand he experiences vis-à-vis Pavel mirrors a similar reaction in Costello:

At the border of being – this is how I imagine it – there are all these small souls, cat souls, mouse souls, bird souls, souls of unborn children, crowded together, pleading to be let in. And I want to let them in, all of them, even if it is only for a day or two, even if only so that they can have a quick look at this beautiful world of ours. Because who am I to deny them their chance of incarnation?

As Attridge notes, what Costello defends is a notion of the right to life formulated as a right to come into existence.²⁹ In *Master*, Dostoevsky makes a similar assertion, but this time it is the right to life considered in terms of the right to resurrect – the right of the dead child to live again. From this follows that ethics for Coetzee precedes ontology; our responsibility for the other transcends being itself. Experiences such as Costello's and Dostoevsky's – non-rational responses to the appeal and ethical demand of the other – thus occupy a central place in Coetzee's view on ethics.

Coetzee's view of ethics as originating not from reason but through ethical impulses thus entails a certain, non-rational form of responsibility for the other. This sense of responsibility is an overall concern in the writer's work, one which connects him not only with Dostoevsky, but also Emmanuel Levinas, who took great inspiration in his own philosophy from Dostoevsky's ethical outlook, to which we will turn next.

Coetzee, Dostoevsky, and Levinas

Coetzee's ethical view, as outlined above, aligns him with French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to whom Coetzee has made references both implicitly in his fiction but also in essays.³⁰ Levinas was influenced in his phenomenological works on ethics by the Dostoevskian maxim expressed by Zosima's brother Markel in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Levinas often quoted:³¹ “each one of us is guilty before everyone for everything, and I most of all.”³²

²⁸ Coetzee 1994, 82.

²⁹ Attridge 2017, 95.

³⁰ Attridge 2017, 91-92.

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³² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. T. 14, Bratia Karamazovy: knigi i-x* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. Ignat Avsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 360. I have amended Avsey's translation to better reflect the ethical implication of Markel's insight into our ethical responsibility for the other. Rather than translating the Russian original “vo vsem” as “for everything,” Avsey opts here for a religious variant – “the other's sin.”

The word guilty (vinovat) can here be understood in terms of responsibility—an ethical demand which we cannot evade or leave unanswered.³³ This appeal became central to Levinas's own ethics, which serves as a bridge between Coetzee and Dostoevsky. To understand how they are interlinked, and how they come to bear on the following interpretation of ethical issues in *Master*, I will next outline briefly some of the most pertinent aspect of Levinasian ethics.

For Levinas, alterity was of outmost and fundamental importance. To face the other, not as an alter ego, but as truly other is one of the cornerstones of his ethics. In fact, it is from this relation to alterity that Levinas's main criticism of his predecessors and main influences, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, stems. For Levinas, traditional ontological theories are reductive in their view on alterity. Traditional ethics in philosophical thought view the relation of the I in relation to self as the primary ontological relation - a form of egoism prioritized over the alterity of the other.³⁴ Hence, I envelope the other rather than recognizing her on her own terms; the other is reduced "to a mere object to be subsumed under one of my categories and given a place in the word."³⁵ What transpires is a subjectivity that "takes its own interiority for the totality of being."³⁶ The I and being itself thus compromises a totality, a closing in of everything:

The term of this movement, the elsewhere or the other, is called other in an eminent sense. No journey, no change of climate or of scenery could satisfy the desire bent toward it. The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this "I:" that "other." I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor.³⁷

What Levinas took issue with was this totalizing view of being and of subjectivity espoused by other philosophers; to him, phenomenology, locked as it were in egoism, lacked an ethical direction, a flaw which Levinas in his work sought to rectify.

³³ Steven Shankman, "God, Ethics, and the Novel: Dostoevsky and Vasily Grossman," *Neohelicon* 42, no. 2 (December 2015): 374, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1007/s11059-014-0281-6>.

³⁴ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London, Routledge, 2000), 320-321.

³⁵ John Wild, introduction to *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, by Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991)

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991a), 180.

³⁷ Levinas 1991a, 33.

