

On the Distinctiveness of the Russian Novel:
The Brothers Karamazov and the English Tradition

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation takes as its starting point Leo Tolstoy's famous contention that the works of the Russian literary canon represent "deviation[s] from European forms." It is envisioned as a response to (or an elaboration upon) critical works that address the unique rise, formation, and poetics of the Russian novel, many of which are themselves responses (or Russian corollaries) to Ian Watt's study of the rise of the novel in England; and it functions similarly under the assumption that the singularity of the Russian novel is a product of various idiosyncrasies in the Russian cultural milieu. The project is structured as a comparative examination of two pairs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels from Russia and England, and as such it approaches the question of the Russian novel's distinctiveness in the form of a literary experiment. By engaging in close readings of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) alongside Mikhail Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* (*Prigozhaia povarikha*, 1770), and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), concentrating particularly on matters of formal design, corporeal integrity and vulnerability, and communal harmony and discord—and by understanding the English texts as a "control group" for an examination of the Russian deviation—it attempts to identify some of the distinctive features of the Russian realist novel. The largest portion of the dissertation is dedicated to *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I take as an emblematic work in a literary

canon that is distinguished by intimations that healing and recovery—as well as the coexistence of both personal freedom and communal rapport—are possible in the real world and in realist narrative.

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For my mother

Note on Translations

The translations of quotations taken from Russian works are my own, unless otherwise noted. For the quotations from *The Brothers Karamazov*, I have given citation information from the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30 tomakh* (abbreviated PSS in the parenthetical citations), as well as from Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's translation (abbreviated PV). Where it has been necessary to transliterate Russian, I have used the Library of Congress system without diacritical marks, although the names of well-known Russian writers are given in their more familiar forms (i.e., Dostoevsky rather than Dostoevskii).

Introduction

On the Distinctiveness of the Russian Novel

In 1868, Leo Tolstoy stated, famously, that Russian literature as a body of work represented a “deviation from European form,” and the distinctiveness of the Russian literary tradition is by now almost a commonplace notion among students of the Russian canon (PSS 16:7). As an aspect of a greater sense of cultural difference, and of a national self-conception whose various spokespeople have offered such concepts as “the Russian idea,” “the Russian point of view,” and the abstract noun “Russianness,” the imagined uniqueness of Russian literature often provokes heated discussion. Especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, critics’ perspectives often depended on their own ideological positioning: whether it was Virginia Woolf, for example, attempting to infuse her native tradition with the “seething whirlpools” she found in Dostoevsky (“The Russian Point of View” 178); or Henry James, positioning his own cerebral art in opposition to the passionate excesses of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy; or Russian readers of various persuasions (Slavophile, Westerner, Soviet) appropriating their national literature in the service of one ideology or another: the Russian canon has often been the object of both intense animus and affection, and it incites discussions that tend toward either extreme—a testament to both the vitality and the pitfalls of the debate.

But, though such conversations are unquestionably reductive, their fundamental essentialism is frequently mitigated by the specificity of the line of inquiry. Hence such articles as Donald Fanger’s “On the Russianness of the Russian Nineteenth-Century Novel” (which attempts to articulate what he calls the “formal eccentricity” of the Russian novel) (46) and more recently William Mills Todd III’s “The Ruse of the

Russian Novel” (which strives to locate the “institutional circumstances” of the Russian novel that distinguish it from the English, French, or American novel form) (403). Such critical investigations, carried out by Slavacists whose partisan enthusiasms are in no way disguised, nevertheless manage to give shape to readers’ intuitions about the distinctive offerings of the Russian literary heritage without relying on grandiosity or cliché.

As suggested by these titles, it is in the arena of the novel (and especially the nineteenth-century novel) that the Russian literary particularity is most frequently investigated. Tolstoy made his observation primarily in reference to works, such as Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, and of course his own *War and Peace*, which present themselves either implicitly or explicitly as subversions of the novel form. It does appear that it is in the novel in particular that the Russian deviation can be detected most distinctly. This can be explained partly by the fact that it was with the nineteenth-century novel that the Russians first entered the world literary scene, so that the novel became the space both for Russian writers’ attempts at self-definition against the backdrop of Western forms and for Western readers’ discovery of Russian literature. But it also, surely, has to do with the novel genre itself. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt located the birth of the novel within a complex of philosophical and socioeconomic developments taking place in early eighteenth-century England, associating traditional novelistic epistemology with the “individualism” ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment empiricism, the Puritan work ethic, scientific rationalism, and the rise of the urban middle class—cultural developments and new ways of thinking that, if they migrated to Russia at all, did not take firm root there. In the West, the nineteenth century also ushered in the naturalistic

and deflationary science of Charles Darwin, whose discoveries challenged all inherited notions, as he put it, of “morals and metaphysics” (quoted in Phillips 42) and whose evolutionary theory had an extremely fraught afterlife in Russia.¹ Indeed, it is not surprising that some of the more fervent celebrations of the “Russianness” of the Russian novel have been put forward by ideology-driven Soviet critics whose national pride rested on Russia’s imagined literary vanquishing of the West, although even pre-Soviet critics also understood the national literary uniqueness to be predicated in part on the absence of a Russian counterpart to the secularized Western bourgeoisie.²

¹ The influence of Darwin on the English novel in particular has been investigated most extensively by Gillian Beer (*Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*) and George Levine (*Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*), who both attribute the pessimism of the English novel to the suspicion, grounded in evolutionary theory, that, as Beer writes “the optimistic, 'progressive' reading of development can never expunge that other insistence that extinction is more probable than progress, that the individual life span is never a sufficient register for change or for the accomplishment of desire . . .” (6). Certainly, Defoe predates Darwin, and *On the Origin of Species* had not been published when Dickens wrote *Bleak House*. But, as Beer and others note, Darwin’s “plots” were circulating in the cultural milieu before Darwin himself codified them, and he had precursors (Malthus, Lamarck, etc.). In Russia, Darwin (who was published in Russian translation in 1864) was met with widely divergent reactions, embraced by some radical intellectuals (such as Dmitry Pisarev) and eschewed by Slavophiles like N. Ia. Danilovsky and Nikolai Strakhov (who claimed that Darwin’s theories bore “the moral stamp of the Englishman” [quoted in Todes 40]). (Dostoevsky also wrote about Darwin in an article in *Diary of a Writer* entitled “One of the Contemporaneous Falsehoods.”) Here, as throughout the dissertation, I am not claiming that all of Russian society eschewed or rebelled against Enlightenment and empiricist notions, or the emerging natural sciences and social philosophies that have been seen as playing such an important role in English novels; quite to the contrary, there was a flurry of interest in Darwin, Claude Bernard, Adam Smith, and the like, all of whom made their presence felt in various nineteenth-century Russian novels. In Russia, though, topics such as natural selection, hereditary determinism, and political economy were so hotly debated in part because they also, often, were met with such powerful resistance by the very same thinkers who were interested in defining and protecting notions of indigenous “Russianness,” and often these Western thinkers figure in Russian novels as the source of various social and narrative ills. (For more on Darwin in Russia, see Daniel P. Todes, *Darwin Without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*; Alexander Vucich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*; and Michael R. Katz, “Dostoevsky and Natural Science”).

² As B. Bursov wrote in 1967, “the superiority of the Russian novel in the course of world literature is indisputable” (338). See also N. Ya. Berkovsky, *O mirovom znachenii russkoi literatury* (1975); E.N. Kupreanova and G.P. Makogonenko, *Natsional’noe svoeobrazie russkoi literatury* (1976); and G.M. Friedlender, “Natsional’noe svoeobrazie i mirovoe znachenie russkogo romana” in *Istoriia russkogo romana v dvukh tomakh* (1962-4). A prominent pre-Soviet critic with essentially the same message was S.A. Vengerov; see his 1919 collection of speeches, *V chem ocharovanie russkoi literatury*.

This dissertation seeks to join the conversation about the distinctiveness, or Russianness, of the Russian novel. Like Fanger and many others, I am interested primarily in the Russian novel's poetics, and in the ways in which the so-called Russian deviation can be glimpsed, above all, in matters of form. The dissertation also begins with the premise that Russian literary uniqueness is inseparable from idiosyncratic characteristics of the Russian cultural milieu, and in this sense I am inspired by the work of David Gasperetti, whose book, *The Rise of the Russian Novel*—which provides an overview of the cultural context that gave birth to the eighteenth-century Russian novel, concentrating particularly on Russian authors' grappling with matters of literary imitation and the influence of nationalism—is, implicitly, a Russian corollary to Watt's study.³ But this project will carry out the investigation within a comparative framework, in the form of a literary experiment, and in the spirit of inquiry and trial and error: with the expectation that a discussion of the particularity of a given body of work might plausibly benefit from its examination alongside what might be considered, loosely speaking, a "control group," and with the hope that the Russian distinctiveness will announce itself convincingly enough in such a context. In this case the partner in the comparison will be one eighteenth- and one nineteenth-century English novel. In truth, of course, the procedure could easily be carried out alongside specimens of other national traditions—the French, say, or the German or American—with the Russian distinctiveness, likely,

³ Along with Fanger, Todd, and Gasperetti, other scholars who have undertaken a discussion of the distinctiveness of the Russian novel—either its rise, or its form and poetics, especially as they flowered in the nineteenth century—have been Richard Freeborn (*The Rise of the Russian Novel: Studies in the Russian Novel from 'Eugene Onegin' to 'War and Peace'*); J.G. Garrard ("The Rise of the Novel in Russia" in his *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*); Andrew Kahn ("The Rise of the Russian Novel and the Problem of Romance" in *Remapping the Rise of the European Novel*); Frederick Griffiths and Stanley Rabinowitz (*Novel Epics: Gogol, Dostoevsky, and National Narrative*); Robert Belknap ("Novelistic Technique" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*) and Edward Wasiolek ("Design in the Russian Novel" in *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*).

manifesting itself just as clearly (albeit perhaps in somewhat divergent formations). But for the sake of simplicity I would like to position the Russian novel against one national touchstone only, and that is the English—partly because of certain temperamental inclinations of my own, partly because many of the most influential formulations about what constitutes realism and the novel genre have been offered with the English realist novel in mind, and partly because so much of recent novel theory (at least as put forward by English-speaking critics) has been composed in either implicit or explicit dialogue with Watt.⁴

Certainly, Watt's identification of the English novel as the exemplar of the "traditional" novel can be accepted only with a hefty caveat, since very few of his claims have gone undisputed, and his assertions about the characteristics of the genre are by no means the final word in novel theory.⁵ Indeed, Watt's detractors tend to echo, either

⁴ Certainly, the question of what constitutes a novel in the first place, and of whether the Russians wrote novels at all, is a vexed and interesting one. Some of the most canonical works of novel theory make wildly divergent or inconsistent claims about the place of the Russians in the study of the novel or else ignore them altogether. Various critics have understood the works of either Tolstoy or Dostoevsky as representing the embodiment of the novelistic ethic, though for different reasons: both Bakhtin and Girard see Dostoevsky as the novelist par excellence for the multitude of voices incorporated into his portrayal of social and psychic life, though they conceive of this quality, and the novelistic ethos that it embodies, somewhat differently; Barbara Hardy claims that Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is the work that most successfully solves the formal problems that are inherent to the novel. Lukacs, by contrast, famously asserted that Tolstoy's "great and truly epic mentality...has little to do with the novel form" (145), and that Dostoevsky, whose creative vision belonged to some "new world" of fictional endeavor, "did not write novels" (151) at all; Maurice Shroder similarly claims that "the more impressive works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy belong...to the body of literature that E.M. Forster calls 'prophetic' fiction—novels, perhaps, but not novels of the stricter sort..." (57). Though I am not planning on engaging in a novel-theory polemic about what does and does not constitute a novel, I take all of these notions about the place of the Russians in novel theory, no matter their divergences, as similarly grounded in intuitions about the Russian distinctiveness.

⁵ Michael McKeon has quarreled with Watt's contention that the rise of the novel in England was predicated on the ascension of the middle class and the decline of Romance as a literary genre; the recent work of Franco Moretti disputes the claim that the novel arose in England in the first place; scholars like Margaret Doody and Thomas Pavel even challenge the widespread assumption that the novel is a literary form associated with the advent of modernity. (In so doing, these critics implicitly echo the earlier claims of Mikhail Bakhtin, who understood the novel to be not a historically specific form, but rather a set of attitudes arising when the absolute authority of a given civilization is destabilized or threatened.)

implicitly or explicitly, William Beatty Warner's charge of cultural chauvinism—that “by narrowing the vortex of the novel's formation, a nationalist British history produces a new object of cultural value now dubbed ‘the English novel’” whose rise is from then on identified with “the rise of ‘the’ novel, that is, *all* novels” (31; quoted in Hadfield 27). (It should also be noted that by associating so much of the formation of the modern English novel with the spread of Protestantism “especially in its Calvinist or Puritan forms” [60]—that is, with religious dissent—Watt effectively ignores the potential influence of Anglicanism as it may have been given novelistic shape by authors, such as Austen and Trollope, whose roots lay with the established Church.) By the same token, novel theory in English has indisputably been enormously influenced by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who figured the novel as a wandering genre, without a national home, and whose theories of novelistic discourse in general were developed from the perspective of the Russian tradition and specifically with Dostoevsky in mind. (Bakhtin's contribution to novel theory will be discussed more fully later on.) But while I recognize that the Russian imagination, through the writings of Bakhtin, has undoubtedly infiltrated Westerners' contemporary understanding of the novel genre, I would like, for the purposes of this dissertation, to carry out the investigation of the Russian novel against the backdrop of scholarship that, in line with Watt, sees something archetypal about the English novel in particular. Watt's legacy may have inspired a conversation about the novel that is distinctly and perhaps unfortunately Anglocentric (and perhaps exceedingly focused on the influence of Protestantism); and yet there is no doubt that the English tradition has been an important arena for the development of our current understanding of realism and the novel form, or at least that it provides a suitable space in which to carry out our

disputes. Whatever this thing is that we call “the novel,” the British have provided many sturdy exemplars—so that if we are engaging in a line of inquiry that requires a touchstone, English novels are a convenient choice.⁶

A comparative study has another justification, however, which is that viewed from a different perspective, English and Russian novels actually line up rather well. Much recent novel theory—especially by scholars who, like Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, attempt to merge literary history with literary geography in developing a vision of world literature as a system—have seen Paris as the capital of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe in terms of cultural hegemony and literary production, and hence modern realism, to put it somewhat hyperbolically, as a fundamentally French phenomenon: the modern English and Russian novel, in this line of thinking, are equally peripheral bodies of work. But perhaps it is precisely this shared sense of marginality that aligns the two traditions, as well as the driving moral force that has often led readers to contrast them, as a pair, to the French canon. In 1886 E.-M. De Vogüé, for example, extolled English and Russian novels for their shared breadth of vision, their “genius for the relative” (*Russian Novel* 12), their moral striving, and their sympathetic view of

⁶ Certainly, matters of literary influence, rivalry, and exchange come into play as well. Kenneth A. Harper and Bradford A. Booth wrote in 1953 that “it has long been known that the major English novelists . . . were widely translated and frequently imitated in Russia,” citing Ernest J. Simmons’s exploration of the influence of Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, Scott, and Mrs. Radcliffe on the course of Russian fiction and also claiming that Dickens was “perhaps as widely read in Moscow and Leningrad as in London and New York” (188). At the same time that they offered opportunities for imitation, however, English novels also provided a standard against which Russian writers could rebel and a set of restrictions from which they could attempt to break free. According to Boris Eikhenbaum, it was the English family novel in particular from whose confines Tolstoy attempted to liberate himself in *War and Peace* (*Tolstoy in the Sixties* 227; cited in Griffiths and Rabinowitz 2); as we will see, Dostoevsky was similarly intent on creating a new kind of family novel that would counter the archetypal novel of domestic settlement à la Jane Austen. But, though this dissertation will pay homage to matters of influence where relevant, it is less interested in cataloging Russian authors’ conscious attempts at undermining the structures of the English novel than it is in discerning organic differences in the form and drives of the two sets of novels, whether or not the Russian deviations are the product of intent.

humanity—to the diminishment of his own tradition. I, too, write frankly from a fan's point of view (i.e., as a Slavacist with an accessory passion for, mostly, the Victorians), although I am particularly interested in exploring this very idea: that much of what unites the English and Russian traditions (despite the secular bent of the former and the barely-veiled Russian Orthodox foundation of the latter, especially as it flourished in the nineteenth-century) is an idealism and moral drive rooted in Christianity. Since the religious underpinnings of the English novel are another topic that has been examined thoroughly by Watt, I will not rehearse it here, and my main interest in any case is a correlative examination of the role of Orthodoxy (as well as Slavophilism and Russia's messianic ambitions) in the Russian novel. It is worth noting, however, that as Watt explains it, the spread of Protestantism accounted for many of the most basic thematic concerns of the developing novel (the devaluing of romantic love, for example, and the related preoccupation with marriage and domestic settlement). (We also have Puritanism to thank for the English novel's delicacy and moralizing tendency in regard to the human body and sexuality, although on this subject, as Watt says, Puritanism was looking back to the emphasis of Paul and Augustine on man's fallen nature and the evils of the flesh [156].)

But what is perhaps most important is the similar theme of moral striving that is embedded in both English and Russian novels (especially in their multi-plot, nineteenth-century incarnations), all of which focus, in one way or another, on questions of the individual's place in the community and culture and approach this problem, for the most part, in a spirit of charity, compassion, and all-inclusiveness, and with the implicit goal of both individual and communal restoration and relief. If the post-Enlightenment,

secularized, no-nonsense English are reformed idealists, however, who often temper their loftiest goals in accordance with the exigencies and limits of a world that God has abandoned, the Russians (and particularly the nineteenth-century avatars of Russian realism, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy) continue to dwell in a universe whose very material is permeated by the divine. By the same token, if the Reformation instilled in the English an individualist ethic that may sit uncomfortably alongside aspirations for communal cohesiveness and harmony, the Russians, with their grounding in the communal mindset of Russian Orthodoxy (a faith whose notions of collectivity and personality are distinctly different from Western individualism), hold out hope that individual and collective fantasies of supreme well-being can be achieved, and that a perfectly incorporated community can be realized.⁷ In this sense, a basic claim of my argument is that English and Russian novels, while sharing common goals and aspirations, often differ in their imagining of the possibility of fulfillment, in both the real world and in realist narrative. In other words, I am hoping that the distinctiveness of the Russian realist novel is most evident when it is placed alongside exemplars of a tradition that shares many of its ideals but, owing to various cultural differences, diverges in its conception of the Real.

The dissertation is structured as two case studies in the English and Russian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. The first chapter examines Daniel Defoe's

⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, referring specifically to the proliferation of charitable societies among the Victorians as well as the numerous revisions to the Poor Laws, says that "to be compassionate...[for the British] was also to be practical, even 'scientific'" (6); she quotes a memorable phrase from the contemporary philanthropist Charles Booth, who spoke of the importance of calculating an "arithmetic of woe" (5). This eminently reasonable form of benevolence, she explains, was to the Victorian mind equated with a certain degree of personal renunciation: "indeed, they were painfully aware that it was sometimes necessary to feel bad in order to do good." And, if charitable works did bring satisfaction, it was supposed to be of the quiet kind, since "this was not a heroic goal, not the aspiration of a saint or a martyr" (6). This repudiation of personal grandiosity and sense of resignation are discernable in many English novels, which seem to promote accommodation, clear-eyed objectivity, and the abandonment of dreams of self-fulfillment. All of which, as we will see, sets English novels apart from so many Russian novels, with their saints and martyrs and their untempered aspirations for both personal gratification and social amelioration.

Moll Flanders (1722) alongside Mikhail Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* (1770), and the second, third, and fourth chapters explore Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). I have chosen these four novels because I take them to be compelling representatives of their respective novelistic traditions (whose general contours, as various scholars have formulated them, will be outlined below), and because, within individual English-Russian pairings, significant similarities in content and imagery make the key divergences between the two traditions—and hence, I hope, the distinctive morphology of the two Russian novels—particularly apparent. Furthermore, although a diachronic inquiry (i.e., how *Moll Flanders* leads into *Bleak House* and how *The Comely Cook* sets the stage for *The Brothers Karamazov*) is relatively submerged, it is my hope that the resonances among the works within each tradition are evident enough so that, taken together, the English and Russian novels illustrate a particular line of development in their respective literary heritages. (Indeed, one of my claims about *The Comely Cook* is that Chulkov's novel is one link in a chain of development leading up to Dostoevsky that scholars have tended to ignore, traditionally assigning this spot first and foremost to Gogol's works.⁸) In the most general terms, we might understand the progression from Defoe to Dickens, and the corresponding progression from Chulkov to Dostoevsky, as the evolution of the picaresque-style novels of the eighteenth century into the multi-plot works of Victorian England and nineteenth-century Russia—with all of the formal developments and

⁸ One scholar who sees Chulkov as properly belonging in this line of development is Gasperetti, who claims that, though his works were never mentioned by Bakhtin, Chulkov was an emblematic purveyor of the “carnavalesque” and hence a natural precursor to Gogol and Dostoevsky (29). Without hearkening to Bakhtinian terminology specifically, I am also interested in carnivalesque energies in Chulkov, but I locate his place in the Russian novelistic tradition in other characteristics of his works as well, such as their subtle but nevertheless discernible messianic and Russian Orthodox underpinnings. (Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque are also discussed below.)

elaborations of character portraiture and psychology that the changing social and cultural contexts entailed. The comparatively greater amount of space devoted in the dissertation to *The Brothers Karamazov* can be explained by my conviction that in Dostoevsky's last work the distinctive features of the Russian novel, as I conceive of them, are most clearly manifested, and that in this novel the highest aspirations of the Russian realist tradition come the closest to being achieved. Put briefly, I believe that in a literary canon that is devoted to imagining the possible achievement of healing and recovery—and the potential coexistence of both personal freedom and communal harmony—in the real world and in realist narrative, *The Brothers Karamazov* might be taken as an emblematic work, with a vision of sublimity that *The Comely Cook* suggests only vaguely and that the English novels, with their more austere realism (and often with a sense of melancholy) consider an unattainable ideal.

In what follows, I will rehearse some of the claims of novel theorists who have based their assumptions largely on the English tradition (and also often on the Victorian multi-plot novel, whose various conflicts can be glimpsed, if only inchoately, in earlier works such as *Moll Flanders*): formulations that I will take as the backdrop for my exploration of Defoe and Dickens. In other words, I will be discussing the conception of the traditional or archetypal novel as it has been established according to the English model as a way of positioning the two English novels in this dissertation as test cases for the Russian deviation. I will then provide a brief overview of some critical formulations about the Russian novel and the Russian realist tradition that have influenced my thinking about Chulkov and Dostoevsky, as well as some of the features of Russian Orthodoxy

that are incarnated in their works and that might be seen as constitutive elements in the Russian singularity.

That there is something problematic about most novels, and perhaps about the novel as a genre, is a common observation. From discussions of novelistic themes and attitudes to examinations of the novel's historical origins, formal principles, and generic attributes, most conversations about the novel center on, and themselves are permeated with, contradictions, ambivalences, and perplexities. Part of the challenge presented by the novel is the inherent and seemingly irremediable tension between form and content. Insofar as these narratives, according to Terry Eagleton (who like many critics bases his claims on the English novel), attempt to be "both representational and formally unified," to reflect "a contingent, haphazard world" but also to be "coherent," the genre itself may be considered "self-undoing," even "a monstrous self-contradiction" (14). The realist novel's very attempt at verisimilitude, according to this point of view, is at odds with the conclusiveness, resolution, and achievement of stasis that readers implicitly demand of it, and that it demands of itself.

The difficult accomplishment of closure and settlement is not only a formal problem but is also, often if not always, a thematic one. In *Narrative and Its Discontents: The Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*, D. A. Miller observed that in the works of "traditional" novelists like Jane Austen and George Eliot, narration always begins with and is predicated on "instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency" (ix) whose remediation serves as the mechanism of forward movement and the ultimate narrative goal. This convention, in addition to being a formal necessity—in

that “only insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals, can be ‘told’” (3)—is both thematic and a matter of plot, such that these narratives tend to commence with some deep and endemic malady: with individuals or communities that are in error (that are, in one way or another, faulty, broken, or sick) and in need of correction. The novel, according to this line of thinking, is a retrospective exploration and a forensic endeavor; its forward propulsion is predicated on a diagnostic assessment—an examination of the symptoms of disease or error and the evidence of earlier misdeeds—and its protracted middle constitutes the movement toward a potential remediation.⁹ Indeed, if the epic has frequently been seen as a genre predicated on an initiatory boast, then the novel is a genre of complaint—and specifically a complaint that cannot be entirely alleviated. Though hope for resolution drives the novel forward, its restorative endeavor seems destined to fail, and “closure,” according to Miller, is mostly “a moment of suppression” (xii).

Surely these notions about retrospective investigation and working-through make us think of the crime or detective novel (or, in terms of nonfiction, the medical case history, psychoanalytic study, or conversion narrative)—all written accounts in which, through a gradual series of steps, the signs and symptoms of some malady or malfeasance are probed, the past is revealed, examined, and reevaluated, and eventually the truth is discovered and retold as a coherent account. According to Watt, the narrative arc of the English novel is one of the areas in which its Calvinist and Puritan underpinnings announce themselves—particularly, their ethos of religious self-scrutiny and their assumption (which goes back to early Christianity and the example of St. Augustine’s

⁹ Besides Miller, Peter Brooks (who deals primarily with the English and the French traditions) has been prominent in furthering this understanding of the novel, in specifically psychoanalytic terms. See his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

Confessions) that it is the duty of every individual to engage in spiritual introspection. Jerry Beasley extends Watt's observation to the episodic narrative structure of the novel, a form that is derived, he claims, from the journey motif of Puritan autobiography and the pilgrim's step-wise, staccato progress toward spiritual understanding (28). (Beasley also points out—perhaps counterintuitively—that this structure is remarkably compatible with the founding tenets of eighteenth-century empiricism, according to which “neither the self nor the world [can] be understood except through a process of analysis and reflection [devoted to deciphering] laws of causality, the principles of order in nature, [and] indeed all formal patterns of meaning ...” [29]). In this light, the novel proceeds by metonymic logic or association: not only in the sense that prose narrative (or at least realist fictional narrative), as Roman Jakobson famously announced, tends to be propelled by a series of metonymic digressions (“from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time” [77]), but also in the sense that solving any mystery involves an intensive effort of cause-and-effect sequencing and a reconstruction of past events based on the clues, symptoms, and scars that remain in the present.

Through these notions we also can understand why it is specifically the bildungsroman and the political novel that, along with the detective novel, have been seen as typical of the genre. Most readers agree that, in one way or another, “the novel's defining thematic opposition” is the conflict between “self and society” (Beasley 50), and that the *content* of the conflictual material—the error or malady that requires investigation and correction—involves questions of the individual's place in the community. For Moretti, the bildungsroman is the species of novel that most purely instantiates the novelistic sensibility because of its characteristic “conflict between the

ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*” (562). For Irving Howe, the political novel is the archetype, but for the same reasons: the political novel (which he defines loosely as “a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting,” [19] or alternatively, and even more loosely, as “any novel I wish...to treat as if it were a political novel” [18]) reveals the “‘secrets’ of the novel in general” precisely because it exposes “the impersonal claims of ideology to the pressures of private emotion.” Thus the novel of public life and collective energies circles around the same fundamental opposition as the novel of personal education and advancement—between the needs of the individual and the exigencies of the wider world—although it approaches the subject from the opposite direction.

It is thus clear why Victorian multi-plot novels (their sometime reputation as “loose, baggy monsters” notwithstanding) have often been understood as the best specimens for analyzing the novel as a genre, for not only do these works embrace elements of both the bildungsroman and the political novel (in that the incongruities between and competing demands of public and private life are presented with fluctuating emphasis), but they are also narratives that demand from readers a rather nimble alternation between the main protagonists as the focus of interest and the competing claims of the wider community, or between immersion in a given plotline and a more flexible, abstracted vision of the whole. These tensions, as Peter K. Garrett writes, present themselves not just as thematic elements but even as “irreducibly different structural principles: between the centripetal impulse that organizes narrative around the development of a protagonist and the impulse that elaborates an inclusive pattern of

simultaneous relationships” (9). And if the motivating drive of these narratives is the integration of self and society in one harmonious, comfortable whole (to reform the mechanisms of the social world to better accommodate the needs of the individual, to cure the self’s wayward tendencies to allow for social assimilation, or to do both at once), then the inevitable precariousness of the balance betrays how tentative the final achievement is. Latent within these works, it seems, is the worry that self and society are not really compatible, that the accommodation of the one to the other will always be imperfect and full integration unaccomplished. (In this sense, Alex Woloch’s thesis in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*—that in realist narrative, and especially in the nineteenth-century novels of Austen, Dickens, and Balzac, the focus on the individual protagonist is always achieved at the expense of minor characters, who are inevitably left without their fair share of narrative attention—is instructive.) Indeed, Watt has pointed out that with *Robinson Crusoe*, the English novel began with a picture of the individual in isolation; as he writes, “the novel could only begin its study of personal relationships once *Robinson Crusoe* had revealed a solitude that cried aloud for them” (92). But whatever examination of social living the English novel went on to perform, the English tradition seems to have retained, often with a sense of pessimism or anxiety, its initial suspicion that all men are islands. Whatever structures of governance and cohabitation human beings have devised, the individuals in many of these novels possess some primal and originary core of difference that remains radically unassimilable—intractable, unacculturated, and unaccommodated. No matter how intensive the forensic labor and how accurate the diagnosis, the endings of these narratives often represent only partial cures, with the conditions of personal

maturity and social harmony still mostly aspirational—or at best incomplete, contradictory, and inconsistent.

Hence all the disciplinary work that is the focus of D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*—which claims, in essence, that “the story of the Novel is . . . the story of an active regulation” (10). According to Miller, novels (which he examines through the lens of Dickens, Trollope, and Wilkie Collins) are at heart narratives of enforcement and correction; they valorize a particular set of goals or attributes (notably individual compliance, conformity, and social harmony) and sanction others (nonconformity, irresponsibility, social deviance). Writing as an heir of Foucault, Miller interprets the novel's disciplinary activity as sinister and repressive. It is also, notably, ineffective, and even “doomed to failure” (xi). Whatever regulatory forces are at play in the worlds of these novels, and whatever self-correcting measures the heroes undertake, we are left with the suspicion that the effort is futile: that the mechanisms of discipline and governance are not only inadequate but also fundamentally misconstrued, that the headstrong self remains unreformed, and that the refractory individual not only endures, but also engages symbiotically with a persistently troubled collective.

Though Miller refers in his title to the agents of social control whose “frequent appearance . . . in novels is too frequent to need detecting” (1), he is mostly concerned with the forms of self-policing that English novels both dramatize and enact. In this sense the title of John Kucich's *Repression in Victorian Fiction*—which examines the complex dynamics of repression and desire in the creation of interiority in the works of Eliot, Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë—is emblematic of a widely accepted critical position. Some readers, however, take a somewhat less categorical stance. Maurice Z.