The solution, in Levinas's view, was a non-rational, true acknowledgment of alterity, and of the relation between the I and the other which did not exclusively privilege the former. As John Wild formulates it in his introduction to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité, 1961)*:

The basic difference is between a mode of thought which tries to gather all things around the mind, or self, of the thinker, and an externally oriented mode which attempts to penetrate [*sic*] into what is radically other than the mind that is thinking it. This difference emerges with peculiar clarity in the case of my meeting with the other person. I may either decide to remain within myself, assimilating the other and trying to make use of him, or I may take the risk of going out of my way and trying to speak and to give to him.³⁸

When confronted with the other, which Levinas describes as an “epiphany of exteriority,” I open up myself to the infinity of the other.³⁹ In acknowledging the other, what Levinas terms “the placing in me of the idea of the infinity,” I break with the totality of self and being.⁴⁰ Levinasian epiphany, as we can see, resembles Coetzee's conceptualization of conversion.

The only way to open up for the infinity of the other is through communication. Only by means of dialogue can I exist with the other without effacing her.⁴¹ Dialogue, or conversation, maintains the proper distance between me and the other. By engaging in dialogue with the other we receive from each other more than we are. This is what Levinas refers to as teaching – a form of surplus that is transferred from the exteriority of the other to the interiority of the self. In receiving the other, I receive more than I am:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [enseignement]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced.

The other is always more than I can fully comprehend. This notion of the other as something that “overflows” my conception of her is what Levinas calls the face:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under

³⁸ Wild, 16.

³⁹ Levinas 1991a, 180.

⁴⁰ Levinas 1991a, 180.

⁴¹ Wild, 14.

my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *idea-tum* – the adequate idea.

If I am unwilling or unable to face the other, I will only be able to contain her in a partial image that I have created, what Levinas above calls theme. That is, to face the other is to avoid totalizing and reducing her. By entering into dialogue, I provide her with my exterior perspective of her as a gift.

This leads us, finally, to responsibility, a responsibility very much aligned with the Coetzeean one outlined above. Responsibility in Levinas is difficult to explain because of its non-rational foundation. In his translator's introduction to Levinas's *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 1974), Alphonso Lingis describes Levinas's understanding of responsibility as "transcendental and bizarre," expressed in terms "strange, nonobjective and non-ontic, but also non-ontological."⁴² Responsibility is something intangible, transcendent, precedent to being, and absolute. It is, Levinas, argues, located beyond me, transcendent vis-à-vis my interiority:

The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity. where the privilege of the question "Where?" no longer holds.⁴³

Responsibility can never, according to Levinas, start from the I. If I were to assume responsibility, to will it forth so to speak, I would only subject it to my own self. To do so would be, once again, to subsume responsibility and reduce it to an object whose only relation in the world is to myself. Thus, responsibility always begins with the other, or, more precisely, with the face of the other. Responsibility therefore does not emanate from me; its existence is harbored within the other, sheltered there in an infinity which the face only suggests: "The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone. Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain."⁴⁴ This calling out to occurs in the meeting with the other – the face-to-face. This is what

⁴² Alphonso Lingis, introduction to *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, by Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), xii.

⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 10.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 104.

Coetzee above described as a conversion experience and which Levinas in similar terms denotes an epiphany – the face revealing itself:

The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons. This movement proceeds from the other. The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation. Thus a structure analogous to the ontological argument is here produced: the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence. But what is produced here is not a reasoning, but the epiphany that occurs as a face.⁴⁵

WHY IS LEVINAS IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSTANDING COETZEE IN RELATION TO DOSTOEVSKY: WHAT CAN WE UNDERSTAND IN *MASTER* ABOUT DOSTOEVSKY VIA LEVINAS?

Ethics of Writing and Reading

A recurring theme in *Master* revolves around the acts of reading and writing. These acts, however, are processes fraught with numerous difficulties. How to read and how to write, what it entails, its dangers and costs, are central to both the novel's narrative and to the text that emerges at its end – the first albeit fictional seed to Dostoevsky's own *Demons*. In this section I will outline Coetzee's view on literature, its ties to alterity and ethics, and consider their larger significance for discussing Dostoevsky in *Master* and **Dostoevskian ethics in general**.

As a white South-African writer who began publishing novels during the apartheid era, Coetzee has, time and again, returned to issues of complicity in his work. That is, how can a writer, caught “in a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence,”⁴⁶ ply her trade without replicating and perpetuating the violence that surrounds her? How can the writer, under such circumstances of violence, produce a “fully human literature”?⁴⁷

Although any comparison between apartheid-era South Africa and Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century Russia reveals large discrepancies, there are also distinct overlaps: the existence of an oppressive and violent state; the radical division of people into castes; the opposition between a smaller well-to-do elite and the poor majority; and the perpetuation of state and oppositional violence. It is significant that *Master* is Coetzee's first novel after the abolition of apartheid and also his first novel set outside of South Africa that does not

⁴⁵ Levinas 1991a, 196.

⁴⁶ Coetzee 1992, 98.

⁴⁷ Coetzee 1992, 98.

engage with colonial or postcolonial themes.⁴⁸ It allows him to consider in *Master* issues of literature and ethics which he had already addressed in his earlier novels, from his debut *Dusklands* (1974) up until *Age of Iron* (1990), but now in a radically different context.

Writers in Coetzee's work are never granted any distance in their relation vis-à-vis reality. In a society mired in violence, where violence so to speak has become ingrained and systemic, culture as a whole comes to reflect this spiritual poverty, including works of art. Coetzee writes:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity.⁴⁹

Underpinning Coetzee's rather despairing outlook on South African literature, including his own, is therefore a refusal to grant the writer a privileged access to truth or higher values. There is no vantagepoint from which the writer can stay aloof in relation to that which she represents; the writer is not a prophet accorded privileged access to higher values.⁵⁰ Such complicity is dramatized in *Master*, with "its thematization of the inevitable implication of literature in relations of power which determine their social context in which it is produced."⁵¹ Thus, writing itself is portrayed by Coetzee as deformed.⁵²

In his analysis of *Master*, Patrick Hayes writes: "Coetzee portrays Dostoevsky as often blind to his own motives, possessed of the most contemptible desires, and deeply implicated, in ways he can barely fathom, in political systems he can little comprehend [...]." Hayes, I believe, overstates the point somewhat. Dostoevsky is not oblivious to his own self or his society; he is constantly scrutinizing himself and his surroundings. What he lacks is, rather, the necessary but impossible distance to people, places, and events. Still, Hayes is surely right in his assessment that Dostoevsky's position in the novel is, indeed, one of "weakness and [...] vulnerability to hostile interpretation."⁵³ That is, these interpretations, how characters in *Master*, not only Dostoevsky, perceive one another, may at every moment turn into forms of violence, physical or psychological, that they exercise toward each other.

⁴⁸ While *Foe* (1986) is partly set in England, it is in its postcolonial critique nevertheless closer to Coetzee's earlier novels set in South Africa. *Master* differs therefore drastically from his previous novels, regarding both time and setting.

⁴⁹ Coetzee 1992, 98.

⁵⁰ Hayes, 167.

⁵¹ Marais 1996, 83.

⁵² Marais 1996, 86.

⁵³ Hayes, 193.

In what, then, does the writer's complicity consist? Coetzee has continually been the target of criticism in South Africa. His unwillingness to tackle head on the most pressing issues of the day, to represent the political inequities which plagued the country especially during the apartheid-era, has been seen as a betrayal of his duty as a writer; he has been "seen to have abnegated his social responsibility by failing to respond to the suffering of his fellow human beings in his time and context. On a fundamental level, according to this line of thinking, Coetzee is guilty of a lack of respect of the other person."⁵⁴

But where his critics find in his work a lack of commitment to representing and censuring violence and repression, Coetzee sees a more fundamental problem inherent in the creative process itself. The writer, Coetzee argues in the essay "The Novel Today," is caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of two modes of writing. The writer can opt for a writing that supplements history, adds more truth to truth which is already "too much truth,"⁵⁵ by "depending on the model for history."⁵⁶ Such writing, for Coetzee, merely replicates that which it seeks to abrogate. It is a mode of writing in which indignation of violence and oppression can turn into fascination and fetishization – representation as indistinguishable from replication. In fact, as Coetzee argues in an essay on torture and its representation, "Into the Dark Chamber," this fascination for the dehumanization of the torture chamber is intimately linked to fiction writing itself. The impetus underlying writing is, Coetzee maintains, the quest for representing that which lies beyond, that which beckons. The writer "is a person who, camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban, creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be."⁵⁷ Thus, the titular chamber of the essay, from which the writer is barred, is "the origin of novelistic fantasy per se."⁵⁸ In erecting torture chambers, in its dehumanizing work, the state therefore creates a scenario that mirrors the essential work of fiction writing – the peering into "the dark forbidden chamber."⁵⁹