Shroder, for example (who takes many English works as emblematic of novelistic epistemology and claims, with reference to what E. M. Forster called the “prophetic” quality of Dostoevsky, that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky did not really write “novels of the stricter sort”), suggests that “the process...of ‘demystification’” (46) charted by the novel is inherently “ironic”: if the romance, in which “the protagonist . . . actually fulfills his heroic potentiality . . . depends on the art of inflation” (44, 51), he says, then “novels are relatively more or less ‘deflationary’” (52).¹⁰ “The novel,” he writes, “records the passage from a state of innocence to a state of experience, from that ignorance which is bliss to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world” (44). Where Miller finds active repression, in other words, Shroder finds gradual disillusionment and eventual growth: the egocentric and narcissistic fantasies of supreme fulfillment with which so many heroes begin their quests—their so-called Great Expectations—giving way to the more evolved recognition that the universe is populated by innumerable, equally deserving selves. In these narratives, consummate happiness and ideal self-realization for the individual are fundamentally at odds with collective living and the exigencies of the wider world, and this is a lesson that we must all learn—even as the novels are simultaneously committed to the strivings of individuals and the inviolable human subject. Perhaps it is this paradoxical egalitarianism—the sense that every individual, no matter how lowly, is entitled to have his story told, countered by the worry that with so many tales and so many selves deserving of a voice the act of narration itself may be ill-fated or even shameful—that accounts for what so many have seen as the precariousness

¹⁰ It should be noted that novel studies generally have recently seen a surge of interest in the *connections* between the romance and the novel, as opposed to what novel theory has traditionally taken to be their mutual antagonism. See Margaret Anne Doody *The True Story of the Novel* and, in the Russian context, Andrew Kahn, “The rise of the Russian novel and the problem of romance” in *Remapping the Rise of the European Novel*.

of the novel form, and especially of the Victorian multi-plot novels, which seem forever torn between these two sets of impulses: between sympathy for the individual's search for expression and happiness, on the one hand, and the insistent need to remedy their heroes' narcissistic fantasies with a heavy dose of reality on the other.

Indeed, as Terry Eagleton writes, “[The] refusal of both nostalgia and utopia means that the realist novel, politically speaking, is for the most part neither reactionary nor revolutionary. Instead, it is typically reformist in spirit. It is committed to the present, but to a present which is always in the process of change” (7). While he is using specifically political vocabulary, the references to utopia and nostalgia conjure up the deeper passions and longings that are embodied in these works—for any “refusal” of utopia must be predicated on some initial imagining of and desire for it as well as a subordination of desire to the reality principle (understood in both the literary and the psychoanalytic sense). If the novel's structure, from this perspective, is based on a laborious journey toward some predetermined goal, it is also predicated on all the alternations and oppositions that spring from the divisions between society and the self: between seemingly contrasting perspectives and epistemologies; between separate and equally compelling focuses of interest; between pessimism and hope. Perhaps in this way the narrative goal of the novel thus conceived is to make these oscillations less and less jarring until they become, if not nonexistent, then imperceptible—a final aim, most readers agree, that is largely impossible. For if these narratives, in their manifest content, do seem to affirm the centrifugal, impersonal, ineluctable truths of the universe, ambivalences remain—such that the very breadth and agnosticism that we appreciate in novels also tend to preclude true stasis or closure.

Part of what is at stake in all of these matters—in these questions of disease and error, of the individual in and versus the community, of the split between subjective and objective and the tensions between fantasy life and the reality principle—are notions of realism, both as literary mode and as epistemology. Of course, the term “realism” has proven as resistant to definition as “the novel” has been, with the meaning of “the realist novel” even more elusive: Peter Brooks’s definition in his *Realist Vision*, for instance—that is, realist novels as prose narratives that “claim to represent the real world” and to be “maximally reproductive of...[the] world...[they are] modeling” (2)—verges on tautology (and probably deliberately so). Realistic novels deal with the stuff and events of the objective, empirical, and visible world, and they function according to (or at least in response to) the laws and mechanisms of that world—including, according to Brooks, the ways in which material reality, in strict noncompliance with our wishes and desires, holds us back, weighs us down, and reigns us in. Whether natural or created—and in the fictions of the industrialist and newly capitalist Victorian era, man-made products take up a particularly significant amount of space—there is, according to this perspective, something stubborn and unyielding about the worldly substances and objects that fill realist works, some friction that readers sense between all of these things and the human subjectivities that must navigate around and through them. As Brooks writes, “things...represent the hard materiality that one cannot get around in any non-idealist picture of the world” (16)—and this sense of a final barrier, some insurmountable blockage or constraint, is for Brooks the defining characteristic of the realist novel.

If the influence of Watt, Miller, Eagleton (et al.) has a corollary in the Russian literary tradition, it is surely the prominence of Bakhtin, whose well-known conception of the novel as a genre that is intrinsically subversive, committed to diversity, imbued with the spirit of parody and carnival, and determined to upend all that is commonplace and conventional could not be more different from the vision of order and communal discipline that Miller, for example, sees as fundamental to the English novel. Bakhtin's version of the novel bears so little resemblance to the highly policed, normalizing narratives of Miller's study that Miller, albeit without referring to Bakhtin directly, presents the idea of the novel's so-called lawlessness as the premise that he sets out to challenge. In this sense, perhaps much of the difference between the two national literary traditions can be glimpsed in the realm not just of the novel, but also of novel theory. And perhaps from this perspective as well we can understand why, save for a brief passage quoted in the introduction, *Crime and Punishment* is not even discussed in Miller's work, since his panoramic survey of discipline and correction as forces that are constitutive of the genre does not tread on Dostoevskian terrain. Indeed, Dostoevsky's vision of the wide-open expanse of Siberia as a spiritually bracing environment, as well as his notion of exile as a prelude to reintegration into the human community, is conceptually orthogonal to Miller's focus on the urban confinement of Dickens, Trollope, and Collins and the disciplinary behemoth he sees as constitutive of their worlds: a panopticon-esque presence in both the social and psychic realm that makes us all always-already exiled from our fellows and ourselves.¹¹

¹¹ Bakhtin did not write solely about Russian authors, and along with Dostoevsky he celebrates Dickens as a novelist par excellence for, among other qualities, his "heteroglossia": in his analysis of *Little Dorrit* in "Discourse in the Novel," for example, he traces the "angle of refraction" of authorial discourse as it passes through, and is undermined by, the voices of the novel's characters. Certainly, Dickens's novels, like

One of the fundamental assumptions of this dissertation, then, is the notion that Russian novels (alongside, and entwined with, their intense spiritual strivings) are often imbued with a spirit of playfulness and license that is culturally specific. The project is also founded on the premise that such characteristics are, in the context of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novel, suppressed, or at least countered by various forms of law and order that cannot be overturned. Of course, all fiction-writing is inherently a playful venture, and Brooks, in writing about the English and French novel, points out the genetic connection between fiction and childhood make-believe, comparing the pleasures of realist fiction in particular to the satisfaction of hobbyists with their worlds-in-miniature: “dollhouses, ships in bottles, lead soldiers, model railroads” and the like. “The scale model...,” he says, “allows us to get ... our minds around objects otherwise alien and imposing” and thus “to bind and organize the complex and at times overwhelming energies of the world around us” (*Realist Vision* 1). Brooks does not make specific reference to D. W. Winnicott, although certainly Winnicott’s notion of play as a “transitional” space between inner and outer that helps the child relinquish magical feelings of omnipotence and allows the adult to reexperience childish sensations of satisfaction and well-being is relevant here. Indeed, although Winnicott does not emphasize model-making over other forms of play, he finds a quintessential example of

Dostoevsky's, embody the impulse to break all the rules, and indeed it is largely this shared churlishness that makes a comparison between them so fertile. But despite their proliferation of voices, and whatever their sense of rebellion and play (and their quest for liberation), Dickens's works, I will argue, are also dominated by opposing, and ultimately indomitable, forces of constriction and control that make them appropriate subjects for Miller's study. Indeed the *Bleak House* chapter of this dissertation, along with the exploration of *Moll Flanders* in chapter 1, will largely examine the various unresolvable confrontations between law and lawlessness, control and anarchy, and form and freedom that are constitutive of the English novel as I am choosing to define it—tensions that the Russian novel, as I understand it, seeks either to transcend or avoid. In this sense, I am taking a Bakhtinian perspective on the Russian novel but *not* on the English—Bakhtin’s own comments on Dickens and other English authors, as well as the appropriation of his theories for studies in the Victorian multi-plot novel (such as Peter K. Garrett’s), notwithstanding.

adult play in the activity of an architect, who “suddenly knows what it is that he wishes to construct, and who is thinking in terms of material that can actually be used so that his creative impulse may take form and shape” (69). Certainly, this grown-up form of “serious play” (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 5) seems to be an apt characterization of Victorian realism’s fascination with the topography of cities and the domestic arrangements of households; Brooks compares Dickens’s activities of “seeing through the roofs and facades of the real to the private lives behind and beneath” (3) to the activity of constructing and playing with a dollhouse. One might also note that he conceives of the modeling efforts of English and French realism as intimately associated with the empiricist epistemology introduced by John Locke and others, that is, the Enlightenment heritage of the West.

Brooks also discusses the function of plot in the novel as a form of organized narration through which the past is “mastered through the play of repetition” (*Reading for the Plot* 134) and the multifarious egos and energies of a community are arranged into a satisfying form of coherence. His inspiration here is, in part, Freud’s well-known description in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of his nephew’s *fort-da* game, in which the child repeatedly picks up and tosses away his toy: a game that Freud interprets as the symbolic enactment of the mother’s departures and returns—to which, in real life, the child reacts with relative equanimity. To Freud the game represents a working through of anxiety, though in Brooks’s reading of the episode, the child, “claiming mastery in a situation to which he has been compelled to submit” (*Reading for the Plot* 98), reframes his condition as one of agency rather than passivity, thereby making tolerable, and in some sense rectifying, his feelings of impotence. In this sense, at least, the kind of

playfulness identified by Brooks as the basis of (Western) realism seems to have a rather obsessive quality, with the pleasure at mastery of a situation bound up intimately with anxiety about the loss of control.

However, if we think about play only in these ways—play as modeling and play as repetition and control—then the Russians seem to be engaged in a different activity altogether. And reciprocally, if we think about play in terms of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque—as communal revelry, or as a riotous explosion of libidinal, Rabelaisian energies—then it seems that the modern English novel (including the two specimen novels that I will be focusing on here, as wildly imaginative as they are) is not even invited to the party. While there certainly are dramatic outbursts of libidinal energy in *Bleak House*, for example, they come about, as we will see, as reaction formations against repression (as in Esther's fits of frantic housekeeping) or as violent eruptions of pent-up energy (as in Hortense's rampage). The devil-may-care, uninhibited ebullience of the Russian novel is of a different order altogether, and I would like to suggest, in fact, that it might be fruitfully connected to the Russian national tradition of pretenders to the throne: a version of carnivalesque inversion carried out in real life, an enactment of demotic pluralism taken to absurd heights (i.e., the notion that even the most lowly might rise to the top), and a cultural phenomenon indicative of the particularly tenuous conception of authority, and matters of law and order, in Russia generally (an idea that will be further explored in Chapter 1). If Western realism is predicated on play as a gesture of control in the context of a regulated and law-bound universe, then perhaps Russian realism instantiates (and also, often, dramatizes; think of the *sviatki* scene of the

gender-bending mummers in *War and Peace*, for instance) the impulse to play dress-up, with all of the liberatory, transformative potential that such an activity entails.

Most discussions of the formal characteristics of the Russian novel, then, refer to the relatively free-wheeling nature of these works, often taking their cue from Pushkin's famous designation of *Eugene Onegin*—if not the first Russian novel, then certainly the first great Russian novel—as a “свободный роман” (“free novel”). Certainly, a work of poetry that claims to be a novel—that, in a sense, dresses up prose as verse—asserts its own generic amorphousness and liberation from convention rather boldly. According to Fanger such unfettered inventiveness might be taken as the defining quality of the Russian novel tradition; *Eugene Onegin* was hailed by Belinsky as the first “‘national’ work, filling a void at once qualitative and quantitative” (“Russianness” 30), and Gogolian absurdity is the widely recognized progenitor of Russian realism (36). (This heritage was then passed on, notably, to Dostoevsky, who as Fanger points out, subtitled *The Double* “A Petersburg poem,” called his projected “Life of a Great Sinner” a “real poem” [“Influence” 47], and claimed that in Russia “our novelists are first of all poets, and novelists secondarily” [quoted in Fanger, “Russianness” 46]). Much of the sense of liberation that Russian novels evoke may also come from the generally agreed-upon notion that, as Renato Poggioli says, “the Russian writer of fiction is far less interested than his Western counterpart in the structure of his novel or story” (259) and that the Russian novel, with its riotous energies, tends to overflow its own bounds. Such a claim is of course reductive (no one would insist that *Anna Karenina*, for instance, is devoid of structure or form), as is the correlative notion that the English novel is single-mindedly concerned with design (Henry James's “loose baggy monster” pronouncement pertained

equally to the novels of his own tradition, and indeed to nineteenth-century novels generally.¹²) But it is generally agreed that Russian novels tends to subordinate matters of style and form and to privilege, in Arnold Kettle's words, "life" over "pattern."

Perhaps the characteristic waywardness of the Russian novel can be glimpsed most clearly in its resistance to the limits set by beginnings and (especially) endings.¹³ As Tolstoy wrote in his drafts to "A Few Words Apropos of the Book *War and Peace*," his narrative "could [not] be called a novel [i.e., what the rest of Europe called a novel], with a starting point, a constantly complicated interest, and a happy or unhappy denouement, with which the interest of narration is liquidated"; indeed, "I am utterly unable to set certain limits to my invented characters—e.g., a wedding or a death...I couldn't help thinking that the death of one character only stimulated interest in other characters, and a wedding more often than not seemed the beginning rather than the end of an interesting story" (PSS 16:7).¹⁴ Undoubtedly Tolstoy's version of the realist novel as a species utterly distinct from his own creations is probably as reductive as any other absolutist position, since for the English novel a satisfying conclusion tends to be more a

¹² "A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty, and is moreover not composed at all unless the painter knows how that principle of health and safety, working as an absolutely premeditated art, has prevailed. There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as *The Newcomes* has life, as *Les trois mousquetaires*, as Tolstoi's *Peace and war*, have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?" (Preface to *The Tragic Muse*, quoted in James Miller 262)

¹³ This is not to say that in Russian novels middles are not distinctive as well. Gary Saul Morson has painted a compelling picture of the embodiment of human freedom in the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: in the "sideshadowing" that these authors employ throughout their narratives, a "*middle realm* of real possibilities that could...happen...even if they...[do] not" (6) exists side-by-side with all of a novel's events and impossibilities. In this way, these authors are able to "escape the determinations of [their] own design and ending[s]" (41), and determinism is overcome.

¹⁴ For more on Tolstoy's distinctive ideas about the marriage plot as it was incarnated in the Victorian novel, see Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel*. Dostoevsky also had his own ideas about the so-called family novel or marriage plot; see Liza Knapp's discussions of his notion (and his novels) of the "accidental family" in her "Introduction to *The Idiot*" in *Dostoevsky's The Idiot: A Critical Companion*, as well as her forthcoming *Dostoevsky and the Novel of the Accidental Family*.

matter of ambition than of achievement. Perhaps in this sense what is different about the Russian novel is that it often side-steps the problem of closure altogether by leaving itself blatantly unfinished. In the context of a tradition notorious for its open endings, the biographical explanations put forward by Gogol and Dostoevsky scholars for the authors' famous inability to complete *Dead Souls* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, respectively, are almost beside the point.

It is particularly in the unfinished nature of these two masterpieces (both of which end, in a sense, with the famous query of Gogol's narrator, "Whither Rus?") that one can distinguish one of the more distinctive characteristics of the Russian realist tradition—its messianic ambition. As Michael Holquist writes, "Russian literature was *always* at the forefront of the search for a national identity" (10), and literature was the repository for Russian thinkers' grandiose hopes for their own nation: their conception of Moscow as the third (and final) Rome. This was especially true of the novel, which flowered, in nineteenth-century Russia, at the same time that the search for the Russian national identity was becoming especially urgent. It is this sense of the novel as the vehicle for national self-definition and ambition that leads Griffiths and Rabinowitz to claim that Russian writers were "liberate[d] from the confines of the European novel" by embodying in their works the contours of the epic tradition: "while the novel in its materialism and privatization portrayed the spiritual fragmentation of the West, Russian writers aimed to take the genre beyond itself by making it something greater, more public, and more primary—in a word, by making it monumental..." (2). Both *Dead Souls* and *The Brothers Karamazov* were conceived as multi-part national epics on the order of the *Divine Comedy* and devoted to tracing the messianic trajectory of the Russian

people; as such the texts that exist, with the various forms of communal disrepair that they depict, represent the infernal beginnings of the collective spiritual journey. If they are unfinished, that is, they mirror the as yet incomplete fulfillment of the Russian national destiny, with the imagined communal apotheosis and collective homecoming always in a state of deferral, though faithfully anticipated.¹⁵

The Russian literary preoccupation with collective insufficiency and future sublimity might also be taken as a narrative representation of the apophatic orientation of Russian Orthodoxy: its concept of divinity as a force so ineffable that it can be conceived of only through negation, in terms of what it is not; and its conviction, as Maximus the Confessor is reported to have stated, that “negative statements about divine matters are the only true ones” (quoted in Clendenin, *Western Perspective* 56). At the same time, perhaps the peculiar amalgam in the Russian soul of earnest expectancy and laissez-faire leniency embodies the privileging in Russian Orthodoxy of New Testament “grace” (“благодать”) over Old Testament “law” (“закон”), as encoded in Metropolitan Hilarion’s eleventh-century *Slovo o zakone i blagodati* (*Sermon on Law and Grace*). As one of the earliest documents of Kievan Rus’, Hilarion’s sermon has been seen as foundational to the Russian literary heritage, and also as a text that articulates an important distinction between Eastern Christian thought (which “emphasiz[es]...mystical

¹⁵ In a way, though, a Russian novel does not need to be explicitly modeled on Dante for one to discern in its open ending hope for a future reunion with paradise. Certainly, part of the picture with which the fictional portion of *War and Peace* trails off—the vision of Pierre circling between his public life in St. Petersburg and Moscow and his family life at Bald Hills in much the same way that souls, in Tolstoy’s famous metaphor of the globe, circle back and forth between this world and the heavenly home—embodies the hope for the achievement of the rhythms of sublimity. (Notably, Bald Hills, where Natasha stays during Pierre’s absences, is not Pierre and Natasha’s own home but is the estate of Nikolai and Marya—the couple’s perpetual status as guests in another’s home representing the incompatibility, in the novel’s conception, between spiritual achievement and traditional domestic settlement.) Such grandiose ambitions are even discernable in the darker novels of Dostoevsky, such as *The Idiot* and *Demons*, which both end apocalyptically—the dashed hopes that these works represent perhaps revealing the urgency of their dreams for healing and integration all the more clearly.

union”) and its Western counterpart (“which emphasiz[es]...juridical categories” of divine law, sin, punishment, and penance) (Clendenin, *Western Perspective* 77). Also crucial to this difference, according to Clendenin and John Meyendorff, is “the near total lack of [the] influence [of St. Augustine] in the East” (Clendenin 77), as well as the total absence in Orthodox Christianity of the notion of Purgatory, which Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky have famously identified as a defining aspect of Russian culture and the notorious Russian maximalism. It might be added that the absence of Purgatory and Augustinian retrospection in the Russian imagination lends a different shape to the experience of conversion on Russian soil: rather than a labored working through of past sins, conversion, to the Russian mind, is an instantaneous experience of grace.

Like their English counterparts, then, Russian novels are often predicated on a picture of insufficiency and distress that is both personal and communal (or national). And yet for the Russians degradation is not so much the proper subject of discipline and reform as it is the prelude to eventual salvation. As Wasiolek writes, “the nineteenth-century Russian novel is a literature of sloths, idlers, parasites, swindlers, cripples, crooks, phrase mongers, charlatans, rapists, tramps, and con men”—but these people are also, frequently enough, “beautiful dreamers” (51), whose lofty aspirations and eligibility for divine intervention are in no way compromised by their moral and physical crippling. In the Russian novel, great expectations are to be trumpeted and encouraged, not corrected or suppressed, and in this sense notions of the novel as an “ironic” and “deflationary” form do not apply. Donna Orwin has claimed that Russian realism, especially as embodied in the works of Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, maintains an unusual commitment to interior life in all its spontaneity and contradictoriness, as well as

an “abiding respect for subjectivity.” Such a “celebration,” she adds, of the authentic human personality—and its protection from the “dissecting eye” (66) of reason and analysis—“is usually understood as romantic” (4).¹⁶ Perhaps in fact this tendency toward the aggrandizement of the human person in Russian realism is not only a reflection of its romantic qualities, but also an endowment of Russian Orthodoxy, with its tenet of theosis: the notion that all people are called on to achieve divination (and a “theme,” as Christoforos Stavropoulos writes, utterly “alien to Protestants” [x]). If English novels, so often, seek to reform their heroes’ immature egocentricity in the name of social harmony, then in the Russian imagination even an individual’s sense of grandiosity and personal promise—a vestige, perhaps, of the infantile megalomania and feeling of omnipotence that Freud called “His Majesty, the Baby,” or “His Majesty, the Ego”—is not the proper object of correction. Nor (as we will see) is it fundamentally at odds with the interests of collective life. What Freud called primal narcissism, in other words, is not a societal wound.

This is not to say that the Russian novel does not seek ethical advancement on the part of its heroes and readers (quite the opposite), but rather that the fundamental incompatibility in so many English novels between the individual and the group is not salient; as Orwin says, “the Russian self is fundamentally sociable” (7). Certainly, this imagining of personhood has its roots in the Russian Orthodox belief that God’s transcendence is understood through the experience of God’s immanence, a conviction whose profound influence on the Russian cultural imagination can hardly be

¹⁶ Certainly, a romantic and atavistic attachment to the inviolable human self is not the purview of the Russian novel alone, and as we have seen, it is one of the elements of the English novelistic sensibility as well (and a source of inspiration for the comparison between the two traditions). Perhaps in this sense what distinguishes the Russian novel is not its romantic championing of subjectivity plain and simple, but rather the force of its celebration, and its refusal to incarnate the opposing drive toward rational demystification.

overestimated. One result was the distinctive vision of collective life popularized by the early nineteenth-century Slavophiles Ivan Kireevsky and Aleksei Khomiakov under the term *sobornost'*, which was later called “the soul of Orthodoxy” by Sergei Bulgakov (145; quoted in Esaulov, “*Sobornost'*” 29) and went on to become a commonplace in the Russian cultural mythology and its assertions of national distinctiveness. In the Russian imagination, the special intimacy between the human person and God—the conviction that He dwells in us and we are destined to dwell in Him—means that “human personhood,” as Timothy Kallistos Ware writes, “cannot be defined and understood simply in terms of itself, as a self-contained, autonomous entity.” Such an understanding of selfhood as fundamentally relational has ramifications in the social realm, since “the vertical, God-related orientation also implies...a horizontal orientation”; if “personhood” acquires “authentic meaning” only in one’s relationship with God (“In the Image and Likeness” 3), then all humans coexist in a sacred, egalitarian fellowship modeled on the celestial home, a collective so harmonious that others become nearly extensions of the self.¹⁷

As a critic in Soviet Russia, Bakhtin was not inclined to consider the Russian Orthodox origins of Russian sociability explicitly within his works,¹⁸ although his ideas about Dostoevskian polyphony, heteroglossia, and “unfinalizability” are certainly

¹⁷ As Sarah Hudspith writes, to the Slavophiles “*Sobornost'* embodies the concepts of free unity, mutual love and voluntary submission to the whole” (8), and it was a characteristic of Russian life “partly due to the Orthodox Church, but also thanks to the age-old peasant way of life that had existed even before Christianity arrived in Russia”: the long history of peasant communes, which were “organized around the same principles of organic unity, congregation, tradition based on collective decisions and voluntary submission to the whole” (9) that dominated in the Orthodox Church.

¹⁸ Recently, however, scholars have taken an interest in the Christian themes and echoes in Bakhtin’s works: the “feeling for faith,” as the critic himself called it, that some readers have seen as taking shape in his theories, whether or not he was himself a religious man (which is a disputed question). See Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino, *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* and Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*.

relevant here, especially insofar as they figure the Dostoevskian self as perpetually open and receptive to the ambient clamor of diverse and equally worthy voices.¹⁹ Whereas in the English novel the imperial self and the imperious collective tend to be at odds—even to represent “irreducibly different structural principles” (Garrett 9)—the one and the many in the Russian novel are not only fundamentally compatible, but even symbiotically entwined.²⁰ Indeed, if the English novel is perpetually engaged in charting the opposition between narcissism and empathy, then perhaps the emotional energy of the Russian novel—or of the various roguish, but also often saintly and self-martyring creatures therein—oscillates between theosis and kenosis: the Jesus-like self-humbling and “empty[ing],” described by Paul in Philippians 2:6-8, in which we are all encouraged to engage. In the Russian imagination, remarkably, self-diminishment and self-aggrandizement are reciprocal, and egoism is compatible with altruism.

Alternatively, or on a somewhat higher level of abstraction, one might talk about the compatibility of metaphor and metonymy in the Russian imagination. If one thinks in Jakobsonian terms of poetry as governed by similarity (metaphor) and prose as governed by contiguity (metonymy), then perhaps in the Russian tradition, with its various

¹⁹ Bakhtin was notoriously hostile to what he saw as Tolstoy’s “monologic” tendencies, although even according to his own notions, Tolstoy may not be as deficient as he suggests. While this is not the place to rehearse this controversy, it is worth noting that Henry James complained about what he saw as the “promiscuous shifting of viewpoint and centre” in Tolstoy (quoted in Belknap, “Novelistic Technique” 233).

²⁰ According to Orwin, this imagining of self and other, inner and outer as fundamentally compatible also produces a notable absence in the literary canon in comparison to the English: as she writes, “no man can be an island in Russia, which, despite the popularity of Daniel Defoe’s masterpiece *Robinson Crusoe* there, has produced no fantasy of independence comparable to it” (6). Instead, as we will see, Russia produced its own *Moll Flanders*, the work with which Defoe, after creating his portrait of “inordinate egocentricity” (Watt 86), may be said to have initiated the project of examining communal interaction that would characterize the English novel throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other words, if the English novel “could only begin its study of personal relationships once *Robinson Crusoe* had revealed a solitude that cried aloud for them” (Watt 92), the Russian novel skips the solitude step.

poet/novelists, the two perspectives, or drives, are commingled. To be sure, this is largely conjecture (and it will be further fleshed out in Chapter 4). But the suggestion here is that in the Russian realist imagination, which figures all selves as united in the image of God and the horizontal relations among people as governed by each individual's vertical relationship to the Creator, metonymic relations are imbued with the aura of metaphor.²¹ As Victor Terras writes, "the presence of a revelatory principle in the facts of real life is a central feature of Russian Realism" ("The Realist Tradition" 91). It is in part this heightened perception of the things of the real world that has led so many Russian writers and scholars of Russian literature to qualify the term "realism" when speaking of the Russian heritage. (Donald Fanger, e.g., writes about the "Romantic Realism" of Dostoevsky and Gogol, Richard Gustafson speaks of Tolstoy's "emblematic realism," and Dostoevsky called his own mode "fantastic realism" or "realism in a higher sense.")²² Such formulations go a long way toward indicating the peculiar capaciousness of the Russian realist vision, and the extent to which the Real itself, for such writers, contains a wealth of potential and possibility that exceeds the bounds of purely scientific and documentary chronicling—the supposed markers of the realist revolution in the West. If realism to the Russians seems to be bound up with a great deal of poetic license, perhaps this is because to the Russian eye the Real itself is the property and harvest of the

²¹ Of course, James M. Curtis, who writes about the metaphorical inclinations of Dostoevsky's prose in particular, opposes Dostoevskian metaphor to Tolstoyan metonymy, and indeed Tolstoy was put forth as the metonymic realist writer *par excellence* by Jakobson himself. And yet as Liza Knapp has pointed out, the emblematic Tolstoyan metonymy that Jakobson discusses—Anna Karenina's handbag, which he claims is a metonymic representation of her physical person—might also be interpreted as a "Tolstoyan metaphor" for her femininity and sexual organs: a delightful discovery, as Hugh McLean writes, of a "metaphoric 'blossom' hidden within...[the] classic [Jakobsonian] metonymy" ("Jakobson's Metaphor/Metonymy Polarity: A Retrospective Glance" 730). Perhaps indeed more of Tolstoy's metonymies should be investigated for such potential metaphoric blossoms.

²² See his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 27:65. These terms have been investigated by scholars such as Robert Louis Jackson and Malcolm V. Jones.

imagination. Its matter is inherently malleable, brimming with potential, and ripe for transformative occurrences.²³

Surely, these qualities are intimately related to the Russian Orthodox conception of real-world matter as imbued with divine energy. Just as St. John of Damascus in the seventh century praised this-world material “not as God, but as something filled with divine energy and grace,” the early twentieth-century theologian P. A. Florensky assured us that both “matter” and “history” were “not despicable” (Kornblatt and Gustafson 106). This expectation of salvation and transfiguration is very frequently discernible in Russian realism, no matter how bizarre, unhinged, or grotesque it may get, no matter how downtrodden or deformed are the individuals or communities it depicts.²⁴ To the Russian religious mind, human beings in their real-world, material incarnations are implanted with the seed of God, perpetually tugged at by their divine origins, and—no matter how far they may seem to stray—always-already perfect; to the Russian imagination, the Real and the Ideal are inextricably fused. In fact, it is precisely our participation in corporeal reality that allows for the possibility of transcendence, for as Christoforos Stavropoulos writes,

if people were only spirit and consequently sinned as spirits, they could not be redeemed since the spirit cannot change...But human beings also have bodies. And they are changeable and can be transformed because they are complex. That is, they have the ability to change direction and to return whence they came. (187)

²³ For a discussion of the ways that Dostoevsky, in particular, both dramatized and embodied the overcoming of material determinism and physical laws in his works, see Liza Knapp, *The Annihilation of Inertia: Dostoevsky and Metaphysics*

²⁴ Indeed, Russian novels themselves were likely influences on Florensky, to the extent that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction and religious thinking were intimately entwined, and Dostoevsky in particular was an important influence on late religious thinkers’ expressions of the distinctiveness of Russian Orthodoxy.

Admittedly, the meaning of this statement is far from transparent (and its theological complexities are beyond the scope of this dissertation). Certainly he is alluding to Orthodox Christology, and to the conviction that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine and that possession of a real human body is a prerequisite for resurrection. But perhaps, in the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy itself, these ideas are not meant to be pondered too closely—just as we are meant to accept that the bread and wine of the Eucharist in the Orthodox church, as Timothy Ware explains it, “become in very truth the Body” and “are not mere symbols” (*Orthodox Church* 283) without, as in the Latin church, subjecting such matters to scholastic debate. To the Orthodox mind, such mysteries defy rational thinking, and mystery “must always remain incomprehensible” (284). Perhaps the most we can say, therefore (or perhaps all that needs to be said), is that as a conception of material existence, and the vulnerable physicality of the human body, this is about as far removed as one can get from the weighty oppressiveness of matter and empiricism that is the marker of realism in the West.

In this dissertation, then, I will be mapping these various differences in outlook and epistemology through close readings of the four specimen novels, concentrating particularly on questions of narrative form, the human body, and the body politic: matters of formal design, corporeal integrity and vulnerability, and communal harmony and discord. All four novels are preoccupied with characters, families, and communities that are faulty, broken, or sick, and they all present us with texts in which such deformities are mirrored by various kinds of narrative misshapeness; in this sense, they all might be seen as exemplars of Randall Jarrell’s description of the novel in general as “a prose

narrative of some length that has something wrong with it” (x1). Indeed, all four might be considered as rogue or criminal narratives with reformist ethical ambitions (not excluding *Bleak House*, I will argue, although this is an unconventional reading); or as tales of orphans who pursue self-integration and fitting in; or as conversion narratives in which the aspirations for personal, communal, and textual integrity are interchangeable goals.