But if the state in this manner provides the writer with material, then it may be argued that the writer becomes somehow complicit in the acts of violence themselves; they serve as the raw material without which this literature would not exist. The writer, so to speak, "follow[s] the state in this way, making its vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy." Hence, the very reasons for representing violence can too easily turn opaque and suspect, which in turn compromises the desire that underlies the creation of the fictional work. As Coetzee

⁵⁴ Mike Marais, "Death and the Space of the Response of the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 84.

⁵⁵ Coetzee 1992, 99.

⁵⁶ "The Novel Today"

⁵⁷ Coetzee 1992, 364.

⁵⁸ Coetzee 1992, 364.

⁵⁹ Coetzee 1992, 364.

writes: “If the novelist finds in squalor the occasion of his most soaring poetic eloquence, might he not be guilty of seeking out his squalid subject matter for perversely literary reasons?” In *Master*, Coetzee turns to this issue on numerous occasions, for instance in Dostoevsky’s interest in representations of violence, rape, and child abuse.⁶⁰

What Coetzee highlights, then, is the veritable minefield facing the writer who feels compelled to represent the horrors of the dark chamber. As he explicitly states, his contention is not that the writer should avert her eyes from violence, but that there must exist another form of writing, one less complicit. A mode of writing in which the writer does “*not* allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them.” This countering form of writing is a writing that “rivals” history; it is a writing that aims to “occupy an autonomous place” exterior to history. Such a position would not be reducible to “looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall or turning one’s eyes away.”⁶¹ Nor would it entail the writer’s “looking on,” which is the apparent danger in the presence of the torture chamber, when there is “too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination.”⁶² Hence, the writer’s task is “how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms.”⁶³ That is, the responsibility of the writer rests in her ability to be open to alterity, to the other, to the appeal of the other.

I will argue in the following analysis of *Master* that these issues regarding literature and complicity are particularly pertinent in regards to Dostoevsky. With Dostoevsky’s *Demons* as its primary intertext, *Master* raises questions of Dostoevsky’s own responsibility as a writer, and of his complicity in the violence of his time. That is, I will contend that the difficulty of facing the other’s alterity, of remaining open to the other’s voice and face, are crucial aesthetic and ethical issues that are central to both Coetzee’s and Dostoevsky’s work.

⁶⁰ Mikhailovsky?

⁶¹ Coetzee 1992, 368.

⁶² Coetzee 1992, 99.

⁶³ Coetzee 1992, 364.

The Master of Petersburg (1994)

Finding Pavel

The first instance of alterity that Dostoevsky faces in *Master*, which also serves as the catalyst for the novel's plot, is Pavel and his death. Pavel's otherness, however, plays out on several different levels. His death makes him other vis-à-vis life itself, to time and to history, and creates a chasm between his world and Dostoevsky's. This is the gulf which Dostoevsky seeks to bridge in the novel. Pavel's alterity consists also in the fact that he has led an ulterior existence as a revolutionary, a life whose secrets have remained hidden from Dostoevsky. Pavel's alterity, to which Dostoevsky is bound through infinite responsibility, can therefore be seen as his foremost duty. Coetzee's dramatization of alterity in *Master* reads as an exploration of Levinas's ethics pushed to the very limits of human existence.

Dostoevsky's need to succor his son in death, to heed Pavel's call, is expressed in non-rational, even mystical acts of conjuring, exorcism, visions, and dreams. Through these acts, Dostoevsky calls fourth the spirit of his dead son and attempts to conjure him from beyond, as if persuading him to return to him. When he first visits Pavel's room, he tries to find his son in the phenomenal traces Pavel left behind: "Faintly the smell of his son comes to him. He breathes in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering me."⁶⁴

It is via language that Dostoevsky attempts to reach Pavel in death. His deployment of language attests to a deeper belief in the transcendent qualities of language: "He is trying to cast a spell. But over whom: over a ghost or himself? [...] When death cuts all other links, there remains still the name. Baptism: the union of a soul with a name, the name it will carry into eternity."⁶⁵ If Pavel is to be resurrected, Dostoevsky will have to find the right words. In Levinasian fashion, Dostoevsky attempts to break his own totality and connect with the infinity that is Pavel's alterity. His longing for Pavel can indeed be described as a "metaphysical desire [that] tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*."⁶⁶ Indeed, the fact that Pavel now in death is "the lost child calling from the dark stream," which clearly has not affected Dostoevsky's feelings of responsibility or even love toward his stepson, will

⁶⁴ Coetzee 1994, 3-4.

⁶⁵ Coetzee 1994, 5.

⁶⁶ Levinas 1991a, 33.

only serve to increase their bond: “Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of a relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.”⁶⁷ Pavel’s non-being appears to fuel Dostoevsky’s love and desire for him, perhaps even more so than when Pavel was still alive.

Dostoevsky makes numerous such attempts at finding language, to establish what Levinas cryptically calls a “distance in depth – that of conversation, of goodness, of Desire.” According to Levinas, this distance is necessary for retaining an ethically balanced contradistinction between I and other. However, to address Pavel’s alterity and to do so on Pavel’s own terms, Dostoevsky needs “the true words”:

Here and now he does not have the words. Perhaps – he has an intimation – they may be waiting for him in one of the old ballads. But the ballad is in no book: it is somewhere in the breast of the Russian people, where he cannot reach it. Or perhaps in the breast of a child.⁶⁸

His landlady Anna Sergeyevna ascribes to him the privileged role of writer, the sorcerer supreme of language, who has the power to resurrect his dead son. Dostoevsky, however, objects, echoing Coetzee’s skepticism of apotheosizing the writer: “‘I am far from being a master,’ he says. ‘There is a crack running through me. What can one do with a cracked bell? A cracked bell cannot be mended.’”

Since Pavel is dead, lost “at the bottom of the waters,”⁶⁹ Dostoevsky often finds himself speaking in the wrong medium. In a dream, he swims underwater, feeling “like a turtle, a great old turtle.” But as he calls out, presumably to beckon Pavel, his voice is lost: “With each cry or call water enters his mouth: each syllable is replaced with a syllable of water.”⁷⁰

However, it is not only the immense difficulty in finding the true words that hampers Dostoevsky; he is also wavering in his intentions toward Pavel, toward his other: “From his turtle-throat he gives a last cry which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to kiss the face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting.”⁷¹ **The vacillation experienced here by Dostoevsky will be a recurring theme. On the one hand, Dostoevsky wants to protect Pavel, protect the child. On the other hand, there are several references to Herod.** The turtle and tortoise metaphor recurs again later, this time to accentuate the precariousness in apotheosizing the writer:

⁶⁷ Levinas 1991a, 34.

⁶⁸ Coetzee 1994, 111.

⁶⁹ Coetzee 1994, 111.

⁷⁰ Coetzee 1994, 17.

⁷¹ Coetzee 1994, 18.

The task left to me: to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts. Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be. And the truth? Stiff shoulders humped over the writing-table, and the ache of a heart to slow to move. A tortoise heart.⁷²

In the “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,” Coetzee ascribes a similar slowness to the South-African writer. Due to her slow tortoise heart, the writer, Coetzee suggests, will always be “too slow” to have any lasting impact on “the life of the community of the course of history.”⁷³ This is not to say that the writer’s arduous work is meaningless; rather, the writer must attempt to engage with alterity of history – be it the hope of a better future free of violence and oppression. But she must do so knowing full well that hers is a tortoise heart that cannot outrace history.

Reading as Demon-Possession, Writing as Acid

As discussed above, acts of literature, writing and reading, in Coetzee’s work are fraught with risks and costs. In fact, writing does not materialize properly in *Master* until the last chapter, “Stavrogin.” Literature, as with language in general, becomes an attempt to reach beyond, to an alterity that transcends historical circumstances, with the responsibilities such acts entail. However, as mentioned earlier, in a Coetzeean work of fiction, any such act comes with ethical demands and aesthetical pitfalls.