But the novels from the two traditions function under very different assumptions about the possibility for, and the mechanisms and implications of, transformation and release. Both *Moll Flanders* and *Bleak House* are burdened by a suspicion that the encumbrances of realism (the competing requirements of verisimilitude and narrative form; the demands of law and order in the formation of a well-functioning society; the intractableness of the material world; the treachery of the body; and the weight of history, tradition, and one’s own past) make remediation and reconciliation unlikely. In both novels the multifarious signs and symptoms of disorder accumulate redundantly—conflict and discontent proliferate throughout the lives of individuals and are passed down generational lines, and the texts themselves seem under the sway of one or another form of repetition compulsion. In these narratives the fact of a troubled beginning virtually forecloses on a satisfactory ending and origins are a prison-house (either literally or figuratively) to which one is always bound to return—a thematic confinement that is matched by the structural recursiveness and deoxygenated oppressiveness of the narrative envelope.

In *The Comely Cook* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast, the complaints and grievances of the novels’ beginnings, while just as clamorous, are less irremediable.²⁵

²⁵ It may be instructive to keep Darwin in mind in thinking about the ways in which the Russian and English novels deal with matters of generational exchange and inheritance and implicitly thematize

And herein, I would like to suggest, lies the Russian “deviation”: that for the Russian realist novel genuine catharsis and transfiguration (for the individual, the collective, and the narrative itself, and in the form of both moral redemption and corporeal or textual reintegration) can never be ruled out in an experience of grace which, though never truly accomplished within the texts, exists as an imagined possibility within the very deformities that are the genesis of the narratives. In fact, it is the initial forms of corruption and disintegration, and the absence of tight strictures on riotous energies, that allow for the proliferation of salvific influences (love, generosity, enjoyment, and emotional unburdening)—flowerings that the English novel precludes by its very attempts at correction, control, and the achievement of narrative form.

The first chapter will present *Moll Flanders* and *The Comely Cook*, novels that depict a footloose, debauched woman and are engaged similarly with problems of judicial, domestic, and narrative settlement, as texts that represent the coalescing of the novel out of the picaresque and that approach the conflict between looseness and form, or between abandon and composure, in the realms of personal behavior, communal functioning, and narrative formation. The second, third, and fourth chapters together consider *Bleak House* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, focusing on the expansion of the novel form into its multi-plot incarnation and examining the texts as both detective

questions of hereditary determinism. Interestingly enough, *The Brothers Karamazov* is the only one of the four novels that grapples explicitly with questions of evolutionary theory and determinism, only to spend much of its energy (both in terms of content and narrative structure) refuting it. A similar pattern obtains to the various Freudian references throughout the dissertation. Throughout, I am functioning under the assumption that the English novels, with their more-or-less rationalist, Enlightenment epistemologies and their Darwinian undertones, look forward to Freudian ideas about the impact of past experience on, and the possibility of change within, the individual psyche. The Russian novels, by contrast (and again, most explicitly, *The Brothers Karamazov*) tend either to ignore notions of psychic determinism, or to rebel against them. Or alternatively, and even more defiantly, they perceive the various sentiments and sensations that Freud claimed to be evidence of pathology as the access of spiritual truth. Which is, of course, exactly what Freud, canny intellectual that he was, claimed about religious feeling in the first place.

novels and bildungsromans that approach the goal of “solution” (the tracking of a criminal; the illumination of the mystery of one’s origins and inheritance; the healing of personal and communal ills; the integration of a fragmented text) in strikingly divergent ways. Throughout, a key assumption will be that the Russian point of view, with its underpinnings in Orthodox theology and its anti-empiricist epistemology, manifests itself in distinctive ways in terms of plot, character, and thematic content (specifically, in the expression and detection of past malfeasance within the present and in the vicissitudes of the material world and the human body). Indeed, the close readings will often hinge on scenes or images of bodily injury, incontinence, fracture, or regeneration as emblems of each novel’s worldview, and I take as a central image—for the problem of the realist novel, for the limits of the Real that the Russian novel has sought to expand, and therefore for the project as a whole—the scars remaining on Esther’s face at the end of *Bleak House*. As the visible residue and enduring manifestation of a past that accumulates in, determines, and encumbers the present, Esther’s scars are an emblem for the burdens that oppress the English novel and from which the Russian novel attempted—throughout its development—to break free.

Chapter 1

Investigations into the Unpoliced Novel: *Moll Flanders* and *The Comely Cook*

Most critical works on Mikhail Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* (*Prigozhaia povarikha*)—published in 1770 and generally considered one of the first Russian prose works entitled to bear the designation “novel”—compare it, though usually in passing, to Daniel Defoe's second novel, *Moll Flanders*, published around fifty years earlier.¹ J. G. Garrard claims that the British work was one of Chulkov's literary inspirations; G. N. Moiseeva and I. Z. Serman categorize the two texts as novels that present life “as it really is” [“как она есть” (59)]; Richard Freeborn writes that Martona narrates “in the manner of *Moll Flanders*” (1); and William Edward Brown calls *The Comely Cook* a “Defoeish novel” (64; quoted in Gasperetti 215). These remarks may serve as a point of orientation for modern-day readers of Chulkov, who probably approach his text with a certain amount of perplexity. As one of the first works of its kind in Russia, *The Comely Cook* bears the markings of the trial-and-error composition that most likely produced it, and readers are often baffled by its roughness, inconsistencies, and sense of undisciplined

¹ A few words on Chulkov's life and career may be of help here. Born around 1743 (the exact location of his birth is unknown), Chulkov was a *raznochinets* (a heterogeneous class in 17th- through 19th-century Russia composed primarily of members of the clergy, merchants, minor officials, and impoverished nobility). Most likely, he was from a family of either merchants or clergymen. He spent his career working, at different times, as an actor, a court servant, and a Senate official, writing assorted fiction, and editing and contributing to several literary journals. His collection of humorous tales dealing with magic, chivalry, and Slavic mythology, *The Mocker, or Slavic Tales* (*Peresmeshnik, ili Slavenskie skazki*) was published in 1766, and his heroic novel *The Adventures of Achilles under the Name of Pyrrha before the Siege of Troy* (*Pokhozhdenie Akhillesovo pod imenem Pirry do Troianskoi osady*) (which was lifted almost entirely from Vasilii Trediakovsky's verse drama *Deidamia*) came out in 1769. *The Comely Cook* was his last original literary work; after its publication in 1770, he abandoned his literary career and entered government service. Until his death in 1792 he made money writing practical works, including a history of Russian commerce, and by seeking out rich patrons. By 1783, Chulkov had accrued enough money to buy Kovkino, an estate in the Moscow province, and by 1790 he had risen to the seventh rank in the civil service.

experimentation. But in *Moll Flanders*, according to numerous critics, we seem to have a predecessor, a model, and a recognizable set of literary conventions to guide our reading.

And yet it is by no means clear what, precisely, these scholars mean by this seemingly obligatory pairing. Questions of literary influence or inspiration are murky—it remains uncertain whether Chulkov read Defoe, and some scholars consider it unlikely²—as are notions of a shared literary tradition: exactly what tradition can account for the vast cultural differences that mark these two works? Of the scholarly judgments referred to above, it is perhaps Brown’s formulation, precisely in its lighthearted evasiveness, that is most convincing.

Among scholars of Chulkov, David Gasperetti has undertaken the most thorough exploration of *The Comely Cook* and *Moll Flanders* as a literary pair, and he also has offered the most lucid explanation of what such an endeavor means for readers of Russian literature. Like many critics, Gasperetti locates much of the impulse to juxtapose the two texts in the qualities and narrative methods of their heroines—each one a “mature woman of the world who, looking back from the vantage point of advanced age, delivers a running commentary on her riotous former life” (24)—as well as in the general subject matter and thematic focus of the works: the glimpse of the lower classes that they offer; the interest in adventure, lawlessness, and sexual license; the similar visions that they present of eighteenth-century Russia and England, respectively, as two troubled communities whose faults both allow and compel the individual to commit the indiscretions that we read about. Implicit in Gasperetti’s discussion are the formal similarities also noted by other scholars. As Segal writes, “the structure [of both works]

² See Garrard, *Mixail Čulkov* 124

is episodic . . . [and] the reader simply passes with the central character through a series of . . . adventures,” such that the “emphasis” of both works “falls heavily, almost uniquely, on incident, on the raw material of plot” (26-27). Indeed both works, as episodic rogue narratives, have been associated with the picaresque, and they have each been understood as crucial in the development of their respective novelistic traditions, specifically as predecessors of the great nineteenth-century English and Russian works that claim so much attention from scholars of the novel form.³

Gasperetti’s interest in *The Comely Cook* and *Moll Flanders* is directed, nevertheless, more at their divergences than their affinities, and at what these discrepancies illuminate for students of the Russian literary tradition. He claims that whether or not Chulkov read Defoe, Chulkov’s work may be understood as “an excellent parody” (25) of his British predecessor’s—a mocking response not necessarily to *Moll Flanders* in particular, but rather to the entire budding tradition of the English novel as it had made its way to Russia and seeped into the consciousness of the literary elite of Chulkov’s time. Beginning in around the 1760s, excerpts (usually translated from French renderings) of eighteenth-century English prose writers (Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne) began being published in Russian journals, as were the

³ As Ulrich Wicks points out, the critical literature on genre theory tends to approach the “picaresque” from two perspectives: the term can refer either to a distinct set of works produced in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, or it can designate a fictional tradition to which any text may belong, regardless of its historical moment, as long as it is episodic and features an amoral “antihero” attempting to navigate a hostile and chaotic world and to evade all forms of closure. Wicks proposes instead that the picaresque be understood primarily according to Robert Scholes’s theory of fictional modes, which apprehends all narratives as ranged along a continuum of seven possible types (extending from satire to romance), depending on the qualities of the represented worlds, and which assumes that most narratives constitute a mixture of various modes. It seems to me that this is the best way to approach the question of genre for both *Moll Flanders* and *The Comely Cook*, although I prefer to think of the picaresque as a convenient label for a certain relationship between the individual, on the one hand, and society, the law, and notions of closure on the other. I am not interested in assessing the degree to which either text is or is not an official representative of this narrative mode, but rather in showing how each one either appropriates or rejects a picaresque worldview, and how each one is illuminated by being paired with the other.

entirety of many of their novels (Gasperetti 4). Thus, for most literate Russians “the *idea* of the ‘English novel,’” as one critic writes, became a familiar literary archetype, and its particular concerns and conventions served as the inspiration for a great deal of Russian prose (Simmons 157).

What exactly constituted the particular concerns and conventions of the developing English novel is of course an endlessly complicated question, to which every critic provides a somewhat different response (and which this dissertation seeks to explore more through close readings than to enumerate definitively). According to Gasperetti, for authors like Chulkov and Komarov⁴—writers with an inclination toward satire, and who were less bound than some of their peers to pure imitation of an imported form—the English novel was at once a source of inspiration and of animus. As he writes in the introduction to *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Carnival, Stylization, and Mockery of the West*, his book explores “the many ways in which [these writers] attacked the...conventions [of their foreign literary models] as being incapable of representing Russian cultural reality” (4)—a reality, one might add, that was at odds with the moral didacticism, civic-minded seriousness, and law-abiding ethic that characterized the English novel from its very beginnings. Rather, according to Gasperetti, these Russian writers approached their own works in the spirit of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which in their hands was an attitude of rebelliousness and mockery that upended established forms of authority and hierarchy and took aim especially against the Russian classicists

⁴ Matvei Komarov (1730s-1812?) was the author of (among other works) *Van'ka Kain* (1779), *The Story of the Adventures of the English Milord George and the Brandenburg Margravine Friderika Luiza* (*Povest' o prikluchenii aglinskogo milorda Georga i o brandenburgskoi markgrafine Friderike Luize*, 1782), and *The Invisibility Cap: The History of the Fetsian Prince Arides and His Brother Polumedes with Various Curious Stories* (*Nevidimka. Istoriia o fetsskom koroleviche Aridese i o brate ego Polumedese s raznymi liubopytnymi povestiami*, 1789)—often considered, along with Chulkov's works, among the first novels, or proto-novels, in Russia.

(Lomonosov, Sumarokov, Trediakovsky), whose convention-bound rigidity and dutiful moralizing bespoke, in their estimation, a slavish imitation of foreign models. In this sense Chulkov presents himself as “Russia’s premier literary jester,” and *The Comely Cook*, with its “mocking, whimsical tone,” distances itself from the “blatant, overbearing didacticism of *Moll Flanders*” by “turn[ing] the world view of a novel like *Moll Flanders* on its head” (25-26). One of Gasperetti’s basic propositions is that this rebellious, carnivalesque spirit was to become virtually a national literary trait: born “within the context of a complete reorientation of [Russian] society” (4),⁵ Chulkov’s mockery, and the novel form in which it was housed, both reflected an emerging Russian national consciousness that sought expression beyond the generic confines of earlier classical forms and also paved the way for such distinctly Russian prose writers as Gogol and Dostoevsky. And so “if *The Comely Cook* is a Russian *Moll Flanders*,” Gasperetti writes, “the emphasis must definitely be on the word *Russian*” (28).

The present chapter is also interested in *The Comely Cook* as a Russian *Moll Flanders* with the emphasis on *Russian*, just as it is similarly unperturbed by the likelihood that Chulkov did not read Defoe. (Like many other critics, I believe that the pairing is instructive nonetheless.) It is further concerned with the extent to which Chulkov’s text looks forward to many of the traits of the Russian novelistic tradition as it flourished in the nineteenth century, especially in the works of Dostoevsky. But it

⁵ According to Gasperetti, the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century Russia coincided with the nation’s emergence, under the promptings of Peter the Great, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great, from a state of relative backwardness in the eyes of Western Europe. This revamping of Russian culture in line with Western models instituted what would become a veritable national obsession (reaching a peak in the Slavophile/Westernizer debates of the 1840s and ’50s) with the relationship between Russia and the West and the question of Russian underdevelopment—an identity crisis that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inspired both the fervent appropriation of foreign cultural elements and the opposing impulse to assert and manifest Russian national distinctiveness.

approaches the Chulkov-Defoe pairing from a somewhat different direction. On the one hand, my sense is that *Moll Flanders*, a touchstone English novel for our purposes, is far less unambiguous (in its tone, its moral content, and its vision of the relationship between the criminal self and society, authority, and the law) than the Defoe-Chulkov contrast might seem to indicate—that it betrays instead all of the ambivalences and strained loyalties that would plague Defoe’s Victorian descendants. Indeed, though Gasperetti understands *Moll Flanders* as a foil for *The Comely Cook* in its moralizing contempt for its heroine, there is certainly another way of viewing the novel’s relationship to its own didacticism (in the sense that its upstanding behavioral codes also *feel* like violent transgressions against human freedom, and that the wildly transgressive Moll is also seductively vibrant). In fact, if we can understand the project of the English novel writ large to be, like that of the Russian novel, the attempted construction of self and society as compatible partners, then it may be said that it was precisely with Defoe’s second novel, the successor to *Robinson Crusoe*’s portrait of solitude, that this great program of narrative and social construction began in earnest (Watt 92). By the same token, *Moll* was also the commencement of the English novel’s troubles: the conflict between the equally demanding pulls of individual aspiration and communal well-being; the apprehension that in the real world and realist narrative, the weight of the past can never be cast off, and that genuine regeneration and reform for both self and community are unlikely; the tensions between the loose bagginess of lived life and the demands of narrative coherence, resolution, and form. If the English novel is a self-undoing genre, one that tends to be pulled in opposing directions and that finds itself unable either to

choose among or to integrate its various allegiances, then *Moll Flanders* may indeed be seen as among its first exemplars.

On the other hand, I would also like to propose that underneath *The Comely Cook*'s rather cavalier appearances lie the very same serious questions (about personal and communal integrity, about the possibility of reconciliation and rescue, and about the capacities of realist narrative and the Real itself) that occupied its nineteenth-century successors. If Defoe looks forward to Dickens with his complaints of irremediable social and personal ills, then perhaps Chulkov looks forward to Dostoevsky, not only in his carnivalesque spirit, but also in his more sober concerns and motivations. In other words, my sense is that *Moll Flanders* and *The Comely Cook* share deep affinities in terms of their most exigent impulses but that they also diverge in ways that speak volumes—and that, taken together, they can be understood as the starting points of two novelistic traditions that harbor similar fantasies about personal and collective relief while functioning under radically different assumptions about the mechanisms of, and the possibilities for, its achievement.

This is not to say that *The Comely Cook* presents us with any sort of affirmative accomplishment on the part of its lowlife heroine or its anarchic collective, or that it is any more restrained than Gasperetti claims it to be. Rather, I would like to suggest that it is the very unresolved disarray manifested by both Martona and her community, as well as the radical openness and untidiness of its narrative form, that allow it to avoid the bleakness of Defoe's final vision and that constitutes its hope.

With *Moll Flanders* the English novel, like so many of its fictional characters, may be said to have begun in error. As Defoe's original title page synopsis puts it, this is the narrative of a woman who lived "a Life of continu'd Variety...[as] Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife...[and] Twelve Year a Thief"—a heroine whose shifting identity both depends upon and figures a decided ethical dubiousness. Moll, it seems, begins her journey in a condition of relative amorphousness: she reinvents herself multiple times throughout the course of the narrative, exchanging not only means of subsistence (usually illicit) but also lovers, acquaintances, living arrangements, habits of dress, and aliases. In this sense, her tale appears to take on a distinctly unfettered quality: in the mutable personal identity and questionable moral standards that she exhibits, in the sexual freedoms that she allows herself, in the license she takes regarding matters of law and the personal property of others, and in the literal mobility that she enjoys (her roving take her throughout England and even as far as America), there appears to be little tying Moll Flanders down. As Virginia Ogden Birdsall writes, "the impression she leaves us with is one of virtually perpetual motion" (73).

Indeed, there is something terribly shocking about the way she successively unburdens herself of her very own children, delivering and depositing them into the hands of others with the nonchalance with which she performs the complementary activity of lifting other people's goods and especially of picking their pockets. This is a woman who, at first glance, seems blithely unencumbered by the past—both the weight of a fixed personal identity and the biological productions of the body. She also inhabits a narrative that appears to do likewise. As Susan Paterson Glover points out, nearly all of Moll's children ("the two children from her first marriage, the son of the Bath lodger, the

son conceived with Jemmy in England, and the two children with her banker husband”) not only get left behind by their mother but also “vanish from the narrative” (123)—as though Defoe were eager to aid and abet his heroine in her ethic of good riddance. If Moll is a loose woman, then Defoe’s novel is a loose text: riddled with inconsistencies, it seems to forget where it has been just as carelessly as it disregards where it is going. Watt points out that Defoe not only eschewed the practice of revision, but he also seems to have begun paragraphs and even sentences without knowing exactly how they would end. Perhaps, in fact, the text’s apparent indifference to the expectations of narrative coherence figures its heroine’s disrespect for lawful authority, traditional morality, and the conventions of good behavior. Or conversely, perhaps its insistently syntagmatic propulsion mirrors the wanderings of a rogue protagonist whose life is essentially a run-on sentence.

This blatant disregard and insouciance on the part of character and author may be part of the reason that, as Lincoln B. Faller writes, Moll seems to “begin...again and again” (54); as a character whose personal standards and behavioral motor seem to require no particular fidelity to the past, Moll appears to live a life of continual fresh starts.⁶ And surely this kind of free-for-all ethic has something to do with the peculiarities of the true beginnings and endings of her tale, which many critics regard more as mechanical facts of the narrative than as organic aspects of Moll’s existence. As

⁶ Moll herself speaks frequently of “ha[ving] the World to begin again” (89), a requirement that Wicks, writing in reference to the sixteenth-century Spanish picaresque *Guzman de Alfarache*, refers to as the book’s ethic of “Volver de Nuevo” (“to beginne the world anew”), which he sees as virtually “the picaro’s condition” (244). For the model picaresque hero, however, the perpetual remaking of the self is an adventure, whereas Moll’s phrasing has the tone of a complaint. This notion—that perpetual “beginning again” is a burden for Moll—certainly stands in contrast to the sense of liberty in the text as discussed above, and it is just one of the many ways in which Defoe’s text exhibits a marked ambivalence toward the very looseness and freedom that have sometimes been seen as its generic characteristic. These are the tensions that will be explored below.

Faller points out, in that Moll was raised by several successive sets of parent-figures, she has “more than one point of origin” (54). This indeterminate beginning matches what Maximilian Novak calls the “open ending” of her story (*Realism* 74), presumably in reference to a conclusion in which her fate remains unsealed, at least insofar as she is still alive when the book ends.⁷ Indeed, in the preface the authorial voice itself seems to sanction Novak’s opinion: “We cannot say indeed, that this History is carried on quite to the End of the Life of this famous *Moll Flanders*...for no Body can write their own Life to the full End of it” (viii). Putting aside the question of Defoe’s (or his stand-in’s) generic designation here—whether this is a novel, an autobiography, or a “history,” for example—it does appear that, in a variety of ways, the textual mechanisms have granted Moll, in E. M. Forster’s words, “freest play” (344); in the successive transformations that it depicts and in the (inherently unfinish-able) autobiographical form that it assumes, Defoe’s text seems to ensure that Moll will never have to put a period on her life—that she will continue to be “always beginning, always starting over, unendingly vital” (Faller 54).⁸ That this portrayal of Moll’s story as perpetually unhindered, flexible, and loose also renders her morally licentious and socially threatening seems to be the suppressed thought lurking beneath the celebration of her extraordinary vitality.

And yet there are a number of ways in which Moll turns out to be significantly less mobile, unencumbered, and generally loose than she may at first appear. In fact, I

⁷ Other critics agree. Faller says that Moll’s tale is “without a definite end” (54), and Watt writes that Defoe does not “show any clear intention of winding up his plot with any sense of completeness or finality” (105).

⁸ This notion of Moll Flanders’ serial survival beyond the page may be said to be literally true, in the sense that after the novel’s publication, as Novak writes, she “quickly assumed a life of her own as a master criminal and master survivor, living on in chapbooks that Defoe would scarcely have recognized” (*Realism* 17).

would like to suggest that her most celebrated qualities are somewhat deceptive—or that, at least, they are strenuously countered by equally imposing forces (of stasis and constriction; of the endurance of the past, the fixity of the beginning, and the doom of the ending) that operate at every level of the narrative and make any definitive reading of the novel open to debate. For not only is the text pulled by opposing impulses, but, as we will see, each set of impulses itself bears conflicting implications as either a source of possibility or an assurance of ruin for our heroine. In anticipation of my argument, though, I will say that I read *Moll Flanders* mostly as a deeply pessimistic novel, in which the life of the individual in relation to the world is envisioned as a paradox from which there is no exit.

To start with questions of motivation: what does Moll want? As an eight-year old, she starts to cry when her foster mother tells her that naturally she will “go to Service” when she is “bigger,” and in an extended scene evocative of Pip’s fateful conversation with Magwitch on the Marshes, she confesses that she intends to be a “Gentlewoman” when she grows up.

Why, what? said she, is the Girl mad? what, would you be a Gentlewoman? Yes *says I*, and cry’d heartily, till I roar’d out again. . . . Sometime after this, . . . my good Nurse told [the Mayor] the whole Tale: He was so pleas’d with it, that he would call his Lady, and his two Daughters to hear it, and it made Mirth enough among them, you may be sure. . . . [But they] did not understand me at all, for they meant one Sort of thing, by the Word Gentlewoman, and I meant quite another. (4-5)

Although Moll’s interlocutors are all amused by her naïveté and “Prattle” (6), their shared levity overlooks her insistence that there has been a misunderstanding. Whereas they define gentility in terms of an ineffable combination of birth, money, independence, good

breeding, and manners that delineates social class in England, Moll attempts to “[explain] myself negatively, that [a gentlewoman] was one that did not go to Service, to do House-Work....., that I understood by it no more, than to be able to get my Bread by my own Work. . .” (5-6). Moll, of course, does not understand the absolute distinction in the social imagination between manual labor and gentility, but there are also a number of ironies in play here, including the fact that Moll herself will change her mind about what it is that she wants (eventually allowing, when she is older, that “a Tast of Genteel living” has given her “quite other Notions of a Gentlewoman. . .” [7-8]). The larger irony is that Moll cannot possibly predict that her fantasy of supporting herself “by [her] Fingers End” (4) and by means of what the Mayor’s family refers to mockingly as her “Gentlewoman’s Hand” (5) will one day be realized in one of her most lucrative careers—as a pickpocket and a thief.

Similarly, Moll seems to be pursuing not a better social position per se but rather an entire state of being, one that might be identified, despite her evasions and wide-ranging meanderings, as an all-encompassing condition of stillness and self-preservation. Her travels are propelled by the search for a permanent lodging and a cessation of motion: she begins her adventures fantasizing about marriage to the elder brother of the family with which she is temporarily residing (the person who, significantly, is due to inherit the family estate), and her activities throughout the rest of her narrative—both her romantic liaisons and her forays into larceny—constitute the pursuit of “a settled State of Living” (90). By the same token, as critics have noted, whatever her transgressions and immodesty, there is always an element of strict decorum and self-discipline in Moll’s day-to-day behavior: John J. Richetti even points out that though she “swoons several

times” throughout the novel she does so “only in private” and “never loses control in [a] public fashion” (137). Many readers have also noticed the surprising restraint, and even a certain element of prudery, with which she describes the sexual act, whose “Secrets” she is usually prevented by “Modesty” or “Decency” from revealing (39, 14). These perceptible instances of narrative withholding mirror not only the frequent ambivalence with which she carries out the deed itself, but also the self-censorship that she demonstrates in the context of a great many subjects; as critics have noted, her memoirs in general “reveal her preoccupation with self-concealment at the very moment that self-revelation begins” (Birdsall 92), and she “seem[s] under a double compulsion to expose and to conceal” (Brown 70). Whatever the exhibitionism involved in Moll’s daily behavior and in her act of authorship, in other words, she also engages in a considerable amount of covering up, just as she seems to be equally concerned with roaming free and settling down.

This tension between containment and release can be seen particularly clearly in Moll’s attitude toward possessions: for if in a certain sense she seems to live a life of perpetual casting off, it turns out that she is in fact just as strenuously engaged in the business of gathering in. Many critics have pointed out the frequency with which Moll gives us lists of her assets at any given point in her story, an obsessive stock-taking that bespeaks not only hoarding tendencies but also a rather methodical housekeeping and bookkeeping streak. Birdsall writes that “she devotes all her ingenuity to the piling-up process,” as though it is “the accumulating instinct [that] drives her on and on” (81), and Samuel L. Macey points out that “we seem to know Moll’s approximate stock of cash and gold watches at almost every important juncture in her life” (18). And though her

methods of acquisition are suspect, she is surprisingly orderly with her goods once she has acquired them. Perpetually terrified that “all...[is] going to Wreck,” she makes sure to keep in “reserve” (41) a certain amount of her assets in case of future catastrophe, and in general, as Birdsall writes, she “likes things to be neat and clean” (79); considering the prospect of having to don rags as a disguise, Moll complains that “I had been bred up Tite and Cleanly, and could be no other, whatever Condition I was in; so that this was the most uneasie Disguise to me that ever I put on...” (183). When she finally acquires her own little cabin on board a ship bound for America, we see this “passion for order” (Birdsall 79) in full force, her evident pleasure in naming her provisions and furnishings matching her delight in acquiring and arranging them:

Now I had a Cabbin and room to set things in; I order'd abundance of good things for our Comfort in the Voyage, as Brandy, Sugar, Lemons, &c. to make Punch...and abundance of things for eating and drinking in the Voyage; also a larger Bed, and Bedding proportion'd to it; so that in a Word, we resolv'd to want for nothing in the Voyage. (229)

Surely this rather bourgeois image of filling a room and of taking precise inventory stands in direct contrast to all of the illicit evacuations that Moll performs: of watches from the pockets of others, of previous identities in favor of new personae, of children from her womb, her care, and her memory.⁹ The Bank of England was founded in 1694, about thirty years before *Moll Flanders* was published, and in many ways the novel and the heroine's behavior reflect the relatively new system of organized saving,

⁹ This association between picking pockets and delivering a child is compounded when, just before she begins her thieving career in earnest, a pregnant Moll falls under the care of Mother Midnight—an underground midwife who assists women in disposing of unwanted children, either before or after term, and who is also involved in the traffic of stolen goods as a pawnbroker.

storing, and stock-taking that characterized Defoe's time.¹⁰ At a certain point Moll does in fact consider "Lodg[ing her] Money in the Bank" (93), and during her visit there she becomes indoctrinated into the new order, under which her money would accumulate interest and allow her to buy stock: "hardly...a clearer antithesis" to be found, according to Robert Alter, "to the picaresque attitude toward money, its significance, and its uses" (70). That it is unclear, at the end of Moll's bank trip, whether she in fact ends up depositing her money—the business of her visit becoming lost in the depiction of the romantic advances of the banker, which she evades at first but to which she eventually succumbs when she marries him within forty pages—only bespeaks the perfect ambivalence that she exhibits toward notions of keeping and being kept.

It seems that Moll is perpetually torn between the impulse to discard and to amass, to let go and rein in; as well as between the desire for freedom and for stability, motion and stasis. In fact, upon closer inspection, this tension between holding on and letting go is evident even in her treatment of her unwanted offspring, her most egregious acts of abandonment: for the truth is that, though she may bemoan her condition, she refuses to abort the pregnancies with the procedure that Mother Midnight offers her, insisting instead on carrying all of her children to term, "gr[owing] Big" (114), heavy, and immobile with each one and allowing the filling out of her body just as she stuffs her cabin with vials of brandy and sugar. Her abstention from an immediate termination, followed by her subsequent abandonment of her babies, speaks to the fundamental

¹⁰ Many critics, including Lindner, have pointed out that though the story is set in the 1680s, Defoe "delineated the world of his readers rather than focusing on preceding periods." An example is his depiction of the "craze for painted calico or the emergence of banking services" (Lindner 259). These characteristics, furthermore, might properly be understood as an element of Moll's Puritan heritage, with its insistence on the continual taking stock of one's soul and on "on possessing...[it] intact from a sinful world..." (Watt 91)

conflict between stillness and flight that characterizes so much of her behavior—the oscillation between the two states becoming a pattern in her history and her confusion about these matters often incarnating itself in her syntax. As she says of her final pregnancy, “my Apprehensions were really that I should Miscarry; I should not say Apprehensions, for indeed I would have been glad to miscarry, but I cou’d never be brought to entertain so much as a thought of endeavouring to Miscarry, or of taking any thing to make me Miscarry, I abhorr’d, I say so much as the thought of it” (114). In the self-revisions and self-justifications here, as well as in the confused vacillation between desire and fear, we see the workings of a mind engaged in a perpetual tug-of-war. In fact, from this perspective even the forsaking of her infants may be seen to bear a double valence, either as a feat of relinquishment or else as an act of “putting in reserve”—their commission into the hands of strangers much like the prospect of storing money in the bank. When toward the end of her story Moll reunites with Humphry, one of her now-grown sons, to find that he has accumulated interest—he is in possession of a large estate that is officially hers—this feature of her behavior may be said to have borne fruit.

Most critics see Moll’s refusal to abort her pregnancies as a sign of the slim scraps of morality that even she retains. If we have been dividing her behaviors into a series of oppositions—containment versus release, settling down versus wandering free, decorum versus immodesty, self-concealment versus self-exposure, order versus disorder—it does seem as if the first element of the pairings represents the ethical, socially sanctioned behaviors of the law-abiding citizen, while the second set represents the debaucheries of the criminal self. But my sense is that the question of morality here is actually beside the point, and that the problem, for Moll Flanders and *Moll Flanders*, is

that both sides of these dichotomies are admirable and deplorable at once. All of Moll's various inhibitions and acts of preservation can be seen as bearing a double valence.