Reading in *Master* is a powerful and difficult act. In a vision he has of Petersburg, Dostoevsky tries to decipher its meaning, but fails: “Written in a scroll across the heavens is a word in Hebrew characters. He cannot read the word but knows it is a condemnation, a curse.”⁷⁴ In his first meeting with Maximov, the police Councillor, they enter into a debate about how to read, and what reading entails. Maximov, who is in possession of Pavel’s personal papers, due to the latter’s involvement with Nechaev, reads from one of Pavel’s stories. The Councillor is especially interested in a murder perpetrated by Pavel’s young hero, who bludgeons to death a certain Karamzin, a landowner whose name is reminiscent of Karamazov, with an axe, much like Raskolnikov. The axe, Pavel asserts in the story, is symbolically important as “it is the weapon of the Russian people, our means of defence and our means of revenge.”⁷⁵ Maximov reads the story literally, implying that Pavel’s story is directly connected to the revolutionary movement with which he had become entangled. Dostoevsky is appalled by Maximov’s reading: “Do you really intend to construe this sotry as evidence against my son – a story, a fantasy,

⁷² Coetzee 1994, 152-153.

⁷³ Coetzee 1992, 98-99.

⁷⁴ Coetzee 1994, 19.

⁷⁵ Coetzee 1994, 41.

written in the privacy of his room?"⁷⁶ What Dostoevsky objects to is the instrumental view on literature that Maximov appears to espouse; an understanding of literature, of reading and writing, as a tool which directly affects the world. For Dostoevsky, however, such an instrumental stance on literature is thoroughly illegitimate. How literature engages with and intersects with the world in which it is produced and consumed are considerably more complex: "Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering."⁷⁷ Hence, Dostoevsky does not reject literature's involvement in political or social contexts per se, but he rejects any simple casuistry between them and our acts of reading and writing. If reading is the arm, the axe, and the skull that receives the blow simultaneously, then it follows that there is a linkage of complicity which is shared by reader and writer. SINGULARITY OF LITERATURE

Likewise, writing too becomes the calling back of the dead; a resurrection act that will bring Pavel back to Dostoevsky: "Poetry might bring him back his son." But Dostoevsky, in his own view, doesn't have the requisite mastery to do so: "But he is not a poet: more like a dog that has lost its bone, scratching here, scratching there."⁷⁸ The words that he seeks, the "true words" with which Pavel can be brought back from death, are barred from him; they reside "in one of the ballads." But he cannot access this song; "it is somewhere in the breast of the Russian people, where he cannot reach it. Or perhaps in the breast of a child."⁷⁹

Nechaev and the Gadarene Swine

PIGS: THE ARGUMENT THAT COETZEE DRAMATIZES THE CHOICE BETWEEN STATE OPPRESSION AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE: CONNECT WITH FOUCAULT QUOTE FROM POWER/KNOWLEDGE: "the State consists in the codification of a whole number of power relations which render its functioning possible, and... revolution is a different type of codification of the same relations" (122); CONSIDER FOUCAULTS ANTI-AUTHORITY STANCE ((FOUCAULT/MILLS, 38)

INCRIMINATING DOCUMENTS

⁷⁶ Coetzee 1994, 42.

⁷⁷ Coetzee 1994, 47.

⁷⁸ Coetzee 1994, 17.

⁷⁹ Coetzee 1994, 111.

In *Master*, Sergei Nechaev serves an important inter- and extratextual link. Modeled closely on Piotr Verkhovensky, Nechaev is both the nihilistic antagonist who sees people as expendable means to a violent end and the catalyst for the novel that Dostoevsky begins work on in *Master*'s final chapter, "Stavrogin." But in order to understand how Coetzee examines revolutionary terrorism and violence in the novel, it is necessary to first examine the metaphors that Coetzee applies to Nechaev and the People's Vengeance.

It is in his dialogue with Maximov that Dostoevsky espouses the view of Nechaev as housing a spirit – the spirit of Nechaevism:

'Into this unlikely vehicle, however, there has entered a spirit. It is a dull, resentful, and murderous spirit. Why has it elected to reside in this particular young man? I don't know. Perhaps because it finds him an easy host to go out from and come home to. But it is because of the spirit inside him that Nechaev has followers. They follow the spirit, not the man.'⁸⁰

DOSTOEVSKY'S ARGUMENT, HIS CLAIM THAT THE POLICE WILL FAIL BECAUSE THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THE PHENOMENON – CLOSE TO FOUCAULTIAN CRITIQUE OF "ANTI-AUTHORITY STRUGGLES" IN THE SUBJECT AND POWER (ARTICLE): "the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much such and such an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power"; THIS IS WHAT MAXIMOV CHASES

Maximov both objects to and agrees with Dostoevsky's contention that the Nechaevites are possessed. First, he makes a semantic adjustment to Dostoevsky's choice of words: "You say we should not lock Nechaev up because he is possessed by a demon (shall we call it a demon? – *spirit* strikes a false note, I would say)."⁸¹ While he concedes that battling these revolutionaries "is indeed like fighting demons," he argues that the phenomenon of revolutionary violence is related to the perennial antagonism between fathers and sons (a reference to Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (*Otsy i deti*, 1862)).⁸² To support this claim, he refers to the Decembrists and then Dostoevsky's own revolutionary circle, the Petrashevtsy, who, Maximov argues, have grown older and wiser: "whatever demons were in possession of them took flight years ago."⁸³

Later, the demon metaphor is fused with a pig or swine metaphor. In his description of Katri, one of Nechaev's associates, Dostoevsky makes the following observation: "She is right, he thinks: one could take her for a child; but a

⁸⁰ Coetzee 1994, 44.

⁸¹ Coetzee 1994, 44.

⁸² Coetzee 1994, 45.

⁸³ Coetzee 1994, 45.

child in the grip of a devil nevertheless. The devil inside her twitching, skipping, unable to keep still.” And then: “He opens the door and motions her out. As she leaves, she deliberately knocks against him. It is like being bumped by a pig.” Nechaev is then described as “[a] piper with a troop of swine dancing at his heels,” with Katri “the swine-girl” among them.⁸⁴

As the novel draws to a close, Dostoevsky still tries to commune with Pavel. Or rather, he begs Pavel to save him, but he is given no quarter, and Pavel stays away: “He is tumbling. *Pavel!* he whispers, trying to recover himself. But Pavel has let go of his hand; Pavel will not save him.” In Pavel’s stead, Dostoevsky senses another presence: “He is not alone. But the presence he feels in the room is not that of his son. It is that of a thousand petty demons, swarming in the air like locusts let out of the jar.” It is telling that the demons, the spirits of revolutionary retribution and vengeance, besiege him right before he commences work on *Demons*. The implication is clear: if nihilists and other revolutionaries are possessed by demons, then these unclean spirits may also enter the writer, who will in turn invest his writing with “vileness, obscenity,” “an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it.”⁸⁵

The intertextual demon avatars to those found in *Master* is not only the titular ones in *Demons*; rather, they find their allegorical home in the Bible paragraph that Dostoevsky affixed to his novel. In this story, which Dostoevsky cites from Luke 8:32-36, Christ expels the devils who reside within a sick man. Exorcized, the devils then enter a herd of swine that in turn stampede into a lake and drown.⁸⁶ In his article on *Master*, Mike Marais reads the swine metaphor as a reflection of the “condition of writing in a politically-fraught social context.” The overarching question raised in the novels is therefore, how is the writer to “transcend[...] the stultifying politics of [her] social context?” In *Demons*, Dostoevsky utilizes the swine metaphor in order to explore and ultimately denounce the nihilists. The novel thus “generates a series of analogies which suggests that Russia is a ‘sick man’ possessed by devils, and that the swine which the devils enter upon being exorcized are the revolutionaries.”

⁸⁴ Coetzee 1994, 217.

⁸⁵ Coetzee 1994, 18.

⁸⁶ “And there was there an herd of many swine feeding on the mountain: and they besought him that he would suffer them to enter into them. And he suffered them. Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked. When they that fed [them] saw what was done, they fled, and went and told [it] in the city and in the country. Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid. The also which saw [it] told them by what means he that was possessed of the devils was healed.” Luke 8:32-36 (Authorized King James Version).

However, as we saw above, Coetzee extends the application of the swine metaphor to include Dostoevsky himself.

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