Critics often point out that Moll's acts of narrative and social self-restraint are perhaps not so much nods to decorum as they are gestures of withholding (or that the two are the same thing): her propensity for concealment in the writing of her memoirs indicates, as Richetti says, that "selfhood is a matter of secrecy" (128), or as Brown writes, that "secrecy seems to be an absolute precondition of self-revelation" (70). Her conspicuous displays of etiquette may similarly be related to a hypertrophied sense of privacy.

Anxious about the prospect of "losing control" in public, she keeps secrets from virtually everyone she meets, including all of her many husbands—hiding from them the truth of her circumstances, her past, and even her real name (which the reader also never learns). This kind of stealth, rather than testifying to the capacity for civilized self-restraint and the core decency of her character, reflects the ontological condition of criminality—the archetypal activity that, as Richetti points out, "demands...secrecy" (128). Her descent into crime is depicted as a gradual toughening, her final trip before she begins thieving taking her to a series of aptly-named locations—from "Stone in Cheshire" to "Stony-Stratford" to "Brickill" (127-8)—as she herself begins the process that eventually will bring her to "that pitch of Hardness, common to the Profession" (126) in which she herself has "degenerated into Stone" (201). That this "mastery of reserve as a hardened criminal" (Pollak 204) bears a distinct resemblance to all of her more estimable acts of prudence and economy should go some way to indicating the predicament in which she finds herself, one in which any act, whether it be of constriction or of slackening, inevitably bears criminal implications.

In the context of such muddled causes and effects, perhaps it would be helpful to ask not what Moll wants, but what does the novel want? Or rather, what is the novelistic conundrum for which Moll's behavior is the objective correlative? For the difficulties encountered in this world are not Moll's alone, nor are her more troublesome features a mere matter of personal fault. I would like to suggest that much like *Bleak House* (as we will see in the next chapter), *Moll Flanders* presents us with a picture of a systematically sick society—of a communal malaise in which any form of commerce between individuals, between self and world, and between inner and outer generally is characterized by paradox and violence. For example, though there are some instances of surprising generosity depicted in the narrative—when as a child Moll finds herself helpless and alone she comments that “some of the Neighbours ...took... Compassion of me” (8), and she is taken in for a time by a well-to-do family; as a grown woman Moll herself acts benevolently toward Jemmy, her one truly beloved husband whom she saves from the gallows, and she bestows a valuable watch upon her son Humphry—these exchanges are in fact morally ambiguous. Moll experiences her connection to the gentlewoman as a form of indenture, commenting shortly after she has been given a home that now “I was Hers by Right” (9); the gift that Moll gives her son is itself stolen goods—hardly an emblem of maternal bounty—and both Jemmy and Humphry refer to the “Debt” they have incurred upon receipt of Moll's possessions (216, 245). Even when we are introduced to Moll, in utero, she is apparently not experiencing unequivocal nurturance and care: as the unwitting agent of her mother's eventual release from prison, the mitigating circumstance that allows her mother to “plead her Belly,” Moll is discharging her filial debt before she even takes her first breath (2). In the narrative's

universe, and in the chains of interdependence, abuse, criminality, and debt that characterize this society, any untainted, genuinely charitable or compassionate act is impossible, even in relations between parents and children.

In a sense, *Moll Flanders* can be divided into two sections, the first recounting Moll's life as a loose woman (a condition in which the self both produces and discards), and the second following her career as a hardened thief (a state that commences, appropriately, after her childbearing years have passed, and in which an empty self illicitly acquires the possessions of others). The problem is that both conditions bear similarly paradoxical consequences for Moll and for the community. The self-perpetuating violence of Moll's activities in her second incarnation as a hardened thief are all too clear; her tactics of appropriation and self-preservation deprive others of goods and resources and produce, in all likelihood, still more criminals in turn. But Moll's original position as a loose woman turns out to be just as noxious, in that her shedding of all encumbrances contributes to the weighing down and beleaguerment of the universe at large. Like other writers of his age, Defoe was worried about the question of overpopulation: "the problem," as Carol Houlihan Flynn writes, "of a city filling up with bodies" and putting a "strain...on the...economy" (6). With her "excess of fertility" (Flynn 70) and her tendency to abandon her offspring, Moll seems to be especially guilty in this regard, burdening the community with extra mouths to feed, crowding the city with needy, marginalized individuals who are ripe for the picking by criminal entrepreneurs, and exacerbating the reciprocal pathologies of overproduction and deprivation that are at once personal and communal. It seems that all acts of bestowing and withholding, of filling and emptying, are equally harmful gestures, bound together in

a perverse cycle in which each one either constitutes or follows upon the other in a complex exchange of impingement and vacancy that in the end depletes everyone.

Indeed it seems to me that it is precisely with the oscillations, ambivalences, and contradictions that characterize Moll's position in relation to her society—and specifically with the conflicts between limitation and freedom, containment and release, and, generally, abstinence and license, with each side of these dichotomies equally problematic and no position promising transcendence or integration—that the novel form begins to distinguish itself from the picaresque and that the English novel in particular is born. For many English novels, I believe, the conflicts, perversions, and paradoxes from which both Moll and her world suffer are incurable; they are often burdened with the suspicion that all undertakings or choices are double-edged and self-defeating, and that the vicious entwinement between society and self is thoroughly self-perpetuating. In *Moll Flanders* in particular, all acts are not only ambiguous in and of themselves, but they also do distinct damage to others and to the outside world generally—which then, in turn, impinges upon and wreaks havoc on the self.

As the foregoing should make clear, Defoe's loose text, like his wayward heroine (Watt's assertions about his authorial carelessness notwithstanding), is far from uncontrolled. Indeed, for all of its picaresque qualities, *Moll Flanders* is not only a conspicuously crafted narrative, but also one with a broad overarching pattern. Various critics have pointed out that Defoe's novel exhibits many of the qualities of both spiritual autobiography and criminal biography (a popular genre in England beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century)—two narrative forms that have been seen as

instrumental in the development of the novel in general and whose influence may have something to do with this novel's complex shape. Both spiritual autobiography and criminal biography have a predictable narrative trajectory; as case histories and conversion tales, they follow the descent into error of a protagonist whose "criminality proceeds...by gradations" (Faller 11) and whose spiritual decline is a matter of "ongoing, cumulative development" (Starr 142), but whose climactic confrontation with his fallen condition leads eventually to enlightenment, self-realization, and redemption.¹¹

Especially in spiritual autobiography (and its ur-text, Augustine's *Confessions*), the narrative is structured as a series of episodes which, from the perspective of the endpoint and under the aspect of eternity, prove to have been governed from the outset by providential design; the text's apparently haphazard and generally errant course turns out to have been predetermined, just as the seeming proto-picaro moves toward a predestined conversionary moment. Thus toward the middle of *Moll Flanders* the heroine, after falling into a life of crime, bares her soul to a minister, repents of her former ways, and finds herself propelled, if not into glory, then at least into an apparently enlightened condition of prosperity and probity: she is reunited with her son and her one beloved spouse, inherits a fortune, and, after sojourns in Maryland, Carolina, and Virginia, returns to her native land. If Moll seems to be cured of her criminal ways to end the novel triumphantly, then the community appears to benefit as well—not only the community of the novel itself, which can experience the removal of at least one criminal threat from its midst, but also the community of readers, which may take heart that Moll's

¹¹ For more on criminal biography (both as a genre, and as it relates to Defoe), see Lincoln B. Faller, *Crime and Defoe*; Hal Gladfelder, *Criminality and Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England*; and Gregory Durston, *Moll Flanders: An Analysis of an Eighteenth Century Criminal Biography*.

transformation indicates that regeneration and reform are genuine human possibilities. That this triumphant conclusion comingles the fates of the individual and the collective—and also imbues the work, in retrospect, with the estate-building itinerary of a Jane Austen novel—speaks to the way in which *Moll Flanders* may be considered a template for, or at least a preview of, the English novel as it would develop in the following century.

But then again, nearly all readers of *Moll Flanders* question the authenticity of its heroine's conversion.¹² By this point in the novel Moll has experienced so many metamorphoses and adopted so many different personae that we may suspect this particular experience to be something other than a lasting transfiguration. We also have witnessed a number of preliminary mini-repentances that Moll herself suggests were fraudulent, even though (or perhaps especially because) she comes to these admissions in her typically digressive, free-associative way: “it was repenting after the Power of farther Sinning was taken away,” she tells us of one of them; “I seem'd not to Mourn that I had committed such Crimes, and for the Fact, as it was an Offence against God and my Neighbour; but I mourn'd that I was to be punish'd for it; I was a Penitent...not that I had sinn'd, but that I was to suffer” (198). In addition, we have become so accustomed to Moll's rather dull, formulaic expressions of self-criticism and self-blame (repeated laments about her “hardened heart,” “degeneracy,” and “past life of a most wretched kind”) that when the conversion finally arrives we are likely to be skeptical. To be sure, these self-indictments are expressed retrospectively, from the point of view of the

¹² As Novak writes, Moll's “conversion to Christianity...is without much of the wit and complexity to be found in most sections of the novel” (*Realism* 93); according to Everett Zimmerman, though “she is repentant...the effects of her wicked life have not mysteriously disappeared by the time that she writes the book” (76).

conversion itself, and thus constitute a kind of meta-commentary on the narrative we are reading sequentially. They also might be considered, in secular terms, expressions of a rather active and punishing super-ego, an internalized version of the punishing civil authorities that now operates in collusion with them. But either way their piety and earnestness are suspect, completely inconsistent and out of character in terms of the wild, imaginative, bad-girl Moll we are reading about.

Indeed, in the preface the author himself seems to plant the seed of doubt, indicating that at the end of her life Moll “was not so extraordinary a Penitent, as she was at first” (viii) and that her memoirs were written “in Language, more like one still in *Newgate*, than one grown Penitent and Humble, as she afterwards pretends to be” (v). The scene of Moll’s conversion is presented with the appropriate drama and heightened emotion; it is a blessed moment of spiritual “revival,” and Moll feels as though she has been “brought...into such a Condition, that I never knew any thing of in my Life before: I was cover’d with Shame and Tears for things past, and yet had at the same time a secret surprizing Joy at the Prospect of being a true Penitent, and obtaining the Comfort of a Penitent” (209). But while the conversion is presented as a grand unburdening and as a moment of “reviv[al],” the event, in truth, bears all the shadows of violence and criminality that plagued Moll’s pre-conversion existence. The experience is depicted as a rape, performed by a cleric who manages to “unlock...all the Sluces of my Passions” by “br[eaking] into my very soul” (208). And if the clergyman is portrayed as a predator and a thief, then Moll herself quickly resorts to her old criminal ways, lying to her confessor, keeping secrets, and entertaining fantasies about abandoning her “Lancashire husband” almost from the moment she embraces womanly decorum and settles down

with him. She even contemplates discarding Jemmy with the same cavalier attitude with which she once considered the prospect of miscarriage, telling us that “I...began secretly now to wish that I had not brought [him] from *England* at all,” even though she immediately retracts the statement with the pious assurance that “however, that wish was not hearty neither, for I lov’d my *Lancashire* Husband entirely” (243). In this confused oscillation between fantasy and obedience we may suspect that, for Moll at least, not much has changed.

There is also another way of looking at Defoe’s narrative and its heroine, which is to consider the possibility that all of those forces of patterning, settlement, and closure that pervade the text are themselves invidious, and that if Moll’s life and her story seem fated to remain subversively open, then from another perspective such freedoms appear to have been foreclosed from the very beginning. Like Moll herself, in other words, Defoe’s text suffers from a dual pathology of license and resistance in which neither impulse offers tranquility, transcendence, or cure for either the individual or the community. Just as, for Moll Flanders, efforts of containment and release are equally problematic, for *Moll Flanders* chaos may be criminal but pattern is a prison.

If the search for stasis in the novel is evident from the beginning, at least in terms of the heroine’s quest for a peaceful safe-haven, it is also the case that Moll’s efforts at abstinence and self-control keep us alert to the ever-present menace of the disciplinary state whose possession of the individual is absolute. Born in Newgate prison, Moll is a child of the state, almost the daughter of Newgate itself. Even upon her release from jail she remains a ward of the town magistrates, who prepare her for a life of domestic service—a fate that she evades by means of the criminal activities that result, in due time,

in her return to prison (“the Place,” as she describes it “that had so long expected me” [197]). Newgate, the crux of this loose (or deceptively loose) narrative about a loose (or deceptively loose) woman, is thus the gravitational center of a fictional universe governed by an insistently centripetal force: the annihilating power of the parent-state and the burgeoning sophistication of the English police.¹³ The emblem of a punishing temporal authority whose obduracy only inflames an intractable criminal element, Newgate is thus a center of spiritual and moral inertia, “a point on which nothing turns” (Gladfelder 124) and a place where no one is corrected.

Clearly there is a problematic conjunction here between the conversion tale (or the confession) and the detective story, and it is a conflation that may go some way toward explaining all of those troubling oscillations between retreat and advance that characterize Moll’s actions. That so much of Moll’s story constitutes both the quest for domestic bliss and the avoidance of the curse of domestic service represents just how fraught the notion of home is for her, and for good reason. When home is a prison, the place of one’s birth and the safe-haven to which one strives to return is the very same place from which one must flee. When Moll is incarcerated in Newgate as an adult she enters not only the site of birth and rebirth but also the location of nemesis and retribution. And as an emblem for a fixity of origins that constrains and predetermines all possible futures, Moll’s prison birth stands for the unalterable burden of one’s heritage, which can never be overcome completely.

¹³ As Gregory Durston writes, Defoe’s time saw significant advances in law and order in Britain and in London specifically; though “some locations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were virtually ‘lawless’ zones, others were comparatively efficiently policed” (11)...Even in the early 1700s the penal process was already significantly less arbitrary than the situation a hundred and fifty years before” (233). In fact it was well on its way to the developments of the 1830s, by which time the jury trial had been instituted and the police machine had nearly reached its “modern form” (233).

Perhaps the novel's fundamental complaint, then, is that every instance of rest and homecoming is also, for Moll, a form of incarceration. Wherever she finds refuge, she also finds herself in some Newgate simulacrum. The prison even seems to have inscribed itself onto her very body. She is stalled again and again by bouts of illness (often psychosomatic reactions to difficult circumstances) or by the exigencies of childbirth—that is, periods of rest that are also episodes of confinement. Newgate in this latter sense is the female body itself, which is at once a source of Moll's independence and self-sufficiency (in her stint as a prostitute) and an instrument of her captivity. Or more broadly speaking, Newgate is the emblem of the myriad psychic, biological, narrative, and social forces that are bound to ensnare the individual.

Ian Watt claimed famously (with many other critics following his lead) that Moll is in essence a “masculine” personality—that is, a “strong, active and dominant” character “brimming with agency and enterprise” (Lacey 3-4). Scores of feminist-inflected readings have interpreted the novel rather differently, however, looking upon Moll as an exemplar of female oppression: not only subject to the burdens of the female body but also trapped within inhibiting social arrangements and “patriarchal relations of dominance” (Pollak 213), one of “a community of women who are bound largely by gendered reproductive, socioeconomic and psychic ties” (Tsomondo 30). In support of the latter reading one might point out evident parallels between the innumerable exchanges of goods and money in the text and the circulation of Moll herself as she is handed from one man to another, a mere commodity caught in the perpetual motion of the capitalist system. But while the question of Moll's status as a woman is undeniably at stake here, I find the reading of Moll as victim ultimately reductive. As Watt points out,

sexual pleasure may have been one of the casualties of industrial capitalism for everyone, both male and female; in that sex, as a “non-rational factor in human life... is one of the strongest potential menaces to the individual’s rational pursuit of economic ends” (67), its repression or regulation may be considered endemic to the modern world, and not just for women. Another obvious contradiction is that she herself trades rather cannily in her own feminine wiles. And the issue is even larger than this, in that in her dual position as both subject and object (i.e., as a woman whose reproductive and generative capacity is also a source of bondage, as a sexual being whose allure leads as much to victimization as to profit, and as a robust individual who is also the plaything of forces larger than herself) she represents much more than the female condition, though she certainly represents that as well. In other words, in this very particular heroine Defoe dramatizes the predicaments of origins, inheritance, and social relations that encumber all individuals and that, as a general human endowment, ultimately transcend gender (though they are perhaps the burdens of women most of all). One might even say that Moll’s prison birth is a compelling figure for original sin.

In this context, an episode toward the beginning of the book is particularly instructive. After the death of her second husband leaves her destitute, Moll takes up residence in the Mint, the so-called liberty area outside of London that was once the location for the manufacture of coins and is now a refuge for criminals and debtors. For Moll the Mint is an ambiguous asylum, “a very private Place” (43) where she finds shelter, yet a home with a public history reminiscent of the financial misfortune that landed her there in the first place. In addition, having herself been traded like currency, the Mint is not so much a sanctuary as it is an evocation of her own origins—in other

words, a prison.¹⁴ Appropriately enough, the Mint is also the location of one of Moll's ill-fated schemes for self-transformation, since it is here that she begins to call herself, and in effect gives birth to herself as, "Mrs. Flanders." But with its echoes of the very beginning of her life, her chosen moniker, far from bringing about an immaculate new beginning, does not even serve as an effective disguise. "Flanders" was the trade name of the embargoed lace whose theft had landed Moll's mother in jail; by calling herself "Flanders" Moll, in effect, re-labels herself with the illegal brand, as well as with the maternal mark of criminality, that she already bears. And sadly enough, the pseudonym is also a dark portent of the future, since "Moll Flanders" is the identifier invented for her by the Newgate convicts before her arrest, even though, according to Moll, the "Rogues never knew ...[that] I call'd myself Mrs. *Flanders*, when I sheltered myself in the *Mint*" (154). By a rather extraordinary coincidence, then (or rather, by means of an uncanny confluence of events), the name that she receives on two separate and apparently unrelated occasions seems to have been foreordained by her maternal inheritance and destined to seal her fate. In the first instance the disguise and reinvention are inexorably shadowed by her prison origins; in the second instance the name conferred by inmates resentful of their famously elusive comrade eventually marks her as a repeat offender and leads to her felony conviction.

In the same way, the "True Name" to which she refers with such reverence, and which she refuses to utter as if it were a sacred artifact, is an ambiguous signifier—both the sign of Moll's fantasied reinvention (which is also, inevitably, an imaginary

¹⁴ It is important to note that Newgate itself is also a "vortex of capitalism" (Chaber 187), a place in which criminals trade in stolen goods and where, as Moll says, nothing is done without "the help of Money" (209). Though the walls of Newgate may seem to offer a reprieve from the perpetual circulation in which Moll has been caught, the prison is itself a microcosm of the London scene: an enclosed space roiling with criminal transactions.

recapturing of a primordially innocent past) and the token that grounds her all too firmly in reality (the real historical past and her inexorable destiny). For if, on the one hand, it represents, according to Robert A. Erickson, the “precious illusion of...[the] original self, the innocent, life-bringing child” (49), then it is also, as Hal Gladfelder says, the signifier that “bind[s] her to her mother, biological origins, her birth in the condemned ward, and a criminal genealogy...” (128). Like the pseudonym, the true name is a mechanism of bondage, and it is kept secret from the world not only because it is a wishful token of an inviolable private self, but also because it is an inherited stain. In fact, for Moll any name, any fixed identity, is precarious, exposing her to discovery, arrest, and imprisonment, or any number of “the diverse forms of social regulation and control” (Gladfelder 130)—surely incontrovertible evidence of her limited personal agency and overwhelming entrapment in grim patterns.

And then, of course, there is the matter of incest—perhaps the most telling emblem of the connection between Moll’s problem of identity and the plague of pattern and repetition. Nearly every one of Moll’s sexual encounters is tinged with some conflation of, or confusion between, sexual and sisterly love: from her first attachment to the elder son of her foster family, who hands her off to his younger brother, leaving her to commit “Adultery and Incest” with her now brother-in-law “every Day in my Desires” (39); to the banker who woos her with assurances that “I will serve you as faithfully as if you were my own Sister” (96); and even to the beau who during their first night together maintains a respectful distance and leaves her “as innocent for him as I was the Day I was born” (80). To some critics, such as Douglas Brooks, the seeming inevitability of the incest pattern calls for a psychoanalytic reading (although, in truth, probably any mention

of this subject evokes Freud, if only as an adversary). According to this interpretation Moll, consciously or unconsciously, is an agent of her own destiny, with the first episode functioning as a primal scene that sets the stage for a compulsive series of reenactments. (One might even locate the trauma even further back in her life story, and say that domestic settlement is out of the question for Moll because she is psychically arrested in the nuclear family of childhood, endlessly playing out the troubled attachment to her mother.) Brooks also adds a quasi-feminist gloss to his reading, suggesting that Moll courts and marries her own half-brother (her third husband, Humphry) as an act of revenge, and that the revelation of incest is intended to sicken him, because “a man must suffer as she suffered” (43).

But I think that the incest motif functions much more generally in the text, and in a way that does not necessarily require this kind of pathologizing of the heroine. As Ellen Pollak writes, “incest is a possibility always present in not knowing where one belongs” (202), and as such it may be considered, ontologically, the sad fate of the abandoned child. Oedipus himself, we recall, suffered just such a catastrophe as a result of his parents’ desertion, whether or not we choose to read his story as evidence of either individual or universal wishes. In *Moll Flanders*, the social and psychological complexities of human sexuality are intensified by the circular patterns that govern the text, in which each seeming advancement is revealed to be an almost diabolical return to origins. Many critics, for example, have commented on the scene in which Moll is crushed by a mattress ejected during a house fire, seeing the burning object as metonymic of the burden of sex that dogs the narrative. But perhaps more attention should be paid to the dwelling from which the object has been hurled—that is, to the mattress as

metonymic of home itself: a nostalgic icon of nurture and ease in the collective imaginary, but a hotbed nonetheless, based on generations of fierce passions and fiery human couplings. For Moll, the pull of sexuality and the pull homeward are the very same thing: a genuinely cataclysmic coincidence in which she risks being crushed by one and burned by the other. When she finally learns, during her first trip to America, that the husband with whom she has journeyed is also her brother, she bemoans the catastrophe as “the most unexpected and surprizing thing that perhaps ever befel any Family in the World” (71). But in a universe in which every act is both overdetermined and repeated, and in which every step forward draws one ineluctably home, incest is perhaps the least surprising occurrence of all.

Moll discovers the tragic truth of her situation from her mother-in-law, whom she calls “Mother” and who she soon learns is in fact her biological mother, another instance of the perverse predictability of this narrative and the convergence of advances and retreats; in gaining a mother-in-law at the same moment that she regains a mother—in acquiring a mother twice over—she essentially loses both. The same is true of the so-called New World in which Moll is presented with this information, which itself turns out to be anything but “new.” Already colonized by transported criminals from England, Virginia is populated by men and women who have been “burnt in the Hand” (60); in a revelatory moment Moll’s mother displays the “Mark” of the criminal by “pulling off her Glove...turning up the Palm of her Hand, and shew[ing]...me a very fine white Arm and Hand, but branded in the inside of the Hand, as in such cases it must be” (60). Hands in particular have been sites of interest throughout the narrative: as the appendages responsible for exchanges of all sorts, they are the basis for human industry and craft but

also for our more illicit activities (as we have seen, Moll's "Dexterity" [153] as a pickpocket is an outgrowth of her "nimble[ness]" as a child, when she earns her keep by being "a good Hand with my Needle" [7]). In this way, the marked hands of the transported criminals suggest not only the illusory quality of personal regeneration, but also, on a larger scale, the likely transmission to the New World of the Old World's flaws. Just as it is in the New World that Moll's past catches up with her, the entire community is blemished by old scars, the material evidence of histories that cannot be expunged and the physical manifestation of the transfer of England's seedy underbelly to this shining new land. Of course, Moll's mother tells her reassuringly that "some of the best Men in this Country are burnt in the Hand" (60): "we have...several Justices of the Peace, Officers of the Train Bands, and Magistrates of the Towns they live in" (60). But whatever notion of starting over is represented by America, a nation, just like an individual, is haunted by its history, and what Moll's mother describes, essentially, is a regime of criminals. When Moll later receives a stay of execution and for a second time follows her mother's path to America, the voyage, which is literally a return rather than a fresh starting out, bears such a weight of personal and collective repetition that we can expect only a crushing outcome. Surely the pun inherent in the name of the prison has never been more cruelly paradoxical than in the history of Moll Flanders, for whom Newgate is anything but a gateway to the new.

And indeed, all of the tokens of success that Moll accumulates in her second trip to America—the husband, Jemmy, whom she brings with her from England; the son, Humphry, with whom she is reunited; the estate that she inherits—take their place in the continuing pattern of her unfortunate existence. Jemmy is certainly Moll's most

convincing attachment, if only because he too has a criminal past and bears the shadow of Newgate. But as shared heritages go this is certainly a sad one, and as Brooks points out, the “incest motif” (48) even carries over to this marriage, since the so-called sister who had introduced the couple in England is now revealed by Jemmy really to have been his “Whore” (104). Humphry, the son who is also Moll’s nephew, commemorates his low-life heritage in his very DNA (and in fact, Humphry introduces Moll to his American relatives as his Aunt, seemingly unaware of the accuracy of that designation—much in the same way that Moll once addressed her mother more correctly than she knew). Humphry also perpetuates his dubious legacy insofar as he is the medium of his mother’s own inheritance of land and wealth: a perversely backwards transfer of assets from the child to the parent reminiscent of Moll’s prenatal rescue of her own mother from the gallows. Perhaps the stolen watch that he receives in return—the token of his mother’s gratitude—is significant mostly for its semiotic value, a totemic relic of this confused multigenerational mess.

In the same way, Moll’s securing of her mother’s estate, the culmination of her journey—and the development that ought to have washed clean all the defilements of her past—is hardly an unambiguous victory. The bequest is described explicitly as a redemption: the maternal legacy is transformed from burden to bounty and the cycle of toxic attachments to criminal mothers (Mother Midnight, her governess) is broken; patriarchy is vanquished in this transaction between mother and daughter; Moll is reborn as a self-sufficient matriarch. In other ways, though, the inheritance rewrites the story very little. Though handed down through Moll’s mother, the estate was the original property of her mother’s master, thus carrying “vestigial reminders” of male dominance

(Pollak 213). Moll herself, rather than assuming the matriarchal role, returns to England with Jemmy and leaves the property to be managed by Humphry—so that, as many critics have pointed out, she never does seem to rise above her existential condition of dependency, which in the New World as well as the Old seems to afflict women preferentially. (There is no indication, for instance, that the best *women* in the country are those who, in the words of Moll's mother, have been burnt in the hand.) Yet even Humphry, her son/nephew who takes over the estate, now symbolically shoulders the legacy of his criminal grandmother and his mother/aunt, remaining in America with the promise that a wife will be shipped back from England—hardly a propitious start to any future family of his own. With all of their blighted hopes, even in the land of opportunity, each and every character is oppressed by the past, the body, and the structures of communal life.

Upon her arrest and incarceration as a thief, Moll had mourned that “if I had but been sent to any Place in the World, and not to *Newgate*, I should have thought myself happy” (198). But of course it is precisely the prison—that all-too-sturdy emblem of her shameful origins, her wayward inheritance, and her inevitable destination—that renders any peaceful habitation out of bounds. Or, at least nearly so, for there is in fact one meager instance in which she does experience a sense of emancipation: aboard the ship to America, where, as we have seen, in the privacy of her own cabin she wallows in material abundance and enjoys a newly acquired, pristine, and luxuriously appointed bed. Moll, in other words, enjoys a room of her own only at sea and in transit: in a realm more or less outside the law, the state, and her own quotidian existence, in which time is arrested and place is an amorphous in-between. Of course, the experience is buoyed by

fantasy, and this single glimpse of transcendence is fleeting; the voyage is also a transportation of England's burdens to America, and the sea (what with storms and pirates) is hardly a safe haven for one's possessions. This watery interlude may be a brief moment of relief, but it is hardly a successful baptism.

The sadness of Moll's predicament is further evident in the status of the novel itself, a first-person account that reads as a narrative version of the ship's cabin—a place in which she may carve out her own niche, although this time in a manner that might endure. But even within her own memoirs Moll is not the mistress of her domain. Many critics have been troubled by the preface to *Moll Flanders*, in which the author (or rather, the self-identified Daniel Defoe) explains that “the original of this Story is put into new Words, and the Stile of the famous Lady we here speak of is a little alter'd, particularly she is made to tell her own Tale in modester Words than she told it at first” (v). While giving Moll “leave to speak” (1) in her own voice, the author also, as Thorell Porter Tsomondo says, asserts his authority as her “editor” (13) and overseer, the supervising intelligence that not only introduces her tale but also “wrap[s] it up...clean,” “finishing [it]...put[ting]...it into a Dress fit to be seen, and...[mak]ing...it speak Language fit to be read” (*Moll Flanders* v). Moll's memoirs, far from operating as an instrument of self-expression, are yet another punitively confined space in which she is disciplined and objectified by the regulating force of a (male) other, who spruces her up before sending her out into circulation—this time on the literary market.

Once again, this underlying dissonance between the female individual and the male authority dramatizes the larger problem that the novel fails to solve: the incorporation of the private self into the larger world and the regulated community. All

of Defoe's novels, writes Jerry C. Beasley, "dramatize the irrelevance and marginality at the heart of individual experience" (54). We are left with relatively little consolation at the end of Moll's story, whose seemingly happy conclusion is undermined from all perspectives and whose quest for recuperation and integration—of the individual, of the collective, and of the two as a pair—ends in quiet failure. That the beckoning sanctuary of home for Moll is indistinguishable from incarceration may in fact speak volumes about the characteristic pessimism of the English novel generally, a form that, from this perspective, seems to embrace the ethos of the spiritual autobiography without enjoying its metaphysical assuredness, and that insists on the achievement of closure and stasis while worrying that its own law and order mechanisms may be fundamentally misguided. Indeed, if Moll's final settlement in landed property and in family life situates this novel as a forebear to Jane Austen and to the English novelistic tradition as it would develop in the following century, then perhaps the notion that all of Moll's achievements are indelibly tainted reveals with sinister force the anxiety lurking in so much of the tradition as a whole (including the ways in which the troubles of modern life are often expressed as the difficulties of fitting into the world as a woman).¹⁵

But it is important not to forget the measures that *Moll Flanders* takes to convince us otherwise, its strenuous attempt to end in connubial bliss mirroring its heroine's refusal to acknowledge the sad truth of her final position. In fact, while throughout most of the narrative Moll had been rather frank in her avowals of ambiguity and paradox—she frequently plays with simultaneous assertion and nullification, telling us of one of her

¹⁵ Certainly, the domestic felicity that coincides with the ending of Jane Austen novels is, as many critics have pointed out, anything but an unambiguous accomplishment.

malfesasances that “this was a Robbery and no Robbery” (183), and of one of her suitors that “he had *a Wife*, and *no Wife*” (93)—she is never able to express the paradox that is perhaps the source of all the others and that serves as both the beginning and the endpoint of her story: the notion of both having and being a “mother and no mother.” This is finally the taboo that the novel and the protagonist cannot speak, just as it represents the buried anxiety that Moll, at the termination of her multitudinous journeys, ends up no further along than where she began, her narrative both perpetually open and hopelessly closed at one and the same time. And as I hope the next chapter will demonstrate, this unspokenness is another characteristic that will be inherited by the nineteenth-century English novel as we will examine it through *Bleak House*: a book that similarly both thematizes and operates under an ethic of suppression and that, along with its protagonist, keeps secret its deepest wounds.

I would like finally to step back from the idiosyncratic details of Moll’s history and address the question of what, in the broadest terms, is holding Moll and her narrative back. It was Watt who made famous the notion that, along with Richardson and Fielding, Defoe’s innovation lay in his realism: the specificity of person, time, and place that would become such an important characteristic of the developing novel form. But Watt was far from the first to point out this quality of Defoe’s prose: according to Novak, “it was Sir Walter Scott who first tried to explain the ‘general charm attached to the romances of De Foe,’ by referring it to ‘an appearance of reality to the incidents which he narrates’” (*Realism* 9). Dorothy Van Ghent writes of *Moll Flanders* in particular that “Defoe’s book describes minutely the local scene, London; it refers circumstantially to contemporary customs...it employs ‘documents’...in order to increase the illusion of

verifiable fact; and, in general, it aims at ‘objective,’ ‘reportorial,’ ‘photographic’ representation, as if from the standpoint of an artless observer” (30). Whatever objections we might propose to this notion of the author as mere onlooker, it does seem to be the case that “the whole book is oriented toward what we call ‘facts’” (Ghent 30). From the assumption that *Moll Flanders* herself was most likely based on one or another notorious female criminal from Defoe’s time,¹⁶ to the notion that Defoe’s style (his “factual plainness” [Starr, “Prose Style” 132]) was in part indebted to the scientific prose output of the Royal Society in the eighteenth century, it appears that Defoe’s novels are firmly grounded in the material world and the here-and-now.

Novel theorists frequently consider this commitment to verisimilitude—in Arnold Kettle’s terms, the privileging of “life” alongside “pattern”—as both an element in the genre’s tendency toward excess and an aspect of novelistic freedom. More decisively than other narrative forms, novels embrace the subjective sense of randomness that characterizes most lives; hence all of the “loose, baggy monsters” of the nineteenth century. But perhaps more to the point is that in Defoe (and also, as we will see, in Dickens), the novel functions under a reality principle that delimits the realm of the possible, and realism is as much a matter of constraint as it is of flexibility and inclusiveness. If for *Moll Flanders* pattern is imprisoning, then, in this work in which all apparent alternatives are instantiations of sameness, so is “life.” At every level of the narrative the burdens of the material world, and specifically of the body, are portrayed with onerous specificity. Moll is encumbered not only by her social and ontological

¹⁶ Proposed candidates for the title of the real-life *Moll Flanders* have been Moll King, Moll Harvey, Mary Godson, and Moll Cutpurse—some of whom, it is hypothesized, Defoe might have met and even interviewed while he was himself either a visitor or an inmate at Newgate (see Durston 5).

condition as a female, but also by the very particular demands of the female body; the New World is blemished not just by the sordid histories of the characters who inhabit it, but also by the very scars they bear on their bodies; the criminal underworld of London is a realm not just of lawlessness and fear but also one of crowded bodies in claustal spaces. In every way Moll's failure to overcome her birthright is connected to the very "intransigence of materials" (as Flynn calls it [6]), which both determines and represents the permanence of psychic scarring, the elusiveness of personal or spiritual transcendence, and the unattainable recovery of pristine integrity for both the self and the collective.¹⁷

Hence Woolf's claim that Defoe's "matter-of-fact precision" is characterized by a quality of "dryness" or "dull[ness]" (15-16), and Martin Price's sense of the "bleakness of Defoe's world of measurables" (in Bloom 37). The pessimism associated with realistic detail is conveyed explicitly in one particularly telling episode toward the beginning of the novel when Moll, in one of her first forays into thievery, filches a bundle from a child. As she tells us, she "walk'd away...turning into *Charter-house-Lane*, made off thro' *Charter-house-Yard*, into *Long-Lane*, then cross'd into *Bartholomew-Close*, so into *Little Britain*, and thro' the *Blue-Coat-Hospital* into *Newgate Street*" (172). Of the entire book, this topographic survey of the London streets gives us what is perhaps the most concrete view of the real-life urban scene. And surely the termination of the passage, and Moll's passage, in yet another Newgate speaks volumes about her position as a character imprisoned in a realistic novel: a form whose adherence to the Real

¹⁷ In fact, according to Flynn, matter to Defoe is so intractable that the cannibalism and disease depicted in *Journal of a Plague Year* are actually an imagined "killing cure" to solve the problem of overpopulation that plagued his city (and his narratives). See Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* 149-177.

amounts to a bondage to the facts of matter, a drive toward endings that are always determined by one's beginnings, and a route that always leads back to one prison or another.

In examining *The Comely Cook* in conjunction with *Moll Flanders*, we note from the start the absence of any authorial intervention in the Russian narrative. As Garrard writes, “the moralizing of Defoe’s novel would...have repelled Chulkov,” who allows his heroine, Martona, to be “left alone with her reader” (*Mixail Čulkov*, 124, 129). This reticence on Chulkov’s part speaks volumes about the difference between these two narrative worlds, although perhaps Chulkov’s hypothetical response to *Moll Flanders*, as Garrard imagines it, does not do justice to the British work’s subtleties, or at least to its contradictions. For if there is indeed a “moral” to Defoe’s story, it seems to lie beneath, and perhaps even to exist in conflict with, whatever explicit declarations—about the correctable self, communal harmony, the prospects for recovery and moral regeneration—we may find there.

Nevertheless, the easy-going, laissez-faire manner of *The Comely Cook* is a far cry from *Moll Flanders*’ overt tendentiousness. Just as surely as the prospect of punishment plagues Defoe’s novel, authority figures of all forms, as Gasperetti says, are “noticeably lacking” in Chulkov’s text, which is permeated with a spirit of all-embracing permissiveness. Not only is Martona free from the author’s annoying scrutiny and censure—not to mention the surveillance of the police and ever-present prospect of arrest and punishment—but she herself also seems to be remarkably adept at letting herself off the hook. As Gasperetti writes, “neither regret nor self-condemnation ever enters the picture” for the Russian heroine, who “shows none of the self-loathing and reluctance so

common to *Moll Flanders*” (27). This sense of playfulness and ease in *The Comely Cook* does not preclude serious intentions, however. As we will see, the two works may be said to embody similar aspirations for personal renewal and communal reconciliation, though they approach these goals from different directions and with different assumptions.

Right from the start, in the author’s preface, we recognize something distinctive going on in *The Comely Cook*. Dripping with playful irony, the preface makes no mention of Martona but presents instead a mock-philosophical exposition, carried on in prose and verse, about the text we are about to read. Whereas the speaker in Defoe’s preface promises to “wrap...clean” and “make...fit” the rather daunting extravagance of his raw material (to make it “comely,” as it were), Chulkov introduces Martona’s story with a kind of devil-may-care fatalism about human impotence and the vast indifferent universe: “Everything in the world is perishable [“составлено из тлена”], and accordingly, even this here book of mine, inscribed to you, is perishable. Everything on earth is mutable [“коловратно”]; and so this book now exists, will exist for some time in the future, and will eventually decay, disappear, and leave everyone’s memory” (288). Of course, in *Moll Flanders* the narrator’s claims are paradoxical, since Moll’s recursive entrapment in scenarios of doom almost takes on a life of its own, and the guiding hand of this sprawling narrative seems more cosmic than authorial. Nevertheless, the ethic of control that is evident in Defoe is utterly absent in Chulkov, whose tone of insouciance extends to his reflections on his own role as narrator. Switching to verse—an abrupt genre shift that effectively merges form and content in the structure of a document that is labile as the universe itself—he tells us that “You can find all of my errors

[“Погрешности”] here,/ But, my friend, don’t judge them harshly,/ Mistakes are natural to us, and weaknesses appropriate,/ All mortal creatures are accustomed to making errors” (289). Along with the preemptive self-criticism contained in the lines themselves, the sudden transition to poetry prepares us for the amorphous, untidy narrative that follows. Indeed, the title is perhaps doubly ironic, since the novel is not only a rather uncomely specimen, but it is also a fairly unmeticulously prepared confection. All of these qualities effectively lull the reader into a mood of good-will and acceptance—of the improvised text, the narrator’s shortcomings, and our own human imperfections and inevitable decay.

The story of *The Comely Cook* goes on to trace a trajectory whose consummation is blatantly absent: the tale ends with Martona poised at the apex of a love triangle, a termination so inconclusive that some scholars believe that the text, which is headed by the designation “Part I,” must be a fragment of what was intended to be a larger work.¹⁸ Martona herself seems to share the author’s disenchanting pragmatism: as she tells us early on,

I was always of the opinion that everything on earth is inconstant [“непостоянно”]; when the sun is eclipsed the sky is continuously covered in clouds, the seasons change four times each year, the sea has both low and high tide, the fields and mountains are now green, now white, birds shed their feathers and philosophers change their systems—so how can a woman, who is born to such changes, be expected to love one man for her entire life? (304)

¹⁸ Alexander Levitsky writes that the assumption that Chulkov’s narrative is unfinished originated with V.V. Sipovsky and was passed on to scholars such as D. Blagoi and J.G. Garrard (107); Harold B. Segel wonders whether Part II was forbidden by the literary censors (26). According to Levitsky, though, there is no evidence that Chulkov had plans to continue his text (107); and as Gasperetti writes, “textual evidence suggests that [Chulkov] probably never intended to write a second part” (78). For the sake of taking a side in the debate, I will say that the correspondence between the announcement of narrative and corporeal disintegration in the author’s preface and the ellipsis of the ending seems to me strong enough to justify treating the work as a completed whole. But in a sense, Chulkov’s intentions hardly matter, not just because of the “intentional fallacy,” but also because a work that proclaims itself to be about the vagaries of material life reveals a fundamental presumption of inconclusiveness.

Along with the author, Martona accepts the ever-shifting nature of the universe, including the “inborn inconstancy” (“врожденное... непостоянство” [303]) of the female sex. She is unabashedly fickle, moving throughout most of the narrative (as well as through encounters with her many male partners) without any of the guilt or nagging psychic discomfort that plagues Moll and confident that her sexuality is part of the ineluctable forces of nature: “many of our sisters will call me immodest; but since this vice is natural to the majority of women, so, not wishing to be called modest against nature, I will give myself over to it [пускаюся в него] willingly” (290). As Viktor Shklovsky writes, “toward her profession—which consists in the frequent exchange of paying lovers—she bears a free and easy attitude...[she] is transferred between hands as uneventfully as a young man changes occupations in the traditional picaresque novel” (114-15). And unlike Moll, whose reticence in these matters is matched by a propensity for secrecy regarding her possessions, her identity, and her past, Martona has a streak of uninhibited exhibitionism—a predilection for ostentatious display that she presents, yet again, as a simple fact of nature. As she tells us after her first conquest of a gentleman who showers her in luxury, “the more fineries a woman has, the more she desires to show herself around town”—which she proceeds to do, parading about the streets to the point that “many people recognized me” (291).

Martona also seems to be remarkably free of any of the residue, traumatic or otherwise, of her past. Her memoirs commence with a reference to the death of her husband in the Battle of Poltava—a rather formidable loss that catapults her into the life of a loose woman, but one that she manages to “completely forget” (290) once she has moved on to her first romantic conquest. By the same token, she seems to be shockingly

unmindful of her family origins: as she writes of an effort to deceive a lover, “I told him so well about my family that neither he nor I could tell for certain what my origins were” (306)—a confusion that is mirrored by our own ignorance of Martona's beginnings, and indeed, of the direction in which she is heading. As a woman who genuinely carries no burden of pre-narrative history and whose capacity for fictional self-creation and moving on remains unfettered, Martona’s trajectory appears virtually limitless.

Moreover, if all of the restrictions afflicting Moll and her world are represented by Newgate Prison, then perhaps the lenience of Martona's universe is suggested by the conspicuous lack of any such restraining presence in her text. Significantly, in *The Comely Cook* civil institutions of supervision and correction are mentioned only in the context of their absence or ineffectualness. By about the second page of the novel, Martona has passed through one romantic liaison and has embarked on a second as part of a transaction that is described as an “auction,” replete with a witness and a symbolic contract: but, she tells us, “since such contracts are never registered with the police, it remained binding for us without any official authorization” (“как такие контракты не объявляются никогда в полиции, то остался он у нас и без всякого приказного порядка ненарушимым” [292]).¹⁹ And though Martona, like Moll, does find herself in

¹⁹ It may be worth, here, rehearsing what the word “politsiia” meant in the context of eighteenth-century Russia. The first incarnation of an independent, specialized police force was ushered into Russia by Peter the Great; although police functions existed in the Russian government before his rule, it was only with the Petrine reforms that a specialized police bureau under a police chief—charged with such matters as supervising building construction, maintaining street cleanliness, pursuing loiterers and drunks, ensuring fire safety, and the like—came into being. The first organized police forces were established in St. Petersburg in 1718 and in Moscow in 1721; in the provinces, specialized police organizations did not emerge until later, though more informal methods of law enforcement (supervision by elected civilians) existed even before the Petrine reforms. Under Catherine II, there was a general relaxation of investigative methods (Catherine, for example, renounced the use of torture), but even under her reign there was a significant police presence, especially as it came to matters of censorship and, interestingly, prostitution. Certainly, then, I do not mean to claim that there was no police presence in Chulkov’s Russia—quite the contrary—but rather that the absence of the police in his text is notable, and it speaks volumes about the Russian realist imagination. (For more on the history of the police in Russia, see V.M. Kuritsina (ed.),

prison in the middle of the narrative, there is nothing momentous or even particularly lawful about the incarceration; it is presented not as a moment of grand social and psychic reckoning but as an ad-hoc act of personal revenge,²⁰ and she escapes quickly with the help of yet another lover. What also is evident here is that in this precapitalist society sexuality is not only unregulated but also uncommodified; unlike Moll, Martona is uninhibited not only in terms of an absence of internalized moral or ethical prohibitions, but even by any potential squeamishness about her own objectification as an item of trade. What we find in *The Comely Cook*, then, is a heroine, a narrative, and a universe that are similarly free-floating: unencumbered by accusation, judgment, punishment, or regulation; uninhibited by formal restrictions; free from the weight of secrecy, a sense of personal illegitimacy, or other psychic obstacles; and unaffected by the pull of a fixed past and a predetermined future. It is almost as if in the Russian rogue narrative we are functioning under a radically different system from that of *Moll Flanders*—one in which the nonexistence, or at least the ostentatious impotence, of the civil authority stands in for very different ideas about judicial, domestic, psychic, and narrative resolution.

Perhaps one could say that the unstoppable Martona is simply more of a picaresque heroine than Moll is—that the complicated design of *Moll Flanders* and its portrayal of a regulated society suggest that with Defoe the English novel had already embarked on the morally serious course of its nineteenth-century avatars, whereas *The Comely Cook* is a more straight-forwardly picaresque specimen. But I think that Chulkov's text is

Istoriia politsii Rossii and S.P. Zviagin, A.B. Konovalov, and S.V. Makarchuk, *Politsiia i militsiia Rossii v XVIII-nachale XX vv.*)

²⁰ She is thrown in jail by the sister of her current lover—certainly a situation bearing little resemblance to the impersonal (albeit, in eighteenth-century England, inchoate) police machine that pursues Moll Flanders.

considerably more ambitious than such a generic designation usually connotes, and that piquant social satire is the least of its many accomplishments. In fact, I would like to suggest that *The Comely Cook* envisions the possibility of success in the very social and psychic arenas in which *Moll Flanders* limns inevitable failure, and that it enacts this promise of wholeness precisely by allowing its protagonist, its society, and its textual envelope to remain fundamentally—loose.

Many critics have pointed out that Martona is not the same person toward the end of the text that she was at the beginning—and as Kevin J. McKenna says explicitly, “a classical picaresque is not supposed to change” (19). Garrard speaks of the “subtle transformation in her character” (“Narrative Technique” 561); Shklovsky says that “she becomes different” and refers to the “change in her relationship to life” (“перемена жизнеотношения героини” [116]). Indeed, from the very beginning, self-critical comments about her former failings (“virtue was unknown to me” [295]; “I did not know that there was such a thing as gratitude” [296]) suggest that by the end she has experienced some sort of awakening or conversion.

Readers have pointed to Martona’s dungeon cell as the site of this transformation and the events that occur there as the “turning point of the novel” (Garrard, *Mixail Čulkov* 133). It is in prison, as Garrard says, that Martona first learns about love and appreciates “generosity”—specifically, that of Akhal’, her former lover who collaborates with his friend Svidal’ in her release—and it is here that she first experiences the kindly sentiments that will guide her behavior throughout the rest of the story.²¹ It is also the case that the jail is the birthplace of the stormy emotions whose fluctuations determine

²¹ See Garrard, *Mixail Čulkov* 133 and “Narrative Technique” 561.

much of the plot that follows, specifically those that result in the love triangle among Martona, Akhal', and Svidal'. When, a few pages after the prison episode, Akhal' and Svidal' fight a duel and Akhal', thinking Svidal' dead, announces his crime to Martona, we see her newfound ardor in full force:

From this incident I discovered what the passion of real love is like...I thought, that I had lost the whole world, when I had lost Svidal', and the loss of my own life seemed to me as nothing, I was completely ready to follow him to the underworld...Springs opened in my eyes, and I shed tears without holding back at all ["без всякого воздержания"]...I was ready to endure anything and to die without fear, just in order to pay back Svidal' for the loss of his life. (315-16)

The woman who had previously parted from her benefactress "without tears" (296) now "shed as many tears as my eyes could hold" (312) and positively leaks with passionate grief; the philanderer whose first romantic attachment of the narrative was described, in a manner reminiscent of *Moll Flanders*, as a marketplace exchange, is now capable of loving another "without any bargaining" ("без всякого торгу" [316]); the rogue once intent on self-preservation is now eager to sacrifice herself for another.

These emotions are presented as sincere; Martona is neither a woman who conforms to conventional pieties nor a character with a rich inner life (though we do see some personal development, she is certainly less of a "round" character, in E.M. Forster's terms, than Moll is), and therefore reading her as either a conflicted heroine or an unreliable narrator would be out of the question. The reader has to take her on her own terms, and indeed, the image of the jailed heroine dissolving in tears provides a nice counterpoint to our vision of Moll's progressive hardening—from the initiation of her prison birth to her life of crime and malfeasance in a world of inescapable Newgates. Whereas in *Moll Flanders* the menacing specter of civil correction makes true penitence

impossible, the very structurelessness of the Russian prison makes it, paradoxically, a true penitentiary—almost an anti-Newgate. For Martona the prison is a place of benevolence, passion, and liberation (both emotional and literal), and the experience of incarceration is transformative.

The significance of this event to the novel as a whole can hardly be overstated. For one thing, the element of peripeteia has important formal implications, in that it lends the work a sense of accomplishment despite all of the loose ends of the final tableau. Shklovsky, for example, who strenuously disagrees with critics who see the novel as either a fragment of a larger narrative or else as an unfinished work, bases his judgment on the change we witness in Martona (“there is an ending. . .the novel, in essence, is finished, and therefore Chulkov could not continue it” [116]). Alexander Levitsky likewise sees *The Comely Cook* as a structural whole, particularly because of the correspondence between the beginning and end of the text, which opens, as he points out, with Martona's report of the death of her first husband and ends with the “projected death” of another (107). Of course, in order for a work to have formal symmetry there has to be a middle, a center around which the structure is organized. Although Levitsky does not mention this explicitly, there is a third death, or apparent death, in the novel that performs this function admirably: that of Svidal', which takes place in the middle of the narrative and coincides almost precisely with Martona's dramatic change of heart in prison.

But Martona's prison conversion has equally significant thematic implications, for the text itself and also in the context of this comparative examination. Unlike Moll Flanders, for whom the spectral presence of Newgate signifies a lifetime of errant

personal behavior and failed gestures toward satisfying domestic settlement (all of which add up, ontologically, to total confinement), Martona, and the narrative, are both organized and emancipated by the prison episode. If Martona is liberated emotionally, one might say that she is restrained sexually, but in a manner that manages to be salubrious without being stifling. Rather boldly, the Russian novel both embraces and eschews what would become the goal of marriage and domesticity for so many English novels, putting an end to Martona's sexual adventures without limiting her options entirely; throughout the rest of the story she remains faithful both to Akhal' and the providentially resuscitated Svidal' (who did not die in the duel after all), with her primary attachment shifting depending on the circumstance. And in the final scene, in which the three reunited companions weep together at Akhal's bedside, they are poised almost pictorially in a moment of mutual good-will and emotional unburdening that seems to suggest a promising future.²² Unlike Moll, whose final marital arrangement represents one more recapitulation of the entrapment theme, Martona and her lovers remain quivering with potential in what seems to be a racy threesome (although, as we will see later, it is perhaps more of a holy trinity), looking ahead to a story that is not yet written and in which nothing is settled, but in which possibilities for fulfillment have not been foreclosed.

More broadly, the notion that Martona's conversion and the integrity of the narrative are both made possible by the symbolic presence of the prison—and that a prison simultaneously anchors and liberates a text—suggests that all of the loose,

²² A bit of plot summary may be of help here. Akhal', thinking Svidal' dead, writes to Martona claiming to have poisoned himself (although, as critics such as Marcia Morris have pointed out, there are indications in the text that the poison may be fake, and that Akhal' may in fact not be dying) and bids her to come to his bedside. She comes with Svidal' in tow, Akhal' and Svidal' are reconciled, and the three are united in picture of simultaneous grief and bliss.

anarchic energies set adrift in the novel may lead not to inevitable dislocation and disappointment, but possibly to the experience of joy in a benign, tolerant universe. This can be seen even in Martona's flamboyant sexual life, which is portrayed as an openness to the experience of pleasure rather than as libidinous self-indulgence or vulgar carnality. Moll's shamefaced evasions and confused circumlocutions are unknown to Martona: as she awaits the arrival of one of her lovers she tells us, "I began to expect the fulfillment of my desires with the greatest pleasure" (305). Whereas Moll's inhibitions reflect a cosmic inertia that provides no way forward, Martona's hopeful anticipation indicates that contentment in her world, if certainly not guaranteed, is at least not out of the question.

Not surprisingly, the associative connections running through *Moll Flanders* (and, some would say, the collective imagination) between sex and money (or sex and material gain) are also evident in *The Comely Cook*, although here they are configured quite differently. Like Moll's conflicting behaviors of acquisition and hoarding versus distribution and shedding (of cash and gold, consumer luxuries, sexual favors, inherited wealth, and even her own offspring), Martona's actions are characterized by both accumulation and dispersal. On the one hand, she shares Moll's taste for possessions and sumptuous living: she revels in her fine clothing and tells us that with the money given to her by her first lover she buys so many "necessary things and trinkets" ("нужные вещи и безделицы") that "our home grew by the minute in possessions and increased in wealth" (291). On the other hand, one of the most prevalent words in her vocabulary is the verb "раздавать" (meaning, "to distribute," "to spread around," "to give out to many"). Toward the beginning of the narrative, for example, she refers to herself as "one of those beauties, who think that they are not responsible to anyone on earth, and distribute their

bounty generously” (“раздают сами благодеяния свои великодушно” [304]), and later the shopkeepers at the market are delighted by her lavish spending. Unlike Moll, with her compulsive stock-taking and compiling of debts and obligations, Martona both gives and receives gifts with pleasure, and throughout the novel one senses that she is driven more by a streak of good-natured, gregarious pleasure-seeking than by anything resembling Moll’s brand of covetousness; her activities, both of the sensual and commercial variety, are above all recreational. When, after her prison conversion, she positively glows with comeliness and good fortune, she reports with delight that observers say her true acts of bestowal have only begun (“я теперь только начинаю раздавать прелести мои мужскому полу по моей благосклонности” [313]), and she also decides to start exercising a bit of thrift (“быть поосторожнее и...запастись” [318]). Compared to Moll’s tortuous scheming and persistently blighted ventures, this combination of cheerful sensuality, amiable generosity, and realistic planning looks like the very definition of well-being. And despite the acknowledgment of future unknowns, we are left with a sense of optimism for Martona and her neighbors.

By the same token, while motherhood for Moll represents an unrelenting pull backward, not only as an obstacle to freedom but also as a reminder of the miseries of home and of her own beginnings as an abandoned child, Martona—who, despite her promiscuity, bears no children over the course of the narrative—looks forward to childbirth in the imagined future. As she tells us, Svidal’, during their love affair, “promised to give me 1,000 rubles if I bore a son who looked like him” (317). Certainly a skeptical reading of Svidal’'s offer is possible, insofar as it contains hints of the marketplace ethic that pervades *Moll Flanders* and also functions as a reminder of

Martona's appetite for sexual escapades. But in the context of the generally joyous, forward-looking mood of the scene as a whole, this proposal seems to have quite a different meaning. The emphasis is on Svidal's eager anticipation of parenthood, with the rubles a metaphor not for the commercialization of human relations, but for the outpouring of exorbitant emotions. And unlike Moll, who squanders her fertility, discards most of her offspring, and concludes her story as a barren and depleted woman, Martona is a vital presence in the closing pages of her unfinished tale, still in possession of her youth and with her childbearing years ahead of her. The imagined child in this sense is the anticipated fruition of her sensual loveliness and a great gift to Svidal'. Such a happy prospect is enhanced by the revelation that Akhal', on his deathbed, has signed over his property to Martona—the original theft having been transformed, unlike Moll's sadly belated inheritance, into a serendipitously leveraged asset. Whereas Moll both accepts and repudiates her mother's bequest, performing one more enactment of her lifelong pattern of ambivalence about the notion and reality of home, the prospect of a house for Martona and her potential family, despite the uncertainties of the future, contains the possibility of true homecoming.

This possibility is also founded on Martona's re-embrace by a tolerant and forgiving community—or rather, by a community that never rejected her in the first place. We notice from the outset that Martona is not the only rogue female in the novel—that there are many other so-called comely cooks (the euphemism with which she, or perhaps the community as a whole, refers to them). She speaks frequently about women “of our kind” (“нашего рода” [92]), and of “our sisters, that is, the same kind of comely cooks as I” (298). (In this context, in fact, even the titles of Defoe's and

Chulkov's novels may be instructive, since *Moll Flanders*, while ostensibly privileging an individual heroine, actually refers to a pseudonym and a conceptual nullity, whereas Chulkov's title, by contrast, positions Martona as submerged in a group, one of a band of sisters.) Indeed, loose women are not the only disreputable characters in the narrative, and sexual license is far from the only form of reckless or disorderly behavior. The novel is filled, for example, with economic and financial indiscretions of all sorts, from the theft committed by Akhal', to Martona's appropriation of a "salary" ("плату" [309]) from an old lover (in the form of pilfered items which she considers retroactive payment for services rendered), to the uncontrolled spending of Martona's first lover, who is described as a man who "spent money without a break" (291). What is remarkable, however, is how little criticism or moral opprobrium is directed toward any of these actions or individuals, and indeed how the permissive social order, like its amorphous penal institution, manages to be fertile ground for future bounty. Toward the end of the novel Martona is introduced to a "School of Love, or Home of Lawlessness" ("любовн[ая] школ[а], или дом беззакония") where young women seduce older men and older women seduce young men "regardless of [убегая от] chronology" (318). These names speak volumes about the novel's assumptions: that sexual adventure is a source of edification; that love flourishes where the law does not intrude; that what is considered a brothel to some is a home to others. It is as if the novel itself is governed by an ethic of hands-off and noninterference—as if the very inchoate looseness of the community, the heroine, and the narrative itself is the quality that represents promise and potential.

The tolerance of financial chicanery in particular makes sense because such activities are fundamental to the novel's general ethic of dispersal. Martona both gives and receives with alacrity, and for every instance of theft or loss there are equivalent examples of generosity and good fortune: the trinkets and finery lavished upon her, the gifts of money that are even exchanged from one man to another, the figurative accruing of interest on her stolen rubles and their return in the form of Akhal's estate. Indeed, the cultural laxity that makes such indiscretions possible is the same openness that brings about such fortuitous occurrences. In Defoe's universe money, possessions, and private property are fetishized commodities; their possession means success, their loss means ruin, and their exchange is always fraught in the context of human relations that are figured as economic transactions. In Chulkov's world, by contrast (and perhaps to the Russian imagination generally, for which the notion of private property was a rather late-arriving concept), money and possessions are ephemeral entities that change hands freely, and wealth is an entirely labile phenomenon.

This pervasive code of permissiveness in matters of money, private property, and crime in *The Comely Cook* is also connected to the generally obscure or indeterminate nature of family origins in the novel. A number of characters are said to be orphans, and significantly, despite Svidal's anticipation, there are no parent-child relations pictured at all. But unlike the essential orphanhood that for Moll is the consequence of maternal abandonment—and that has the effect of marking her indelibly as her mother's daughter—the parentlessness of Chulkov's universe appears to be a source of genuine liberation. This is a community that is emancipated from the burden of origins, inheritances, and genealogical determination. It is also a universe of primarily lateral

relations, and of brotherly and sisterly ties of various kinds, often not biological (Martona, for one, tends to regard nearly every female companion as a sister), with each generation seemingly left on its own to conceive of family as it chooses. One of Martona's lovers speaks more than he knows when he says offhandedly that "I had... a brother, who, however, didn't look a bit like me," for "one father does not always produce similar children" (307). Whether this observation about sibling variety should be taken as evidence of adultery, or as an uninformed theory of heredity, or as an existential statement about parents and children, the unwitting admission of maternal impropriety here is overshadowed, or at least accompanied, by the suggestion of a certain creative anarchy in the composition of his mother's household: a vision of a flexible and generously extended family circle in which illegitimate children, however their arrival is explained, are embraced, and in which sons are not replicas of their fathers. If Moll Flanders is encumbered by the weight of the past and the all-too-certain transfer of each generation's errors and malfeasances to the next, Martona and her compatriots are remarkably unconstrained and liberated from any such compulsion to repeat.

In this context, we may begin to understand one of the more peculiar episodes in Chulkov's narrative—the one in which Martona admits Akhal', the first admirer whom she genuinely loves, into her home by dressing him up as a woman and pretending that he is her sister and then, when the two are finally free to become lovers openly, announces that "I began to call my sister husband, and she [called] me wife" (309). Surely there is some reversal here of Moll's unwitting marriage to her brother, in which the romantic attachment is revealed to be incestuous, the apparent inception of a new family is a return to ancestry, and the hereditary endowment reveals itself, once again, to be a curse of

never moving on. In Martona and Akhal's case, what appears to be an affiliation based on acute family likeness (the love of two biological sisters) is in fact predicated on difference (the love of a man and a woman from separate lineages), and the sibling bond (an attachment fixed at birth) is imbued with all the forward-looking potential of a budding romance. Whereas Moll is forever plagued by the always-already problem of having slept with her brother, Martona flirts with the idea of incest—not to mention playing around with cross-dressing and same-sex eroticism: behaviors that exemplify her reckless abandon, to be sure, but that also have larger implications. Like the ménage à trois of the novel's final scene, which reflects the unhinging of traditional family arrangements, Martona's first loving attachment represents an explosion of the very notion of a fixed family circle, a radical deviation that imbues both romantic love and family relations with a sense of indeterminacy and promise.

Perhaps it is in part a result of this polymorphous notion of family, and the overall condition of parentlessness, that malefactors are treated so permissively in *The Comely Cook*. In a society in which goods are amassed and discarded haphazardly, money is dispersed carelessly, and losses are capable of being recovered, neither promiscuity nor burglary is particularly noteworthy, and in many ways these tendencies are epiphenomena of the general fluidity of marriage and family. This is a community devoid of police and civil authority *because* it is devoid of parents and paternal authority—or at least in which the two absences are so structurally intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable. If a fictional setting can be thought of as a discrete culture, then an ethnographically inflected reading of *The Comely Cook* and *Moll Flanders* would look at notions of crime and innocence, or of conscience, as determined by these cultural

peculiarities: that is, in the absence of parental authority, an overbearing police presence, or a formalized penal code—specifically in the absence of patriarchal prerogative, the so-called law of the father—wrongdoing is relatively uneventful in the first place, more on the order of mischief than of crime. Whereas Moll’s reflexive self-reproach leads her to regard nonmarital sex as a grave offense, for example, Martona is so self-forgiving that she is able to justify outright theft as a form of cosmic reparation. At the same time, whereas Newgate prison stands out as a cultural icon in *Moll Flanders*, the cell in which Martona finds herself is just a room. In this way, if Defoe’s work may be seen as an incarnation *avant la lettre* of the question of criminal justice reform (of what D.A. Miller has called the nineteenth-century English novel’s preoccupation with the problem of “police and offenders...joined in a single system for the formation and re-formation of delinquents” [5]); and if Newgate, its central image, is a stern, hulking presence that creates the very social ills it is supposed to redress, virtually giving birth to Moll and bodying forth criminals as surely as it incarcerates them—the prison in *The Comely Cook* functions more as a way station or resting place. Because without police and parents, there is no criminality to begin with.

It is fitting, therefore, that the two truly dire atrocities mentioned in the novel (the apparent killing of Svidal’ in the duel, and the attempted murder of the merchant by his wife, who is tricked into feeding him fake poison) are literally missing: the murders are not, in fact, carried out. They are, however, committed in fantasy, especially the second one, a complicated piece of play-acting that is recounted to us as a self-consciously artistic interpolated tale and thus may be considered a fiction twice over. We have seen such elements of performance, display, and fiction-making in the novel from the

beginning, especially in Martona's behavior, and in many ways communal life as a whole is portrayed as a game of dress-up; Akhal's transformation from lover, to sister, to husband is only one of many metamorphoses in a world in which one's role (as husband or wife, brother or sister) is never fixed. A person's social position is similarly unpredictable, susceptible to costume changes that alter one's status completely: when Martona meets her first lover, for example, she says about him and his companion that she doesn't quite know who is who because "one of them seemed to be the servant and the other the master, although the latter was dressed worse than the former" (291). But in a fictional world so conspicuously lacking in parents and authority figures, it is particularly unsurprising that crime is essentially make believe, and that criminality is bound up with a tendency to pretend. With no grownups in evidence, no threshold over which one crosses from childhood to adulthood, all activities retain the quality of play. And with no figures of authority on duty—no one making the rules or establishing the roles of parent versus child, cop versus criminal, master versus servant—life is just a series of role changes.

Perhaps it is this sense of a social order based on performance and spectacle that explains the merchant's decision, in the interpolated tale, to forgive his wife for her misdeeds. Indeed, he goes beyond mere forgiveness, even offering to buy a village in her name where she can live out the rest of her days in peace. In a text in which criminal acts are at most playful indiscretions, it is no wonder that clemency prevails. But perhaps the ending of the story is also instructive because it is specifically a husband who forgives a wife. In *Moll Flanders*, the crime that finally lands Moll back in Newgate is a theft from the home of a married couple. And in an episode that represents just one of the many

intrusions of a punitive, patriarchal culture, “the Mistress of the House [is] mov’d with Compassion, and enclin’d to...let me go,” whereas the husband insists that Moll “must go before a Justice” (197). In the amorphous world of *The Comely Cook*, by contrast, gender roles have the same indeterminate quality as all other social arrangements. As it happens, it is actually a woman who tries to keep Martona in jail, while two scenes that involve sojourns in bed—that most biologically encoded symbol of female submission—concern men who are shackled and suffering the indignities of the flesh, with one of them even in hemp fetters (“в пеньковых оковах” [322]) for his own protection. But more important, it is also the case that in *The Comely Cook* qualities of mercy and compassion are equally male and female endowments, and a woman is as likely to triumph as a man is. Like Martona at the end of the book, the female beneficiary of her husband’s largesse winds up not as a prisoner, but potentially as mistress of her own domain.

When Martona exchanges her first lover for his master, she is transformed virtually overnight into a gentlewoman, boasting that “one night transformed me into a lady [роспокою] and mistress over my former master” (294). This is quite different, we recall, from the ending of *Moll Flanders*, which more or less confirms the utter folly of Moll’s childhood yearnings toward gentility. Moll does become the heiress of an estate, and she might even be accepted as a gentlewoman upon her return to England (a matter that is open to debate), but the flimsiness of her final prosperity—her failure despite all appearances, and just as the teasing adults had predicted, to transcend her disgraceful origins—is an unavoidable conclusion. And in many ways Moll is the butt of an even larger social (or cosmic) joke, which is that she can enact her determination to be free, independent, and at the mercy of no one only by manipulating her already marked hand.

Whether her body bears the sign of the prison literally or only metaphorically is a matter on which the novel remains silent. But if Defoe's work conjures up an England that was already too proper and rule-bound to admit unambivalently the likes of Moll Flanders, instantiating the worry that in a complex, orderly society and in realist narrative transformation is unlikely and the private self always feels estranged, then every individual in this universe has to be considered, in one way or another, marked on the hand. By contrast, in the radical freedoms of *The Comely Cook*, nothing is foreclosed. In a world of orphans, rogues, and pretenders—in which law, paternity, origination, and legitimacy are all fictions, hierarchies are fluid, identity is malleable, and even women are liberated from their fetters—Martona can float all the way to the top, transformed in an instant to the heights that Moll could never attain.²³

Of course, Martona's fortunes soon plummet once again, just as her ascendance as the mistress of her own estate is in no way guaranteed. But perhaps the very anarchy of Chulkov's imagined world, the genuinely symbiotic formlessness of both society and self in the novel, and the amorphousness of the text prefigure the possibility of a consummate fitting in. In a 2004 article, Olia Prokopenko proposed the hypothesis that *The Comely Cook* is actually a fictionalized biography of Russia's first empress, Catherine I, based primarily on what she discerned to be biographical affinities.²⁴ This may seem to be a

²³ McKenna points out that one of the epigrammatic statements in the novel—"until now Makar was digging ditches, but now Makar is the Mayor" ("доселева Макар гряды копал, а ныне Макар в воеводы попал" [294])—suggests that "a completely unexpected change, from worse to better, may occur to anybody" (10).

²⁴ Prokopenko writes that Catherine I "may well have been a personal model" for Chulkov because her story "attracted [him] as an exciting account of social ascent." Her announced purpose in the article is to "compare characters and events in Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* with figures and episodes from Russian history of the Petrine period directly linked to Catherine I" to show that "in the figure of Martona...the author of the novel presented artistically the life of Catherine, Peter the Great's wife and, later, the ruler of Russia" (225).

fanciful suggestion, but perhaps it is only appropriate that in a novel in which the human trajectory is uncertain and unconstrained, and in a society that is willing to embrace the lowly and forgive the miscreant, Martona should be offered the possibility of that title. In Defoe's novel, Moll may wind up settled, but she does so as both mother and aunt of the same young man, who serves as a constant reminder of her marginality and shame. In Chulkov's, Martona's future remains unwritten. And with an eventual experience of luck—or grace—that can never be ruled out, she just might get to be the queen.

Indeed, an even more glorious fate may await her. For despite the satirical tone of the author's preface to *The Comely Cook*, the profane worldliness of its heroine, and the rags-to-riches story that the novel imagines, the text also embraces, or at least betrays, spiritual strivings that are unmistakable foreshadowings of the next century's preoccupations. The Christian echoes are obvious enough: the conversion and rescue of Martona; the deaths, or purported deaths of Svidal', the merchant, and perhaps even Akhal' (depending on how one interprets his final deathbed scene) that are followed by figurative resurrections; the spirit of charity (as symbolized by gift-giving) that is extended to even the most downtrodden in the community, testifying to the equality of all souls; the decidedly religious inflection of the quest motif, which centers on the search for permanence in a churning world; the flood of tears at the end that promises purification and a clean slate. But even in the most general sense, a heroine who is set loose in the cruel material world but sustains no truly devastating losses, and a plot that is structured around deaths that are not irreversible, upholds the promise that mortality is just a fiction, just as the absence of temporal authority and biological genealogy suggests the possibility of another, all-

embracing sort of parentage. Even the shape of the final love triangle has sacred implications, as risqué as that may seem.²⁵

Perhaps the emblem of this capacity for miraculous renewal—as well as the evident contrast between the spirit of promise enshrined in the novel and the deep pessimism of *Moll Flanders*—is Martona’s experience upon her escape from prison. As she tells us, after her release she regains her equilibrium (“я совсем исправилась”) within the space of a mere three days: her previous beauty is restored (“лицо мое получило прежнюю красоту”) with its former whiteness and suppleness intact (“тело наполнилось прежнею белизною и нежностью”), and indeed, there are no tell-tale physical signs (“совсем не было тех знаков”) that she has even been in prison (313). In fact, by the end of the episode, it is clear her trials have made her even stronger and more vital (“в еще лучшем состоянии”) than she was before. Unlike Moll, who is forever encumbered by the intransigence of the material world, Martona bears neither literal nor figurative marks on her hand. On the contrary, she seems to have experienced a salvific intercession that announces itself in her corporeal malleability: a corollary of the narrator’s early announcement that “everything on earth is mutable.” And whereas *Moll Flanders* is a frank Christian allegory whose fidelity to realism thwarts the pilgrim’s progress at every turn, *The Comely Cook* is a defiantly secular work that also promises deliverance and restoration.

It seems, moreover, that the narrative bears the stamp of Russian Orthodoxy in particular, especially the sustaining conviction that for every human being personhood is

²⁵ As Timothy Ware writes, in Russian Orthodoxy “our faith in God as Trinity means that there can be no true person unless there are at least two persons—or, better still, at least three persons—communicating with each other” (4).

a perpetually evolving state and that one's life is ever oriented toward a future experience of grace. Certainly, from this perspective, the open-endedness of Martona's story and the flexibility of her persona—as well as the sense of promise that pervades the novel, the forward-moving momentum of the plot, and the suggestion of Martona's potential future triumph—seem imbued with spiritual significance. Indeed, the characteristic idleness of Martona and the other characters testifies to a remarkable trust in providence. We repeatedly hear Martona saying things like “I didn't want to undertake anything” (291), and she gets to indulge her decidedly passive tendencies when both she and Svidal' find themselves as “idle people, or rather lazy” (“люди праздные, или бездельные”) who “had no responsibilities whatsoever” (“не обязан[ы]...никакою должностью” [325]). It also might be noted that unlike Moll, who is trapped within a state of all-encompassing indebtedness, Martona and Svidal' seem to consider themselves not only free of official obligations (“должности”) but also of financial ones [“долги”]. But perhaps such unconditional liberty is not so much a state of indolence as it is a condition of expectancy. Unlike Moll, whose quest for independence is conditioned by a world in which miraculous provisions are never forthcoming and in which self-reliance, especially for a woman, is chimerical, Martona, despite all of her familiarity with worldly loss, can sustain a faith in a sort of cosmic safekeeping, a kind of higher committedness that is ennobling rather than degrading.

It is not hard to see the glimmerings here of the later Russian realist tradition—a body of work that features idlers and slackers of all sorts, that often regards passivity as a virtue, and that presents individual indeterminacy, social chaos, and spiritual longings as figurations for one another. Indeed, perhaps Chulkov is often considered the “pioneer of

the realistic novel in Russia” (Goodliffe 130) not only because, as Richard Freeborn writes, *The Comely Cook* “may be regarded as the earliest satisfactory essay in the social-psychological form of novel in Russian literature” (2), but also because the work is an early specimen of what would become an illustrious tradition in Russia: of novels that have trouble settling on beginnings (as with Tolstoy’s difficulty with finding the starting point for *War and Peace*), that resist conclusions by promising sequels that never materialize (as in *Dead Souls* and, as we will see, *The Brothers Karamazov*), and that reflect, in their very structure (or lack thereof), the urgent aspirations of a culture engaged in the on-going process of forging of a national identity.²⁶ And so if Defoe’s work instantiates the worry (articulated perhaps most discernibly, in the nineteenth-century English novel, in the works of Dickens) that genuine self-integration is impossible in a complex, orderly society and in realist narrative, then perhaps the very anarchy of Chulkov’s imagined world and the amorphousness of his text prefigure the messianic impulses that would reach fuller expression in the works of Gogol and Dostoevsky.

Surely in Chulkov’s footloose heroine, his unhinged community, and his inconstant universe we see a foreshadowing of Chaadaev, who in 1836 would claim that the Russian people “are not related to any of the great human families” (27), and who goes on to ask:

Do we not all have one foot in the air? It looks as if we were all traveling. There is no definite sphere of existence for anyone...no rules for anything at all; not even a home...nothing lasting, nothing enduring; everything departs, everything flows

²⁶ Amy Singleton has written about the “expectation in [nineteenth-century] Russian society that the novel should express a cohesive cultural identity (a ‘Russian Russia,’ as Nikolai Gogol put it”) (3), and many critics have written about the connection between Russian cultural ambition and the utopian urges of nineteenth-century Russian prose. For a compelling discussion of this topic in the context of Dostoevsky’s life and works, see Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, Chapter 1.

away...In our houses we are like campers; in our families we are like strangers....
 (“Letter I” 28)²⁷

The fact that this assessment, which was actually a condemnation of Russian anarchy, was mistaken for approbation—and that it was adopted as a credo by Slavophiles and Westernizers alike—is perhaps a testament to the Russian capacity to bemoan the present state of communal disorder while simultaneously viewing it as a source of national promise. This positive spin on Russian disarray would become even more evident in Chaadaev’s “Apologia of a Madman” (“Apologia sumashchedshego”) in which, under pressure from the authorities, he reconfigured his reproving comments as a stirring manifesto, excoriating “the world”—by which he meant the Western world—that “is oppressed by its tradition” and exulting in the Russian alternative: “Let us not envy the world for the limited circle in which it flounders,” he wrote, for “the future belongs to us” (215).

What I am suggesting here, then, is that like Chaadaev’s letter, and like the many nineteenth-century Russian prose works that have been seen as glosses on it, Chulkov’s narrative can be read as messianic proclamation just as readily as it can be interpreted as social satire. One might almost imagine Chaadaev’s comment in his “Apologia” about the oppressed (non-Russian) world as a reference to Defoe’s heroine, his England, and his text, as if the Russian analysis of Western culture from afar were not so different from the English diagnosis *in situ*. And if *Moll Flanders* and *Moll Flanders* are apt representations of Chaadaev’s imagined West, then perhaps Chulkov’s heroine (whose

²⁷ Various scholars have made the connection between Chaadaev’s letter and the concerns and outlook of the Russian literary works of his period. Holquist discusses “the enormous sense of a void in their own past” (15) felt by nineteenth-century Russian authors in connection with Chaadaev’s first letter. See also Thomas Seifrid (“Suspicion toward Narrative: The Nose and the Problem of Autonomy in Gogol’s ‘Nos,’”).

earthly homelessness admits the possibility of sacred homecoming), his nation (whose collective parentlessness just might allow the formation of a universal brotherhood based on love), and his novel (whose condition of disintegration inscribes a form of wholeness all its own) present a Chaadaevian vision of Russia that predated Chaadaev himself.

In this way Chulkov might be seen as the initiator of a line of descent in Russian literature that places him as a direct forebear of Dostoevsky, perhaps by way of Gogol. Although it is not my intention here to examine *Dead Souls*—another contender for the title of “first Russian novel”—it is worth noting that the cultural enshrinement of Gogol’s Chichikov, and perhaps even Gogol himself, as the quintessential Russian hero may go some way toward indicating Russian culture’s continuing investment in its own exceptionalism, as well as its contempt for the tightly regulated structures (textual or otherwise) of the West—a world that is so crammed with institutions, traditions, and rules that even with signs of grace all around, it may be too crowded and distracted to notice. Gogol’s fictional writings have no explicit theological content; his novels are part social realism and part fantastical invention. But it is precisely in that conflation of reality and fantasy, and the vision of the exalted future in the degraded present, that the Russian Orthodox church declares itself: as a faith in which the Real itself, including the brute physicality of the human body, is malleable and ripe for spiritual transformation. It is no wonder that, in a culture in which the body and material existence generally are radically spiritualized, literary realism takes on a very different form from its Western counterpart.

Yuri Lotman explicitly compares Gogol’s fiction to child’s play and the transitional realm of make-believe, in which nothing is either a truth or a lie and

everything is instead “a new version of reality.”²⁸ “For Gogol . . . everything in life is real and possible precisely because everything is unreal” (Lotman 35). From this perspective, perhaps we can see how Gogol confers a paradoxical legitimacy on all of the pretenders who parade about his work: Chichikov, for example, whose dreams of social ascent are predicated on tall tales and hollow possessions; or Akaky Akakievich, whose self-abnegating retreat from the world is indistinguishable from megalomania;²⁹ or, notably, Poprischin, the deluded aspirant to the throne of Spain in “Diary of a Madman.” From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in Russia, according to Boris Uspensky, the notion of royal legitimacy was bound up with the “persistent myth of the pretender on the throne,” a point of view rooted in a manichean dualism in the Russian psyche that understood the true tsar as invested with “God-given power” as opposed to the “self-styled power” (263) of the imposters. Certainly, Chichikov is a liar and a charlatan, Akaky Akakievich is a self-obsessed cipher, and Poprischin is a certifiable lunatic. And yet perhaps in Gogol’s texts and his vision of Russia we may view these empty claims to the throne somewhat more charitably. For in a universe in which vacuity is a likely prelude to fulfillment, fiction and fantasy are the very stuff of existence, and the distinctions between “real” and “unreal,” “true” and “false,” and “icon” and “idol” are blurry. Indeed, perhaps Gogol’s world of play and pretend suggests that the religious roots of *samozvanchestvo* lie not only in notions of the divine appointment of the unique

²⁸ It should be noted that Lotman’s idea about “the potential variety of . . . unrealized possibilities” each of which was “just as ‘real’ as those that happened in life itself” (35) in Gogol looks forward to Gary Saul Morson’s notions of “sideshadowing” in the nineteenth-century Russian novel, discussed in the introduction.

²⁹ For more on Akaky Akakievich as a pretender, see Priscilla Meyer, “False Pretenders and the Spiritual City: ‘A May Night’ and ‘The Overcoat’” 71 in *Essays on Gogol: Logos and the Russian Word*.

individual, but in another aspect of Russian Orthodoxy as well: the idea that all people can achieve theosis, and that we all have a divine calling.

The suggestion here, then, is not necessarily that Chulkov initiated the relationship between realism and national messianism in Russia, or that he was the first purveyor of the distinctive elements in the Russian imagination that would animate Gogol (and later to Dostoevsky, as we will see in chapters 3 and 4), but rather that for all of these authors such proclivities were bred in the bone. *The Comely Cook* leads to Gogol not only in its general picture of potential for a corrupt heroine and community, but also in the more nationally and culturally specific features that we recognize in the work: in the impostors and tricksters who populate the world; in the connections, evidenced in Martona's behavior and in the author's literary persona, among linguistic manipulation, fiction-making, and the possibility of social elevation; in the kenotic self-emptying that characterizes not only Martona's conversion, but also the scene of tearful, communal bodily release at the story's end; in the critical suspicion that Martona is not only a royal pretender but also, potentially, a successful one.

In fact, Chulkov has been seen not only as a satirical inventor of lowlife protagonists but also, in other works, as a distinctly utopian thinker, one of the many searchers on the "quest for earthly paradise [that] has been one of the central focal points of Russian literature and culture" since Russia's conversion to Orthodoxy, and that has been seen as a dominant characteristic of Russian thought in the eighteenth century (Baehr ix).³⁰ And so perhaps these fantasies of a Russian utopia motivated his venture

³⁰ Stephen Baehr's book, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-century Russia: Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*, traces the myth of earthly paradise in Russia whose depictions, both in text and iconography and "represented by surrogates ranging from an island to the moon...usually had essentially the same legal structure, political system, and leadership as did Russia in the age of

into novel writing as well—especially a work that begins with the Battle of Poltava, the triumph that installed Russia as a leading power in northern Europe and that is conspicuously directed to an audience of like-minded compatriots. (Perhaps the most frequently used word in Martona’s vocabulary is the pronoun “наш,” “our.”) In fact, the debate regarding *The Comely Cook*’s claim to realism is reminiscent of the one that would later surround Gogol, just as the extra-literary aims that accompanied Chulkov’s writing (the elevation of the status of prose in Russia, which lagged behind the rest of Western Europe in its appreciation of the novel form) look forward to Gogol’s reputation as the man around whom the backward Russian literary tradition might finally coalesce.³¹ In other words, perhaps *The Comely Cook* is any early product of the various historical and cultural forces, and textual and extra-textual fantasies that would shape the novels of Gogol and Dostoevsky: the ambivalent Westward gaze; the quest for a cohesive national identity and literary tradition; the Russian Orthodox faith and the longing for universal harmony and brotherhood. And perhaps this shapeless work about a disordered

Catherine the Great” (113). On this subject his discussion of Chulkov’s tale “The Dream of Kidal” from the 1789 edition of *The Mocker, or Slavic Tales* is especially interesting. R.V. Kakurin and E.P. Titkov also provide illuminating commentary on this tale, which they consider “the most radical work of its kind in eighteenth-century Russia” (*Mikhail Chulkov: Tvorcheskoe nasledie* 96).

³¹ On the question of Chulkov’s realism, Garrard and Moiseeva and Serman take the affirmative position, insisting that *The Comely Cook* is indeed realistic, especially in contrast to the fantastic and sentimental work of his contemporary, Fyodor Emin. Citing the accuracy of the travel and geographical information in Chulkov’s novel, Garrard argues that it “is set in eighteenth-century Russia, not in some Oriental never-never land” (“Narrative Technique” 556). Moiseeva and Serman claim similarly that “the action occurs in Russia in a definite historical epoch...There is nothing fantastic or exotic about Chulkov’s novel...Martona does not live in the realm of ideal feelings and unusual passions” (58). Other critics disagree, including Alexander Levitsky, who points to the distinctly un-Russian names of the characters and the great liberties Chulkov takes in his description of Russian society (100), and who even argues, echoing the vocabulary of Martona herself, that the entire text is composed of “*imaginary* (fictitious, irrelevant, nonexistent) *words* (*nebyl’nye slova*) or simply *lies*” (101). As Gasperetti writes, “Chulkov has no qualms admitting that his fiction is simply contrived” (77). My argument here, however is that it is precisely the elements of fantasy, contrivance, and verbal play that make *The Comely Cook* a work of realism in the Russian, or “higher” sense. On the subject of Russia’s late-arriving entrance on to the novelistic scene, see Irwin R. Titunik (“Mikhail Chulkov’s ‘Double Talk’ 31) and Garrard (*Mikhail Čulkov* 135).

community and a “loose,” “вольная” woman (a term that in the Russian, interestingly enough, combines notions of licentiousness, liberty, and transcendence) is a quintessential expression of the intimation and the hope, held out so frequently in Russian realist novels, that it is precisely by means of indigenous Russian deviations and disorder that the nation’s true comeliness might be realized.

Chapter 2

Form and Body in *Bleak House*

Dostoevsky and Dickens are frequently placed side by side in discussions of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Their shared interest in urban spaces and the problems of urban living; their profound sympathies for the downtrodden and disenfranchised; their proclivities for melodrama, grotesque portraiture, and mystery; the inclusive sprawl of their novels, and their attempt to represent within their pages the social realities of two large nations in moments of cultural transition are all elements that make a comparison undeniably fertile. Although critics have not been tempted, as with the Defoe-Chulkov pairing, to call any of Dostoevsky's novels the "Russian version" of Dickens (or vice versa)—for the obvious reason that the elevation of Chulkov's status that is implied by the association with Defoe would be absurd in the context of Dostoevsky and Dickens—the similarities between the worlds of their novels pretty much announce themselves.¹

Part of the discussion centers as well on matters of influence. We know from his letters that Dostoevsky read several of Dickens's works in French or Russian translation, though some critics have speculated that he was acquainted with all of the English author's novels (Lary 98). Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is discernibly the model for *The Insulted and the Injured*'s Nellie, and many scholars have seen Stavrogin in *Demons* as a Russian version of *David Copperfield*'s Steerforth. And yet other readers agree that it is not the specific correspondences among the works of Dickens and Dostoevsky but rather a more general sense of the kinship between the two authors that is the more appropriate, or at least the more interesting, line of scholarly inquiry. Donald

¹ One critic did claim, however, that "it is possible to see Dostoevsky as a reinterpreter of Dickens" (MacPike 196).

Fanger writes of the potent “spiritual affinities” (*Romantic Realism* 250) that he detects in their writing, and Albert Guerard, in his examination of the novels of Dostoevsky, Dickens, and Faulkner, claims that he is intent on “discerning kinships and affinities among writers from radically different cultures”—all cultures, he adds, “in uneasy moments of transition” (3).

This chapter, too, approaches a comparison between Dickens and Dostoevsky with a general assumption of profound resemblances tempered by cultural difference, though its aim is more focused than that of Guerard’s admittedly diffuse study. Its goal is to position *Bleak House* as a test case and a paradigmatic example of the English realist novel as it flourished in the nineteenth century, and to examine elements of narrative structure, thematic content, character development, and imagery that establish a contrast with similar matters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which will be analyzed as an emblematic Russian novel. One assumption is that the challenges and paradoxes of the realist novel that were discussed in the introduction—that is, its status as a problematic and perhaps even self-undoing form, and a genre that inevitably is shadowed by a sense of dissatisfaction, compromise, and failure—are even more evident in Dickens than in Defoe (in whose works the various tensions that would explode in the Victorian novel are perhaps more latent), and that Dostoevsky’s novel, as a specimen of Russian realism, is in a similar way more fully realized than Chulkov’s.

If the multi-plot novels of the nineteenth century represent advances beyond their eighteenth-century predecessors in terms of portraiture and formal complexity, it is also noticeable from the outset that these are extremely crowded narratives in comparison with the first-person confessions discussed in the previous chapter. The next three

chapters, therefore, investigate the tensions that become apparent when the fictional community (like the actual community of urban inhabitants and of newly minted readers and consumers) expands, the need for collective relief becomes commensurately more urgent, and the structures of governance that threaten individual freedom become increasingly sophisticated. Such matters are especially at stake in a late nineteenth-century Russian novel such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, which reflects momentous and abrupt social upheavals and rearrangements, particularly the Great Reforms of Alexander II, which in practically one stroke freed the serfs and reorganized the judiciary, army, church, police, and other public institutions. These conflicts are also evident in the Victorian novel—a form that emerged from a transitional historical moment in which industrialization, urbanization, and the leveling of social hierarchies made the need for a newly imagined communal order all the more exigent, and one in which individual protagonists share center stage with the community at large as the subject demanding attention.

Indeed, if in *Moll Flanders* the institutions of communal control are the implicit backdrop to the individual life story, in *Bleak House* the collective, with its various disorders and needs, is granted an explicit narrative domain that is separate from, and perhaps even more expansive than, the realm of individual subjectivity. In this way, the thematic conflict that is somewhat submerged in Defoe's work (although it is revealed structurally by the narrator's announced presence and his frank supervision of what Moll gets to say) is built in to *Bleak House* as a constitutive formal element. By the same token, the police authority that is portrayed in *Moll Flanders* as a rudimentary social presence has become a fully developed state bureaucracy, which in *Bleak House* is

incarnated in the character of the detective and the institution of the Court of Chancery, both representing, according to D.A. Miller, an “all-pervasive system of domination” whose authority is “so finely vaporized...that every surface it ... attack[s] is already porously welcoming” and whose subjects have virtually “internalized” and been “seduced by” its control (*Police* 61, 63)—and a presence so ubiquitous in the novel’s atmosphere as to make Dickens’s work an appropriate case study for Miller’s book.² Or, one might say, whose subjects have *not only* internalized, but *have also* been seduced by, its control, since this is an apposite distinction between Moll Flanders and Esther Summerson, both young women abandoned by their mothers, positioned at the margins of society, bewildered by sexuality, struggling with patriarchal authority, and desperate to find a home. Whereas Moll’s frantic peregrinations are a confused response to the unmovable bars (metaphorically speaking) of Newgate prison, Esther Summerson’s domestic obedience, at least in terms of her overt behavior, is voluntary; but the notion that Moll’s Newgate becomes Esther’s Bleak House (to which the poor girl appears to be so always-already bound that we are prompted to wonder what the scene of her birth might have

² For information on the British Court of Chancery and Dickens’s relationship to it, see Alexander Thomas Fyfe, *Charles Dickens and the Law*; William S. Holdsworth, *Charles Dickens as a Legal Historian*; E.T. Jacques, *Charles Dickens in Chancery*; A.H. Marsh, *History of the Court of Chancery and the Rise and Development of the Doctrines of Equity*; and J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*. For our purposes, it is enough to note that the equity court, which originated as an attempt to remediate some of the failings (such as the rule-bound rigidity) of the common law courts, became, famously, just as troubled as the system for which it was intended to serve as an outlet. As Baker writes, “it is the height of irony that the court which originated to provide an escape from the defects of common-law procedure should in its later history have developed procedural defects worse by far than those of the law.” While many discussions cite *Bleak House* itself as the main source for our understanding of the role the court played in the cultural imagination, according to Baker even “two centuries before Dickens wrote *Bleak House*, the word ‘Chancery’ had become synonymous with expense, delay and despair” (111). As Marsh writes, throughout the life of the Chancery court “it was frequently made a subject of adverse criticism that suits...were not speedily determined and that it was not an uncommon thing for twenty or thirty years or more to elapse between the commencement and the final ending of a suit in that Court” (61).

looked like, under the assumption that, like Moll's, it likely took place in the same sort of enclosure in which she inevitably ends up) should be clear.³

Admittedly, Dickens may seem an odd choice to position against Dostoevsky as an exemplar of the traditional realist novel. A writer of “magical bounty” (Romano 1), with a wildly idiosyncratic vision, limitless imagination, and the ability, as John Romano says, to perceive “a world to which the rest of us are blind” (1), he is perhaps a less-than-obvious representative of the literary mode that purports to examine, as transparently as possible, the things and events of the world as we know it. In fact, Donald Fanger has paired Dickens and Dostoevsky precisely to show that the work of *both* can be contrasted with the “pure realism” (12) that developed toward the end of the nineteenth century. As Dickens himself wrote in the preface to *Bleak House*, his project was to explore “the romantic side of familiar things”—a phrase that Robert Newsom chose for the title of his critical study of the novel and that has been central to many readers’ vision of the author’s work. According to Fanger, such an ambition—to imbue the ordinary with the fantastic and reveal the fanciful within the real—meant that Dickens as well as Dostoevsky (and also Balzac and Gogol) was a purveyor of what he calls Romantic Realism, a writer for whom “the bestowing power of the imagination” (13) was central. Indeed, Dostoevsky’s oft-quoted self-definition as a “realist in the higher sense” and his observation that “that which the majority calls almost fantastic and exceptional is sometimes for me the very essence of reality” (PSS 29/I:19) resonates with Dickens’s own assertion in the preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit* that “what is exaggeration to one class

³ Perhaps the comparison between Defoe and Dickens is even more compelling if we think about the heroine of *Little Dorrit*, Amy Dorrit, who as an adult returns with her husband-to-be to the Marshalsea, the prison of her upbringing and the one that held her father. *Bleak House*, in this sense, is Esther’s Newgate/Marshalsea. (My thanks to Liza Knapp for this suggestion.)

of minds and perceptions, is plain truth to another” (5). Like Dostoevsky, Dickens transformed the world in the process of observing it, or at least observed it with a vision much more unfettered than most of us possess.

Yet perhaps it is precisely his own deviant tendencies that make Dickens a particularly suitable foil for exploring the Russian realist project and the Russian novel as it flowered in the nineteenth century, and as a form that Dostoevsky perfected. Perhaps, in other words, it is in the very differences between these two unconventional realists—both of them positioned at quite a remove from “pure” realism, but with Dostoevsky far outpacing his English counterpart—that we can best locate the singularity of Russian realism and the achievement of the Russian novel. Indeed, whatever Dickens’s inventive freedom, his novels, as many have noticed, are also burdened with a contrapuntal weightiness or inertia—a sense of heaviness or restraint that oppresses the characters and encumbers the text. Henry James, in an essay titled “The Limitations of Dickens” commented on what he perceived to be a mood of “permanent exhaustion” in the author’s work: the impression that *Bleak House* seemed “forced,” that *Little Dorritt* was “laboured,” and that *Our Mutual Friend* felt “dug out as with a spade and pickaxe” (48)—comments, in fact, that are strikingly reminiscent of Woolf’s pronouncements about the “dryness” and “dull[ness]” of Defoe’s realism. This sense of sluggishness and resistance is represented throughout Dickens by a variety of signifiers (the fog in *Bleak House*, the dust heaps in *Our Mutual Friend*, the industrial waste in *Hard Times*): dreary and joyless images that themselves seem to stand in for a range of afflictions (the exigencies of everyday life and empirical fact, the treachery of the material world, the demands of artistic verisimilitude). Seemingly intractable and immutable, these things of

the world are burdens to which, as we will see, Dickens remained tethered, despite the powers of his transformative imagination.

Bleak House is a restless, troubled novel. A split narrative, a work deriving from what is generally considered the author's "dark" period, and a novel whose title explicitly prepares us to enter a melancholic, sickly world, *Bleak House* is frankly predicated on infirmity, injury, and gloom. It is also extremely perplexing in its narrative structure. Around half of the novel is recounted in the present tense by a seemingly omniscient, third-person observer whose gaze is far-reaching and whose descriptive efforts create a well-populated and multifarious community; the rest of the chapters (interspersed, in alternating groupings, with the objective ones) are presented by a single individual, Esther, telling her story in the first-person and the past tense and delineating the contours of her own little domain. Other oppositions, both ontological and epistemological, are embraced by this split as well: between subjective and objective viewpoints (or, for culturally determined reasons, between the female versus the male perspective); between the private reflections of the individual and the events in the community at large; between a vision that apprehends the world from the perspective of the ongoing, muddled present and one that perceives things retrospectively; and between, as Joseph I. Fradin writes, "the whole complex of human need, hope, and feeling" and the realm of "intellect and dispassionate observation" (41).

All of these matters are implied in the general dissonance between Esther and her world, and they are all oppositions that seem to be calling out for integration. Indeed, *Bleak House* seems almost ideally representative of the English realist novel as we have

been conceptualizing it, with its fractures, contradictions, and maladies requiring diagnosis and cure. In particular, the split narrative expressly captures the inherent friction in the multi-plot novel between self and world, individual and society, personal development and collective energies. And its jarring back-and-forth between narrators—which requires us, every few chapters, not only to exchange our focus of interest and to broaden or narrow our perspective, but also to give ourselves over to utterly dissimilar narrative voices—demands a remarkable amount of attention from its readers. These pulsating alternations—between expansion and contraction, and between the self-directed inward turn and outward projection—are further enacted by nearly every character, as well as by the events and observations recorded in each of the novel’s two halves: so that the fundamental tension that many readers have seen as characteristic of the novel form seems to have penetrated this narrative to its very core. It is no wonder that Robert Newsom called *Bleak House* “Dickens’s most novelistic novel” (129).

The healing of the divisions that are evident at the structural level of the novel, then, is not the only way to understand the novel’s energies—for both Esther and her community are independently diseased, and similarly plagued with contradictions and vacillations. Both private and public realms are themselves suffering from a disordered relationship between interior and exterior, and particularly from a malady that precludes any smoothly functioning commerce between the two. And both worlds demand examination, diagnosis, and remediation. It is impossible, of course, fully to disentangle one narrative from the other, or to examine separately the curative efforts on which each half of the novel is embarked—because not only is *Bleak House* one novel, but all symptoms of disease in both halves of its universe mirror in their own way the strange

divisions in the novel writ large. If in some sense the problem of this novel is the gap between Esther's interior life and the outer world, then in another sense the pathologies of these two arenas are all too deeply bound up in each other. Indeed, what might seem to be an opposition between Esther and the outer universe turns out to be a dialectic, a complex in which the very same problem is approached from opposite directions. And this turns out to be true of virtually every seeming opposition—behavioral, psychological, ontological, epistemological—that we apprehend in the novel.

This is also in part why *Bleak House*'s troubles seem so deeply intractable: for how can a problem be solved if it, along with every discernible corrective measure, already implies its own opposite, and if all contrasts or choices carry with them the burden of sameness and homogeneity? If there is some rift to be spanned in this novel, the bridge that we must build presents no obvious blueprint. It is even difficult to determine where to initiate construction—for the entirety of *Bleak House* is so recursively turned in on itself, with so many iterations of both self-division and thematic connectedness, that locating a particular point of entry for critical analysis seems virtually impossible. At best, it seems expedient to approach Esther's disorder and that of the larger world separately, at least at first. It also seems advisable to start with the objective side of things, if only because that is where the novel itself begins. Perhaps this is the reason that so many scholarly works on *Bleak House* start at the very beginning, and for this reason we too will commence with the opening of the first chapter—paragraphs that portray the malady of the omniscient narrator's world in extremely concrete terms.

The crux of the novel's opening, as Newsom writes, is that “something is wrong in reality” (125). The signs of the disturbance are overwhelmingly evident—in the

smoke and fog that blind the eyes and clog the throats of the London pedestrians and that make all inhabitants of the streets, animate and inanimate, indistinguishable from one another; in the soot and the gas that accompany and are the physical elaborations of these elements; in the layers upon layers of mud in which the surface of the earth is gradually becoming encrusted. Almost all of the novel's material forms—all of its objects, substances, and bodies—seem to suffer from, participate in, and serve as expressions of some central disease: some “heart of corruption,” as Morton Dauwen Zabel writes, or “central ganglion of the deadly contagion which the novel will trace” (327). If “Dickens conceived his novel,” according to Zabel, “in terms of morbid growth and infection, and of their pervasion throughout the body of society,” then the author himself seems to have acted “in the office of an anatomist or pathologist” (329), tracking down and meticulously documenting all the instances of illness and revealing the latent connections among them. The clinician's deep and penetrating gaze is both diagnostic and forensic, and so the progressive unfolding of the narrative is also a matter of retrospective investigation: as J. Hillis Miller writes, “in a sense all the novel is present in the initial moment and is only explicated or pieced together by the events which follow” (*World of His Novels* 8).

As the symptoms catalogued in the opening paragraph indicate, the novel's malady is characterized by contradiction and paradox. The disease is one of both paralysis and of movement—of constant and chaotic collisions among densely packed objects and bodies in confined spaces. The first several paragraphs are weighed down by the present-tense progressive verbs that characterize the omniscient voice, and they paint a London street scene in which people, dogs, horses, carriages, barges, and natural

elements are all engaged in independent and interlocking activity and “jostling one another...” (13). This is a world of frenetic and self-perpetuating motion; but it is also, as J. Hillis Miller writes, “a motion which does not move anywhere” (*World of His Novels* 5). The overall impression is one of insurmountable stagnation, a paradoxical condition of dynamic stillness or “suspended animation,” as Newsom calls it. This vortex of unproductive and seemingly unmotivated activity not only seems to admit no real growth or progress, but also is afflicted by incessant decay and decomposition. It is as if all of these colliding bodies and objects are little by little eroding one another, and every complex substance is gradually dissolving and melding with the mud and grime that surges through and coagulates upon the city streets. With each passing moment the world of *Bleak House* is becoming more and more suffocating, homogenous, and heavy, with an encrusted external layer and fermenting inner core. The entire physical universe seems to be on the verge of spewing forth all the gritty, decaying material that is both constitutive and concealed.

To a large extent the illness figured in the novel’s first paragraphs is a disease of the natural world, with its unstoppable elemental forces and its inexorable physics; the “implacable November weather” (13) of the narrative’s opening is really a complaint about a cosmos that is governed by both inertia and entropy and in which the very laws of thermodynamics oppress people in their daily lives.⁴ But the darkness of November is also a malaise to which human beings contribute. All of the commodities and manufactured items that encumber this newly industrialized world of capitalist

⁴ For more on Victorian physics and thermodynamic laws as they are embodied in the Victorian novel and the Victorian cultural and literary imagination generally, see George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* (which discusses the world of “entropic decline” of *Little Dorrit*), Allen MacDuffie, “Victorian Thermodynamics and the Novel: Problems and Prospects,” and Tina Young Choi, “Forms of Closure: The First Law of Thermodynamics and Victorian Narrative.”

enterprise—people’s clothing, their possessions, their domiciles—lead to an ever increasing overabundance and also to a preoccupation with things: all the “kitchen-stuff,” “old iron,” “waste paper,” and “ladies and gentlemen’s wardrobes,” for example, that clog Krook’s rag and bottle warehouse. With his mania for acquisition and hoarding, Krook may be a comical and exaggerated figure; but his shop, in which anything is bought but nothing is sold and disparate items are acquired indiscriminately only to grow cobwebs and fester, is unmistakably a microcosm of the oppressive, “deadened” (BH 20) world that we see in the opening paragraphs.

Similarly, one of the novel’s most eloquent expressions of how it feels to live in such a world is spoken by the narrator in reference to the distinguished Court of Chancery, the institution located “at the very heart of the fog” of London, where “the raw afternoon is rawest...and the muddy streets are muddiest” (14): it is a feeling, we are told, of “being ground to bits in a slow mill; it’s being roasted in a slow fire; it’s being stung to death by single bees; it’s being drowned by drops; it’s going mad by grains” (71). A human invention whose functions and products have proliferated so wildly that it now seems to run autonomously, the Court of Chancery spews out sheet after sheet of meaningless documents that slowly bury the hapless citizens engaged in “perennially hopeless” legal battles (17). It is a hub of endless output whose products, once they are emitted, are destined to stagnate or circulate forever, and as a human institution it figures “the central evil and confusion” producing all the other symptomatic substances (the fog, mud, smoke, etc.) clogging the biosphere (Newsom 125). Hence our sense, as J. Hillis Miller writes, that in *Bleak House* “the world...[is] in man’s hands” and “its decomposition is his fault” (“Moral Life” 177); hence also the feeling that the problems

and pathologies plaguing the novel's inhabitants, in both their personal interactions and their communal life, are related to the muck and grime coursing through the city streets. It seems that nature and culture have merged as forces of over-production, obstruction, and decay.

Indeed much of the general pathology has to do with human semiotic proclivities—for it seems that all of the objects and bodies clogging up the novel do so not only because they represent brute matter, but because they are also bursting with signification. As both earthly material and products of the human imagination, they present themselves not only as paradoxically roiling and inert substances, but also as objects of semantic analysis. In this way no object, despite its corporeal nature, is discrete or self-contained; rather, all things contain the potential for self-propagation and infinite proliferation as items capable of generating endless discussion, analysis, and debate—the “forensic lunacy” (637) that, along with matter itself, is bogging down the earth. The case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, for example, is a dispute over an estate and an inheritance—over possessions (items that signify) and over money (signifiers made into matter)—that produces the sea of legal papers (thin materials covered in markings) that Richard Carstone wastes his life trying to interpret and that end up killing him. It is not clear whether Richard dies from the emotional strain of poring over these endlessly self-replicating signifiers, or whether he is literally smothered by all of this paper; but it hardly matters, for his fate is the same either way. Indeed, for all of the characters that the novel describes as hopelessly covered in mud, there are just as many—legal writers, scribes, and clerks—who are submerged in writing materials, and both conditions are equally suffocating. As Esther says when she first meets Caddy Jellyby, the young girl

who serves against her will as her mother's amanuensis, "I suppose nobody ever was in such a state of ink" (53).

And so any contact between self and world in this novel is dangerous and fraught; this is a work about all of the ways that human beings, with all of their imprudent and endlessly signifying productions, mark up, weigh down, and are in turn beleaguered by the outside world and others. Phil Squad, a minor but imaginatively rich character, is perhaps the archetypal representation of this social pathology: this is a man so barely in possession of himself that when he lopes around his shooting gallery particles of grease and grime from his body are scattered everywhere and he "le[aves] a smear all round the four walls, conventionally called 'phil's mark'" (351). With his every movement Phil Squad leaves behind the physical evidence of his existence; but he himself is also imprinted with the traces of his occupation and a lifetime of bodily assaults and impingements. "What with blowing the fire with my mouth when I was young," he says, "and spieling my complexion, and singeing my hair off, and wallering the smoke; and what with being nat'rally unfort'nate in the way of running against hot metal, and marking myself by sich means" (421) he has become almost a walking relic, with hands that are "notched, and seamed, and crumpled all over" (351). As a carrier of the world's depredations he has become a decipherable object in his own right, and thus a potential subject for scrutiny, inquiry, and exegesis: more of the "forensic lunacy" that adds to the world's burden of dubiously worthy matter.

Phil may be an especially unfortunate creature, and his body may have run up against the hazards of the world with particular frequency and violence; but his is the human predicament as *Bleak House* conceives of it. In this novel, communal living is a

bleak endeavor in which practically any action or behavior is capable of defacing the material world and disfiguring or branding others—and in which we are all in turn scarred and sullied by our encounters. The young Jellyby children who tumble wildly about the house have imprinted the walls and staircases of their home as well as the bodies of one another with evidence of their recklessness, and all have “notched memoranda of their accidents on their legs, which [are] perfect little calendars of distress” (78). Krook’s encounters with the outside world result similarly in “notched memoranda”: the “crooked marks on the paneling of the wall” (75) that represent his stockpile. This inventory includes, along with the assorted iron, clothing, and waste paper, human bones and hair—themselves memorials to the body’s vulnerability, and hence items whose recorded account makes them doubly imbued with semantic weight; they are notches representing notches. It is no wonder that, in a world in which materials and signifiers reproduce and pile in on each other *ad infinitum* and in which we register our own existence in terms of the bruising we suffer and the havoc we wreak, everything is going to ruin.

Indeed, Krook turns out to be not only a monster of acquisition but also an agent of contamination in his own right, and his participation in the general pathology of the novel is not just passive. A man whose “breath issu[es] in visible smoke from his mouth, as if he were on fire within” (68), he has virtually melded with the dangerous overload of unstable, rotting substances in his warehouse, and when he spontaneously combusts in the middle of the novel, he erupts in what is described as “a thick, yellow liquor” and “a stagnant, sickening oil” that coats the room and “defiles” anyone who enters (516). Krook’s detonation is thus one of both implosion and explosion in which an ossified

exterior membrane—he is a “cadaverous” man whose “throat, chin, and eyebrows, were...so gnarled with veins and puckered skin, that he looked...like some old root in a fall of snow” (68)—battles with, and eventually fails to contain, fetid, viscous substances, the bodily equivalent of mud and soot. This filth then merges figuratively with the rest of the foul detritus coursing through the streets, including the “slime” spreading from Tom-all-alone’s, the dilapidated and impoverished section of London that is imagined similarly as a nidus of infection and source of the city’s pestilence. Like Krook’s foul eruptions, “there is not a drop of Tom’s corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere” (710).

It is not difficult, therefore, to glimpse the extent to which Krook’s two-sided malady is both allegorically and causally linked to the disease of the larger world. Laughingly referred to as “the Chancellor” by various characters throughout the book, Krook is both the product of and the analogue for the court itself—a totalizing system of control that cannot get anything done, and a hub of prohibition that spews the detritus of its jumbled mechanics with improvident force. Indeed, as in *Moll Flanders*, whose heroine is similarly navigating the dichotomy between constriction and proliferation and whose world is similarly overburdened by various forms of human production, it appears that the only kind of evacuation that *Bleak House* can imagine of either psychic or material build-up is apocalyptically violent. D.A. Miller connects Krook’s spontaneous combustion to the wish, repeated in various forms throughout the book, for the Court of Chancery’s “wholesale destruction by fire” (*Police* 62)—surely a version of Defoe’s “killing cure.” Perhaps, in fact, *Bleak House* puts an even more pessimistic spin on Defoe’s already cynical vision, since in Dickens’s work, as we have seen, even

spontaneous combustion does not accomplish true catharsis, and Krook's residue continues to plague the universe.

As Krook's fate in particular makes evident, many of the symptomatic oppositions that we have been examining—release and retention, circulation and stagnation, motion and containment, reproduction and paralysis—are problems that are not so much contrasted in the novel as they are deeply entwined. In the person of Krook, *Bleak House* expresses a distinct apprehension about what is contained within the human person; his churning viscera are the product of a lifetime's accumulation of the waste products of others, just as the disease emanating from Tom-all-alone's is the product of crowding, filth, and human excretions. But in a sense we all harbor an inventory of foul matter that builds up inside and threatens to leak out or burst through in unpredictable ways. Given Victorian public health anxieties about the city, the menace represented by Tom-all-alone's is fairly matter-of-fact—but the far more imaginative phenomenon of Krook's spontaneous combustion represents dangers that are much less tangible. For many characters, what is stewing internally and threatening to erupt are all the injuries received from others; the cankers are excrescences of emotional life, and the harm that is inflicted on others in turn is mostly a matter of cruel, perverse, or immoral behavior. These noxious grievances emerge not only from the clashes and insults of collective living and the urban environment but also from the wounds of family life and of genealogical connectedness in general: the mysteries of one's origins and one's parentage, the shame of family secrets, and the simple, painful fact of enthrallment by the family as an institution. (This is the source of much outer scarring as well; the Jellyby children, for example, are so wildly reckless because they are neglected by their parents.)

In the most general sense, what all of the characters of *Bleak House* are suffering from is the burden of the past. As J. Hillis Miller writes, in *Bleak House* “the past weighs on the present not in some intangible way but as the accumulating mountains of dirt, inscribed paper, refuse, junk, waste, and excrement that are piling up all around and that fill the streets....” (“Moments” 55). The same mechanism governs the lives and bodies of individuals, who cannot free themselves from their past because it is part of “the very substance of their beings” (“Moral Life” 165).

If a novel can be said to have a goal, then, the primary goal of *Bleak House* is to determine how to eradicate the infection that is at once communal, familial, and individual, so that, paradoxically, it both is and is not the fault of every single person. And in a sense, the novel appears to propose a cure based on self-repression, the famous Victorian ethic of composure and restraint that allows for no harmful breaches or impingements. Certainly, anyone who has studied Dickens’s autobiographical writings notices that his novels return obsessively to the subject of inadequate parents, and the bile directed toward those who neglect, harm, or brand their children is almost unlimited.⁵ In *Bleak House* this ethic of kind, responsible, and prudent behavior extends to all realms of human relations, including, notably, the treatment of parents by their children. As George Rouncewell says to a young protégé, ““The time will come...when this hair of your mother’s will be grey, and this forehead all crossed and re-crossed with wrinkles...Take care, while you are young, that you can think in those days, “I never

⁵ Unlike, say, *Great Expectations*, in *Bleak House* there is not much parental lashing out *per se*: there is no real yelling at, whipping, or beating of children. Rather, the parental scarring in *Bleak House* is more subtle: from the Jellybys to the Pardiggles to the Smallweeds, nearly all of the children in the novel are in some way deformed by an oppressive and misguided family culture and imprinted by mild parental misuse. But perhaps it is the very subtlety of the abuse—and the ways that this kind of latent, masked nastiness lines up with the restraints and repressions of Victorian culture—that makes the wounds in this late novel seem all the more grim.

whitened a hair of her dear head, *I* never marked a sorrowful line in her face!”” (554). As Barbara Hardy and others have pointed out, Dickens endorses the ur-Victorian ethic of “social responsibility” (39), an imperative based on mature, conscientious, and vigilant conduct, self-renunciation and self-restraint.

And yet *Bleak House*, like all of Dickens’s works, also communicates a palpable abhorrence of the very forms of repression and inhibition—both as a mechanism of social control and as a psychological condition—that it simultaneously institutes. George Rouncewell’s instruction to do no harm to one’s mother, for example, certainly sounds noble, and yet his own chosen method—total isolation from the beloved woman and a life of self-imposed exile or quarantine—is actively cruel to the professed object of his concern. Old Mr. Turveydrop, the “Master of Deportment,” inhibits and oppresses his son in ways that are just as injurious as George’s well-meaning self-restraint, and his genteel composure is, in effect, as damaging as the squalor and chaos of the Jellyby household.⁶ Indeed, some of the most wrongheaded characters in the novel (Tulkinghorn, Esther’s godmother) are figures of exaggerated self-control, encrusted creatures with “immoveable” faces and “unsoftened” expressions, and Sir Leicester and Turveydrop are laughable snobs. Conceiving of themselves as the last gentlemen in this “leveling age” (228), the only remaining stalwarts in a society whose “floodgates,” as Sir Leicester laments, “are burst open” (648), they are comical anachronisms oblivious to their own social and cosmic insignificance. In particular, they are deluded enough to believe that social distinction—or pretensions thereof—confer immunity to the pervasive

⁶ And it is especially in this “leveled age,” when Caddy Jellyby and Young Mr. Turveydrop can choose to marry and merge—which they do, toward the middle of the novel—that these two problematic upbringings become virtually indistinguishable.

urban contagion and the city's overcrowding. But as the narrator triumphantly announces, "there is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubit inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high" (710). By the same token, whatever pride Sir Leceister takes in the Dedlock heritage, he is as risible a figure, walking the hallways of Chesney Wold lined with portraits of a host of previous Sir Leceisters, as Young Smallweed, lowly born to several generations of Old Smallweeds and well on his way to becoming an Old Smallweed himself. Just as the inexorable forces of industrialization and urbanization sweep up everyone without distinction, there is an interconnectedness among people that is unavoidable: the simple biological and ontological fact that no person is self-begotten or autonomous and that everyone is caught in a complex web of relations and affiliations, mutual dependency, vulnerability, and injury.

These minor characters are mostly ridiculous and innocuous versions of some of the more genuinely destructive figures of repression in the novel. If the foibles of Mr. Turveydrop reveal the extent to which willed composure can be subtly harmful and the ways in which self-restraint may be identical to encroachment, the more disturbed or malevolent individuals—who belong mostly to the milieu of Chesney Wold, the seemingly impenetrable fortress that competes with the seething streets of London as a fulcrum of the novel—demonstrate the truly menacing underside of repression. The immense and terrifying power that Mr. Tulkinghorn wields over the world of the novel generally and over Lady Dedlock in particular, for example, is based on his remarkable

imperturbability and his capacity both to secrete and withhold. Described as “an Oyster of the old school, whom nobody can open” (158), with a face that is an “expressionless mask” (192), he “carries [Dedlock] family secrets in every limb of his body, and every crease of his dress” (192); and his repressive impress on Lady Deadlock, who is caged by his ever-present gaze and his invasive knowledge, is formidable. The aptly named Lady Dedlock herself bears a demeanor of boredom, indifference, and aristocratic hauteur that is another sort of repressive shield, the result of both her own efforts of composure and her terror of Tulkinghorn.

But Lady Dedlock also carries within herself explosive secrets that threaten to erupt and destabilize her entire universe. Her scrupulous self-command masks not only a sordid history (the love affair that transgressed class boundaries and produced an illegitimate child) but also “raging passions” (653) which, as it turns out, were never successfully kept inside to begin with. For not only have her secrets leaked out, and been divined and appropriated by Mr. Tulkinghorn, but we are also confronted with the figure of Hortense, the only perpetrator of literal violence in the novel, who, as Lady Dedlock’s maid and quasi-double, is almost the incarnation of her mistress’s id. Not only do Lady Dedlock’s refinement and decorum, like Sir Leicester’s class advantages, prove to be of spurious value as protective barriers, but her fate also reveals the extent to which self-repression, as a personal characteristic, is neither praiseworthy nor benign. Instead, like all the maladies of excess and containment that the novel chronicles (over-production, acquisitiveness, accumulation, hoarding), it tends to mirror on the level of the individual psyche the congestion and suspended animation of the opening paragraphs—a deceptive quiescence and a hardened shell threatening to combust in a convulsive upheaval. The

lives of both Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn end in forms of evisceration: she dies after fleeing to London, having shed her last few belongings—her clothes, her watch—almost as though she were losing body parts; he is killed in a bloody confrontation with his nemesis, Hortense, that leaves a lasting stain on his office floor. Perhaps the one alternative to dangerous repression or catastrophic eruption presented by the novel is the controlled venting practiced by John Jarndyce, who voices his private laments in the wing of his house he calls the Growlery. But while this strategy does manage to ward off spontaneous combustion or apocalyptic release, it cannot counteract the human tendency toward the more subtle sins of narcissistic projection—and even Jarndyce's actions throughout the novel, as we will see, are capable of doing harm.

We may conclude that what the novel seems to be searching for is not a tactic of containment but one of catharsis: a rite of purification, purgation, and healing that leaves its subjects immaculate and intact. It seems that the mud cannot simply be tamped down or transferred elsewhere; it must disappear for good. We wonder how precisely such a transcendent maneuver might be accomplished, for at the opening of the novel, at least, we do not recognize any character who is capable of it. Indeed, the few characters who seem able to confront the outside world and others selflessly and objectively, without the need for endless expression and replication of themselves and their own pasts, are also beings who, rather inexplicably, seem to possess no past or parentage to begin with. Mrs. Bagnet, for instance, is certainly a woman of genuine altruism and social responsibility. But Mrs. Bagnet is Dickensian caricature through and through: presented entirely from the perspective of an observer, she seems to have no real interior to speak of. Even her

husband says that she is “*all metal*” (544).⁷ Truly uncorrupted, free of old wounds or family enthrallments, she has no hidden self festering beneath the surface. But in this sense she cannot possibly serve as a model for all of the complex selves that the novel portrays, those in whom we glimpse an inner life and genuine struggle. Nor can she be of any help in understanding the work—the therapeutic emptying, the healing of wounds, the overcoming of the past—that engages the novel’s other half, or in answering the question posed by that portion of the novel, which is: how can a real person, who is all-too-human and all-too-flawed, manage to free herself from all her psychic and social burdens and become both contented and decent?

Esther Summerson is a very troubled young woman. An abandoned orphan and, as both she and we eventually learn, the product of Lady Dedlock’s illicit affair (a fact unknown for much of the novel even to Lady Dedlock herself, who believes that her daughter died in infancy), Esther clearly, as they say, has issues. Of course, it is difficult at first to tell precisely what Esther needs to work out, in part because she so insistently presents herself as having so little within. She is perpetually announcing her own nothingness: one of the first sentences that she writes recalls her girlhood self disclosing secrets to a doll, who stares back in response, “not so much at me, I think, as at nothing” (27-8). Another memory consists of the experience of falling asleep and gradually coming to feel that “I was no one” (63)—a sensation that appears to plague her waking as well as her half-waking life. Her daily behavior is guided by an ethic of “submission, self-denial,

⁷ She also seems to be one of the few objects in the novel not caught up in the capitalist system. As her husband gushes, “The old girl’s weight—is twelve stone six. Would I take that weight—in any metal,—*for* the old girl? No. Why not? Because the old girl’s metal is far more precious—than the preciouslest metal” (544). To her husband at least “she is a treasure” (442): non-exchangeable and possessed of inherent worth.

[and] diligent work” (30), and her entire persona is one of self-abnegation. These are qualities that beguiled many of the original readers, who tended to perceive her as the conventional Victorian “angel in the house”: in an early review of the novel Henry Fothergill Chorley writes of her “surpassingly sweet way” (56) and calls her an “angel...of experience, simplicity, and overwhelming kindness” (quoted in Allan 57). In fact, if there is something subtly though palpably amiss with Esther at the opening of the novel, perhaps such pronouncements about her meek, docile saintliness—on the part of both Esther and her fans—are part of the problem. It seems a wonder, in fact, that she has managed the self-assertion necessary to put forth her “portion of these pages,” although she does confide that she had “a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write...for I know I am not clever” (27).

But write Esther most certainly does, nearly five hundred pages brimming with the first-person pronoun, protesting all along the way that “it seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of *my* life!” (40). And although some contemporary critics have been as captivated by her narrative as the early readers were, regarding this “idealized female character” (Walder 144) as a model of feminine self-denial and generosity, others have been unable to speak of this “passive paragon...of moral virtue” (Eagleton 151) and “model of flawlessness” (Gay 47) without irony; in recent decades especially, critics such as Peter Gay, Terry Eagleton, and Lawrence Frank have worried that Esther’s “persistent humility and self-negation” reeks of a decidedly unpleasant self-righteousness (Frank 65). Indeed, if there is something charming and sympathetic about her habitual self-examination in the looking glass (an item that is introduced within the first fifty pages of her narrative and

follows her throughout), one can't help thinking that this genuine perplexity about her own identity is also a form of self-obsession and that such fervent assertions of personal emptiness mask, or themselves constitute, a distinct over-fullness. As one senses from her lament that it would have been "better never to have been born," operatic misery tinged with self-pity can be indistinguishable from self-importance. In one of Esther's first exchanges outside of her childhood home, a boarder at the school where she will spend the next six years introduces herself as "Miss Donny" and Esther responds "No ma'am, Esther Summerson" (38)—a mistake suggesting that modesty (the expectation that one will be misidentified) is not all that different from vanity (the expectation that one will be the subject of conversation).

The high drama of Esther's pronouncements, combined with the conventional pieties to which she is prone, suggest that her narrative has an audience, or an imagined audience—although who exactly that might be is a question inherent in any first-person narration. But what is striking here is that Esther seems to be currying favor with whoever it is she is addressing, and part of that effort involves the creation of a persona she is earnestly trying to inhabit. Whereas the hand of the narrator reveals itself in Moll's story, guiding what Moll is or is not allowed to say, Esther seems to be controlled by a super-ego so strong that no external agent is necessary—even if her confusions and conflicts leak out around the edges. Probably the most charitable position in regard to Esther, therefore, is one that combines sympathy with skepticism, sees Esther as the plaything of forces she barely understands, and looks upon narcissism as an affliction in its own right demanding remediation or cure. Perhaps this position is also closest to the spirit of the novel itself.

One manifestation of Esther's confusion is her habitual questioning of her own reliability, often expressed with symptomatically tangled syntax. "My comprehension is quickened when my affection is," she says at one point, "unless my vanity should deceive me (as I know it may, for I may be very vain, without suspecting it—though indeed I don't)..." (29) —a disclaimer containing so many iterative alternations between self-approval and self-doubt that it has no meaning at all. She also tends toward hypothetical statements that only barely disguise buried fantasies of being the center of attention, the focus of everyone's concern: her friends bid her farewell from boarding school "as if" their only thought at the moment is "May you be very happy!" (41); she muses that Ada and Richard, John Jardyce's two other wards, "really seem...to have fallen in love with me, instead of one another" (211). All of the profound divisions and intertwinings in Esther's psyche between pride and humility, self-inflation and self-negation, egotism and altruism announce themselves pretty clearly in these comments, along with the dismal state of her self-knowledge. Her confusion takes on a physical aspect when she falls ill in the middle of the novel and complains of "a curious sense of fullness, as if I were becoming too large altogether" (502); this is a sensation, one suspects, that would have been there to begin with if not for the equally confusing feelings of vacancy counteracting it. In all her naiveté, Ada unwittingly expresses the idea that something is amiss when, early in the narrative, she finds herself overwhelmed by the apparent bounty Esther is bestowing on the Jellyby household and describes the atmosphere as a feeling that "it rained Esther" (84).

Perhaps part of the reason for the uneasiness with which we greet Ada's comment is that bountifulness in *Bleak House* is not necessarily benevolent. When Charley

introduces herself to Esther as her new maid with the words “I’m a present to you, miss” (385), there is something disconcerting about this transfer of human goods engineered by the ever-generous John Jarndyce. Esther’s own generosity, while not associated in this way with the heartless mechanisms of capitalist exchange, is mired in selfish motives nevertheless. Esther explains her good works with the assertion that “I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself” (128)—a credo that sounds less like philanthropy and more like imperialist strategizing. Mr. Skimpole, one of the more repellent characters in the novel, seems to have her number when he says facetiously that she is “the very touchstone of responsibility”: ““When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself—in fact I do say to myself, very often—*that’s* responsibility!” (603). A perpetual juvenile who does not work, repay debts, keep track of time, or submit to the law or the police, both of which he manages to elude through personal charm, Mr. Skimpole gives us a glimpse of the chaos and disintegration that threaten to emerge from self-indulgence and mild, below-the-radar criminality. Yet his colossal selfishness grants him insights about Esther that others do not have, or at least allows for a cynicism about her motives that others cannot accommodate: the suspicion that for all her upstanding high-mindedness, she is also working (and scheming) to become the center of her own little world.

Esther seems motivated, moreover, not only by the urgings of personal ambition but also by the exigencies of private pathology. The specific tasks that she performs as the domestic sovereign of *Bleak House*—which she describes as “trying to remember the

contents of each little store-room drawer, and cupboard” and “making notes on a slate about jams, and pickles, and preserves, and bottles, and glass, and china, and a great many other things” (115)—sound alarmingly like Krook’s obsessive wall marking and also the genteel severity of her mother, Lady Dedlock. They also remind us of the organizational proclivities of Moll Flanders, a loose woman and roguish figure whose desperate housekeeping activities are only one of several characteristics that align her, paradoxically, with the obedient and well-behaved Esther. Just as for Moll these gestures toward propriety and self-restraint are both a protest against and an enactment of her predetermined fate—a battering against the bars of a jail cell that she is complicit in erecting—Esther’s tight control is also a muted cry for independence, although in this case her explosive energy is turned inward, in a reaction formation of ferocious self-suppression. What Esther is also repressing is her own sexuality, another apparent contrast to the behavior of her fellow-sufferer, Moll, that paradoxically emphasizes their affinity (as well as their shared distinction from their true antithesis, Martona). One notes almost with amusement the way in which romantic thoughts about Allan Woodcourt are often followed by especially energetic bursts of housekeeping, such that the perpetual jingling of her household keys becomes the symptom and sound of sexual desire on lockdown.⁸ But Esther’s passion for control and domestic order has a dark underside, just as Krook’s warehouse activities are intimately bound up with his acquisitive lunacy,

⁸ Although the coexistence in Esther of sexual anxiety and feelings of social exclusion is palpable, and one recognizes intuitively that these disturbances are closely linked in the psyche of a confused and repressed young woman, a precise logical connection between the two states is never delineated in the novel. Undoubtedly, in literature, as in life, the connection is probably overdetermined. But a comparison with *Moll Flanders* may be instructive here as well, since it is worth remembering that, as Ellen Pollack writes, “incest is a possibility always present in not knowing where one belongs” (202). Perhaps a theme that is manifestly associated with orphanhood in Defoe’s novel is also latently present in this one: that the problem of the mysteries of one’s origins always evokes, if only loosely, the specter of incest.

and Lady Dedlock's well-bred tranquility barely masks a stormy interior. Or indeed, it may be an ailment in and of itself. It may not disguise energies as cataclysmic as those that eventually erupt from Krook's foul abode or from Lady Dedlock via her alter-ego, Hortense; and certainly Ada's raindrop vision of Esther, though uncannily apt, does not presage any major deluge. But ironically, one of Esther's contributions to her part of the novel is the reminder that first-person narration is often unreliable, or at least that it frequently speaks more than it knows. In Esther's case a modest, dutiful, selfless exterior is the public face of internal turmoil. Or rather, an orderly surface is one side of the same double-edged pathology that not only plagues the other characters, but is also related to the general derangement of the universe at large as it is recorded in the other half of the novel.

Indeed, what might be called the Skimpole-Esther dialectic (selfish indulgence versus selfless responsibility) or the Esther-Esther dialectic (self-projection versus self-negation) mimics the dialectic characterizing the human community and material world as a whole: between the disorder, decay, and deliquescence melding with the primordial ooze and then bursting forth to plague the earth, and the forces of civilization and restraint that are becoming more and more elaborated and which, while promoting themselves as progress, mask dangerous tendencies of their own. As much as Mr. Turveydrop and Sir Leceister mourn the new democratic order, in which old hierarchies have broken down and the floodgates seem to have burst open, the fact is that a new system is being ushered in whether they like it or not: new efforts of human will are being manifested, and the ground is being laid for new structures to take hold. As the omniscient narrator announces toward the novel's end, with a note of alarm sounded in

the menacing passive voice: “Railroads shall soon traverse all this country...preparations are afoot, measurements are made, ground is staked out” (839). In thinking about this new world order we are haunted by the fates of characters like Lady Dedlock, Tulkinghorn, and Krook, who suffer from a hypertrophied capacity for control, and especially by the example of Esther, for whom system itself is a form of derangement. In the world of *Bleak House*, at least, all of the attributes of civilization—the locks and keys and pantries and prisons and lists and calendars and court orders by which we keep the contents of the world at bay—are just as malignant as, even as they are in danger of being countered by, the anarchic forces of mud and sludge that threaten to overwhelm everyone without distinction.⁹

And so if there is something very wrong with Esther—some very personal “wound” (29) that originates from shame about her murky and disgraceful origins and makes her unable to delineate the boundaries of her selfhood or accurately come to terms with her own dimensions—then it seems that her recovery, the work upon which so much of the novel is embarked, is much more than a private matter. It is as if the entire universe of *Bleak House* is riding on Esther’s rehabilitation, on her ability “to repair the fault I had been born with” (31), and the dependence is both causal and metaphorical. On the one hand, if Esther heals and attains a more realistic vision of and relationship to the outside, then perhaps she truly will begin to engage with it responsibly and thereby catalyze collective reform; and if her story demonstrates the possibility of human healing,

⁹ In this way my thinking differs somewhat from that of J. Hillis Miller, who sees in Esther a “quasi-magical power to organize and sustain the world” and to organize the people around her into “an integrated circle of which [she is] the center” (“Moral Life” 77). He even attributes a symbolic importance to the cheerful jingling of her housekeeping keys, which represent, along with Jarndyce’s quiet charitableness, a commitment to order and system that is superior to “any sort of public decision that is ratified by legally institutionalized convention...” (“Moments” 59). Needless to say, I read these characters more skeptically.

then all is not lost for everyone else, too. On the other hand, to the extent that Esther's malady is allegorically equivalent to the disease plaguing the novel's objective universe, the recuperation of the individual and the reform of the world are reciprocal processes. We may pity Esther for her neurotic belief that every sorrow in her environment is "my fault" (30), or we may deride this presumption as a symptom of her characteristic narcissism. And yet in a figurative sense she is correct, for imaginatively at least, all of the burdens of the novel (all of the muck and grime, all of the unpaid debts, unmet expectations, and festering resentments) really do coalesce in the figure of Esther, who is both piteously cut off from a disordered world and also a perfect embodiment of it. Her burdened narcissism, in other words, is paradoxically both delusional and accurate—and, as a disorder that properly belongs both to her and to the novel's universe, its eradication, if it is achieved, will transform both her self and that universe simultaneously.

This thoroughgoing transformation of Esther and of the universe is attempted from two opposite directions that structurally mirror the opposition at the heart of the split narrative, as well as all the apparent contrarities that coexist within the novel's imagined world. It is figured as the hoped-for result of both an exorcism (an organic event that takes place within the individual and that is meant to bring the inside out) and an investigation (an intellectual exercise that proceeds from the details and evidence of the outside world inward toward hidden truth). Both operations involve personal labor on Esther's part, and both are the result of, and are deeply entwined in, the mechanics, energies, and circumstances of the novel's plotting and its larger universe—so that if she has been assigned the responsibility of integrating the cosmos, then she is also the site of all of the novel's cosmic machinations.

The exorcism takes place at the very middle of the novel, while Esther is happily situated (or perhaps grimly mired) in Bleak House, and the disease that had previously lain dormant under her serene exterior seems to erupt and overtake her body as literal, physical illness.¹⁰ This is a moment in which all of Esther's inner darkness is finally brought to the surface (she actually is blind through much of this period), and her state of fevered disorientation fetches up disturbing images from her past. As she tells us in her retrospective narrative, "while I was very ill...divisions of time became confused with one another...[I was] at once a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as..." (555), and she is "not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them." This is also a period of heightened confusion for Esther about her place in the world and her connections to others. In a sentence with both figurative and idiographic signification, she expresses this muddle as a vision of "a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which *I* was one of the beads!" (556). It is unclear whether the self, in her delirium, has become submerged as a minor component of a larger whole, or whether the larger whole has been reduced to the string of her own little narrative, with the personal pronoun in italics.

The entire process of Esther's rehabilitation seems to proceed stepwise. She speaks of the feeling of "labour[ing] up colossal staircases," "striving to reach the top," finding herself stymied "by some obstruction, and [then] labouring again" (555). The illness itself is followed by a period of calm repose, "the long delicious sleep, the blissful

¹⁰ For more on the sickroom scene in the Victorian novel generally, see Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill*, which discusses the sickroom scene in Victorian fiction as "a cure for self and narrative incoherence" (1).

rest” (556) that follows great tribulation. Esther regains her sight, is reunited with Lady Dedlock, and experiences a maternal embrace for the first time. At this point, however, her progress becomes stalled. Esther may have ascertained the most basic facts about her mother, but she still is ignorant of her father’s identity, and she knows nothing whatsoever about Lady Dedlock’s inner world. Then, when Mr. Jarndyce proposes marriage and she somewhat ambivalently accepts, the recovery threatens to come to a grinding halt and we fear that Esther may remain arrested at Bleak House forever. Luckily (or craftily), before her fate is sealed, the novel provides space for further development by delaying the marriage as well as any disclosure of the engagement, and the story is turned back over to the omniscient third-person narrator. During this merciful postponement the detective story aspect of the novel, which had been introduced early on, takes center stage, and we see that every encounter in the first half between Esther and the universe of Chesney Wold—and hence every tentative approach made by her narrative to that of the omniscient narrator—had been a wind-up to the feat of detection that will eventually, it seems, fill in all the missing pieces.

At this point the plot of *Bleak House* takes a forensic turn, a diversion of the storyline that is crucial not only for Esther but also for the entire novelistic project. If we can conceive of the restorative work in which both the investigation and the exorcism are engaged as attempts to fill in the gaps in Esther’s knowledge and self-knowledge, then we can equally view it as an effort to bridge the gap between the two narratives: the most obvious rift in the novel and the most large-scale wound. Just as Esther lacks an accurate vision of the outside universe and her place within it—and hence of the other narrative,

about which she acknowledges her own story as a mere “portion”—the world has also been missing Esther. Though we do have evidence that the third-person narrator is aware of her existence—one of his early chapters begins with the words “while Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes...the rain is ever falling, drip, drip, drip, by day and night” (103)—she is part of a dimly acknowledged diurnal phenomenon rather than a real presence in his text or a member of his narrative community. If part of Esther’s malady is Lady Dedlock’s nullification of her existence—her initial unawareness that her child is alive, and her later refusal to recognize Esther as her daughter publicly—then this is an injury inflicted by the third-person narrator as well as by the structure of the novel as a whole, which seems to limn Esther’s pathology as much as Esther embodies the novel’s: her alternating (or perhaps simultaneous) feelings of cosmic grandiosity and shameful invisibility corresponding to her status as both narrator and no one. And healing for the novel as a whole—both for Esther’s subjectively experienced neglect and her isolated self-involvement, and for the omniscient narrator’s omission and flawed objectivity—requires that Esther be seen by the third-person narrator and admitted as a character in his text as fully fleshed out as any other.

This is an integrative endeavor that extends out even further, however, if we can conceive of the novel in general as a fictional narrative that tends to begin in error or agitation and aspires to a condition of equipoise and stasis. From this point of view especially—the assumption that the notional goal of all novels is a state in which the individual is healed or reformed and public and private interests are merged into one harmonious union—*Bleak House* is a spectacular failure. For the third-person narrator never does, in the end, see Esther. He comes close: he follows Inspector Bucket in all of

his peregrinations (the detection and capture of Hortense, the attempts to track down Lady Dedlock, the journey to Esther once he has decided he needs her help); and as Bucket draws closer and closer to Esther, it seems more and more likely that she and her story are about to be embraced by the objective half of narrative. But at the end of chapter 56, Bucket is dropped off by the narrator in the front hall of Bleak House, while Mr. Jarndyce retreats upstairs to fetch our sleeping heroine; and when we see the three of them next in chapter 57 we once again find ourselves in Esther's narrative. The third-person narrator never does penetrate Esther's bedroom, and the deepest, most shame-ridden recesses of her inner world, including her sexuality, never see the light of day. Of course, the investigation as a plot element does manage to bridge both narratives in a way that the exorcism—a purely interior event that we hear about only from Esther—does not. But any larger hopes for thorough integration, coherence, and enlightenment—for health, harmony, and the relief of shame—remain unfulfilled. All these failures are borne out by the conclusion of this massive effort of detection, which, sadly, attains its revelation too late: Esther is brought face to face with her mother for the second and last time just moments after Lady Dedlock has died.

The narrator's failure to apprehend Esther, though, is a wound that is quite deeply buried. *Bleak House* in no obvious way announces the convergence of narratives as an explicit or even implicit goal, and in all likelihood most readers, when they turn from chapter 56 to 57, do not feel that some major achievement has been foreclosed. Perhaps for this reason Esther's tardiness in discovering her mother may seem to be only a minor hitch in her upward trajectory. Indeed, to all appearances Esther and *Bleak House* do achieve the satisfying, epithalamic endings they seek. Esther concludes the novel

married to Allan Woodcourt, with a home and children of her own, and many readers have taken this conclusion at face value. The novel, in fact, is so persuasive in its final declarations of bliss—with Esther’s description of her new life in the last few pages verging, despite the humble prose, on the ecstatic—that even as skeptical a critic as Robert Newsom, whose reading concentrates on the novel’s ambiguities, claims that “Esther does manage finally to repair [her] fault, for she both finds herself a husband and raises a family...” (84).

I would argue, however, that as with Esther’s initial declarations of selfless modesty, her final elation is a case of protesting too much. Whatever calm, mature perspective she seems to have attained by the final paragraphs, we find evidence of Esther’s injured narcissism right up to the end. The book concludes with yet another reference to the looking glass, and Esther’s valedictory description of her new life as Allan Woodcourt’s companion—“The people even praise Me as the doctor’s wife. The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake” (988-9)—is at once self-congratulatory and self-abasing, steeped in both fantasy and shame, and proof of her continuing assumption of roles in which she finds herself significant only in reference to others. That capitalized “Me” on the very last page is the final entry to the list of highlighted personal pronouns (“the story of *my* life,” the discovery that “*I* was one of the beads” of the universal necklace) that pepper the text, locutions in which orthographic emphasis both trumpets the self and masks insecurity. As Mr. Bucket says to Esther toward the very end of the novel, “you’re a

pattern, you know” (902). As a more current expression would have it, Esther is still quite a piece of work.

Indeed, for all of our relief that the marriage to Jarndyce will not take place, Esther never really escapes from Bleak House. She ends the novel situated in a new Bleak House, an exact replica of the first that has been erected and arranged by Jarndyce himself—who proceeds to bequeath Esther to Woodcourt (“take from me, a willing gift” [966]) the very same way he once furnished Esther with Charley. Nor has the community at large been healed in any significant way. Jarndyce v. Jarndyce is concluded with nothing having been accomplished. Human products and establishments remain unreformed, with new industrial goods likely to breed and proliferate their own kind of woe and new efforts of containment and order (such as the railroad grids) likely to shatter once the floodgates burst once again—or at least, with time, to disintegrate and decay. Institutional repression remains both ineffectual and devastating: Hortense has been incarcerated in a cell from which she, or some equally destructive energy, will inevitably break free to haunt the earth. Richard is dead; Ada is widowed and living at the original Bleak House. Sir Leceister ends up “invalided, bent, and almost blind” (981), incapacitated by the loss of his wife. Charley may have moved on from her service, but she has done so only to be replaced by her sister, “little Emma,” who as Esther says “is exactly what Charley used to be” such that “I might suppose Time to have stood for seven years still” (986). Caddy Jellyby and Young Mr. Turveydrop have established a nice little home of their own, but the wounds and deformities that they have suffered, and the pollution coursing through their veins and their family lines, have been passed on to their daughter, who is deaf and mute. Esther has two little daughters herself and seems to

be looking forward to becoming, as she had imagined her future self toward the beginning of the novel, “the grandmother of little Esther’s little Esthers”; we can only imagine the fissures and self-divisions all of these little Esthers will themselves bear, and just how many iterations of Esther are going to spill out into this already overpopulated world.

Part of the problem is that embedded within *Bleak House* is a deep pessimism about the efficacy of the therapeutic activity in which it itself is engaged. According to J. Hillis Miller, “the basic structural principle in *Bleak House*” is a “procedure of indication” that

...speaks of one thing by speaking of another, as Dickens defines the Court of Chancery by talking about a rag and bottle shop. Everywhere in *Bleak House* the reader encounters examples of this technique of ‘pointing’ whereby one thing stands for another, is a sign for another, indicates another, can be understood only in terms of another, or named only by the name of another (“Dickens’s *Bleak House*” 63).

Miller refers to this guiding principle of “naming one thing in terms of another” as the “procedure of synecdochic transference” (“Interpretation” 31), although in general we can understand this method of pointing, by which every item is linked to some other item or set of items with which it is contiguous or shares common ground, as a heightened version of the metonymic displacement identified by Jakobson as the principle of all realist narratives. It is as if the pointing figure of Allegory painted on Mr. Tulkinghorn’s ceiling is not only a haunting image within the novel, but also the deity presiding over it, propelling us insistently from one image to another but never allowing us to transcend the starting point. Like the ragamuffin Jo, who, as Miller points out, is forever made to “move on” by the city authorities but is perpetually in a state of loitering; and like

Richard Carstone, who, caught up in the endless chain of legal maneuvers called *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, is in a state of “captivating looseness” (594) that immobilizes him—all people and things (from the jostling and bumping Londoners of the opening paragraphs to the ever-circulating currency, documents, and consumer goods) are in a state of metonymic displacement that produces no progress. Certainly Jakobson’s (and later Lacan’s) association of the literary trope of metonymy with the Freudian defense mechanism of displacement is relevant here (and is likely what Miller had in mind). Paradoxically, the narrative engine that moves the novel is the stultifying force of repression—psychological, institutional, and cultural.

Appropriately enough, it is the mother-daughter pair that most conspicuously manifests the damage wrought by repression, metonymic transfer, and motionless movement. As an attempt to escape from Tulkinghorn’s own pointing finger, Lady Dedlock’s spatial substitutions—in which one leisure activity or habitation is constantly being “exchang[ed]” (183) for another one exactly like it—are equivalent to a flight from the past that Tulkinghorn threatens to reveal. Esther, with all of her frantic housekeeping and narrative circumlocutions whenever the subject of Allan Woodcourt comes up, seems to have inherited her mother’s predisposition as surely as she catches her physical illness from Charley, who caught it from Jo, who caught it from God-knows-who back in Tom-all-alone’s. It is little wonder that Esther’s ailments at the end of the novel seem as acute as they were at the beginning; just as the physical exorcism that was supposed to serve as her liberation was itself evidence of her deep entanglement in webs of metonymic transfer, the narrative therapy in which she is engaged—a process reminiscent of a confessional narrative or the “talking cure,” in which the retrospective tracing of the story

promises enlightenment and health—devolves into an eternally digressing account that is itself symptomatic of the disease of “moving on.”

But Lady Dedlock and Esther are not the only characters so afflicted. From the suprapersonal level of institutions and bureaucracy to the recesses of one’s inner life, every character in *Bleak House* is caught up in the larger nets of professional association, family affinity, marketplace interchange, and psychic or emotional displacement by which the unique self is undervalued, unassimilated, and overlooked. Just as the aristocratic lineage of “Sir Leicester” has granted to a man who both is and is not himself a name and title that both are and are not his own, the modern invention of representative government is a farce in which a position first held by “Lord Coodle” is passed down to “Sir Thomas Doodle,” who is then replaced by “the Duke of Foodle,” all the way “down to Zoodle” (257). In a similar manner, Young Smallweed’s professional drive to become a law clerk—and in so doing “to become a Guppy” (316)—makes self-realization impossible both for Mr. Guppy and for himself, and Ada’s form of emotional transference onto Jarndyce—“my father’s place can never be empty again,” she tells him, for “all the love and duty I could ever have rendered to him, is transferred to you” (212)—neither does justice to Jarndyce nor heals the wounds of Ada’s past. (Indeed, it seems that Ada’s substitution and Smallweed’s ambition are merely more cultivated versions of Krook’s quite primitive form of self-projection, the actual ejection of his own inner mud onto everyone else.) The advent of industrialization, commoditization, and urban crowding in Victorian England may have produced a particularly inhospitable environment for the individual, but in *Bleak House* the communal ill of displacement is

both ageless and, as J. Hillis Miller says, “irremediable[,]...inseparable from language and from the organization of men into society” (“Interpretation” 67).

In fact, all of the salutary endeavors undertaken by the novel with the overall purpose of diagnosing and healing this troubled world function according to the same unruly metonymic processes—for the method of diagnosis itself is an associative maneuver by which specific manifestations are linked to create a web of connections that subordinates each individual symptom to the overall design. There is therefore a great deal of ambivalence written into the novel about every one of its curative endeavors—for, like language, government, the family, and social arrangements generally, in *Bleak House* diagnosis, whatever its worthy intentions, is always a repressive mechanism that eradicates distinctiveness and originality.

This self-undoing mechanism is perhaps most evident in the sub-plot of the detective investigation, itself a kind of diagnostic procedure and an emblematic synecdochic activity. Mr. Bucket is a perfectly ambiguous figure: an emissary of revelation and enlightenment, he is also the keeper of secrets, and his professional activities are based on his ability to function, like Mr. Tulkinghorn, as a perfectly sealed vessel.¹¹ Though we may admire Mr. Bucket for his ability, say, to ascertain at first glance that a woman’s husband is a brickmaker (the clues: the clay on her clothes and the bruise on her face), we cannot help registering something sinister about a man who reads people like books for a living, who perceives the details of their bodies and attire with the eye of the commodity fetishist and who, in a piercing glance, turns individuals into a pattern of symptoms. Like the figure of Allegory itself, the detective approaches the

¹¹ As Mrs. Bagnet says of him late in the novel, “Bucket is so deep” (801).

world with an accusatory pointing “fat forefinger,” which “seems to rise to the dignity of a familiar demon. He puts it to his ears, and it whispers information; he puts it to his lips, and it enjoins him to secrecy; he rubs it over his nose, and it sharpens his scent; he shakes it before a guilty man, and it charms him to his destruction” (803). His own abundantly signifying digit, in fact, seems to be the agent that sends him scurrying around the world of the novel pursuing a series of endlessly moving targets. Thus the professional seeker of truth, reconciliation, and serenity, the ambassador for sense and justice, is himself an institutional agent of repression and a victim of the endemic malady of perpetual movement and exchange.

Mr. Bucket does capture Hortense in an impressively choreographed feat of detective work. But even in handcuffs Hortense manages to undermine his achievement with a caustic remark about Mr. Tulkinghorn, Lady Dedlock, and Sir Leceister: “Can you res-tore him back to life?” she says with contempt. “Can you make a honourable lady of Her?...or a haughty gentleman of *Him*?” (837). In truth, Mr. Bucket’s discoveries are always-already belated, because no attempt at discovery or recovery can eliminate a past that is a hard, inexorable fact (or, in the case of the novel’s particular imagery, a repository of oozing, fermenting sludge and mud in which we are all struggling not to drown), and reversing a social or moral fall is as unlikely as resurrection. As Mr. Gridley, a minor but especially beleaguered character, moans: “I can’t undo the past, and the past drives me here!” (252). It is fitting that at the end of the novel the pointing finger of Allegory directs us to the permanent stain on the floor deposited by the corpse of Tulkinghorn—an emblem of the past’s indelible imprint on the present and, as suggested

by the image all along, the source of all the novel's forms of displacement in which movement is never really moving on.

In *Bleak House* the endurance of the past is memorialized not only by all of the blood, ink, and mud stains that cannot be erased, but also in the scars, injuries, and bodily deformities—the cripplings that can never be undone. Such images haunt the novel, from the Jellyby children's scars and Krook's souvenir body parts, to the beautiful woman, mentioned casually, who “broke her ankle and it never joined” (590), or the rumored ghost of Chesney Wold whose limp can supposedly be heard on dark nights and who serves as a persistent reminder of the Dedlock family disgrace. In this phantasmagoric figure notions of the haunting past, crippling, and shame come together explicitly, but in a sense these matters have been bound up with one another throughout the entire novel. In *Bleak House* bodies never remain chaste or undefiled, and once their integrity has been breached they never become fully reintegrated. Humans all carry their personal stigmata, because fracture and decomposition will always follow their inexorable and irreversible course, and because past injury and wrongdoing can never be expunged from a material universe. These are axiomatic truths that are manifested most vividly in the scars left on Esther's face after her illness: the outward manifestation of an inner fault that her previous facial beauty—her comeliness, as it were—had merely kept hidden, and the personal equivalent of the muck and the grime that will never be dispelled. Esther ends the novel as the survivor of a personal story engraved in her flesh, another in a community of crippled souls living in a world in which renewal and transfiguration are ontological impossibilities and healing always comes too late.

Such, then, is the price we pay for realism and the metonymic principles of realist narration, which not only moor us in the material, empirical world but also are incapable of introducing any transcendent leaps.¹² Unhappily enough for Esther, despite all of the ordering, disinfecting, and drudgery of her domestic life, it is the third-person narrator—the representative of the cruel, impersonal outer world with its mud, pestilence, implacable weather and unalterable thermodynamic laws—who prevails. Indeed, although Esther may literally have the last word in the novel, it is the other narrator whose voice is somewhat louder, since he is in control of one more chapter than she is. If this is a book with a limp, in other words, in which recovery, closure, and stasis seem forever out of reach, then Esther and the straining self are the shorter leg.

When Terry Eagleton calls the realist novel a “monstrous self-contradiction,” he could have been talking specifically about *Bleak House*. With all its divisions, imperfections, and unresolved conflicts—between the self and the world, the individual and the community, subjective and objective viewpoints, autobiographical or confessional narrative and history or reportage—*Bleak House* dramatizes the condition of human disease that virtually defines the genre, although here these elements are presented not as antinomies but rather as reverberating dialectical correlates. In fact, they are the very

¹² It may seem peculiar to claim that a novel featuring an event of spontaneous combustion is also imprisoned by the laws and dictates of the objective universe. One of the more frequently repeated anecdotes about *Bleak House* relates to the author’s assurance that Krook’s form of death was a true, scientific possibility—a contention that he bolstered, as he wrote to his friend George Henry Lewes, with “the recorded opinions and experiences of distinguished medical professors, French, English, and Scotch” (991). As Peter Gay writes, Dickens “insisted in the strongest terms—in *Bleak House* perhaps most urgently—that he was in league with nature and science in imagining the scenes he spread out before his readers” (18). Whatever his misconceptions or his vivid imagination, for Dickens certain empirical rules were hard and fast—and these are the laws to which he tethered his created world.

structural principle of the novel itself, which exists in its own state of “suspended animation” or “captivating looseness”: so quivering with life that it threatens to dissolve at any moment into chaos and mud, so coherent and tightly woven that its very mastery is constrictive. This tension between artistic control and anarchic defeat is given mimetic representation in the very last sentence, in which our heroine, ensconced in connubial bliss, breaks off in an enigmatic silence that speaks volumes.

I did not know that [I was pretty]. I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, . . . and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen, and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—.

All of Esther’s faults and wounds announce themselves here: her injured narcissism, her rage masquerading as mousy self-effacement, her profound self-unknowableness. Her own portion of the narrative and the last words that we hear terminate in stuttering, hesitation, and unfinished business—as a manifesto of healing, an utterly unpersuasive statement. But whether the novel itself ends structurally in defeat and indeterminacy is an open question. Esther, we remember, is in control of fewer chapters than the omniscient narrator, and those final words, which end on an upbeat, with nothing accomplished, can only take us back to the very beginning: “London, Michaelmas Term, Lately Over.” Which is only to say that *Bleak House* is both a deeply imperfect structure—with a massive fault line deeply interred within the layers and layers of narrative, suffering from the same repressions and perturbations as its characters, and progressing nowhere—and a perfectly unified artistic whole. Like a noblewoman with a seedy past, or an unhappy housekeeper, or a beautiful woman with a broken ankle, *Bleak*

House buries its shame: it is consummate form masking painful wounds, and conclusiveness covering deep and enduring mystery.

The Brothers Karamazov, by contrast, is emphatically not a novel that buries its deepest wounds. If the major fault line of Dickens's narrative is deposited in a silent and seemingly ordinary transition between chapters—and if this interment figures the repressive forces that lie at the heart of the novel's problems—then Dostoevsky's work features a brazenly conspicuous narrative gap: the line of asterisks that traverses a page in the middle of a chapter and that denotes Fyodor's murder. *The Brothers Karamazov*'s seemingly central scene, and the instant that is subsequently reported, analyzed, and speculated about by nearly all of the novel's players, is audaciously missing from narrative depiction. Unlike *Bleak House* with its brilliant cover-ups and its insistence on coupling chaos with coherence, Dostoevsky's novel flaunts its holes, wounds, and mysteries; and by the same token, it is a novel whose final inconclusiveness is hopeful rather than defeated, not a curse but a gift. And so there is something very different going on in *The Brothers Karamazov*—something certainly having to do with this peculiar reveling in narrative deformity but also extending into the world of the novel generally. Indeed, if Dickens's novel is like a sturdy house whose contents threaten to burst forth, no matter how meticulously they have been organized and contained—or like Esther herself, whose composure and corporeal loveliness belie an inner chaos that is bound to be shamefully revealed—*The Brothers Karamazov* (which, formally, bears no such stultifying carapace, and which refuses to locate its characters' quest for homecoming in something so worldly as a house) imagines a form of comeliness that is

not incompatible with the deformities of the present. These are the matters that will be examined next.

Chapter 3

The Brothers Karamazov: Slouching toward Transcendence

The Brothers Karamazov (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*) (1880), like *Bleak House*, is a crime novel about a murder, and the two works share a number of preoccupations: the nature of guilt, transgression, criminality, and detection; the settlement of wrongs and the achievement of justice; and the problem of faulty individuals and a beleaguered community. *The Brothers Karamazov*, likewise, presents us with a picture of overwhelming corruption and decay—a world pervaded by what Robert Louis Jackson calls “the ugly, the repulsive, [and] the disfigured” (*Quest for Form* 77). In Dostoevsky’s novel, too, these troubles are played out in the dramas and disorders of one family. Yet, as we will see, the possibility of regeneration and healing in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as the mechanisms for their accomplishment, are conceived of quite differently.

The notion that *The Brothers Karamazov* envisions the possibility of transcendence without violating the laws of verisimilitude is hardly a new one. It is by now a commonplace of Dostoevsky criticism, or at least the large body of work influenced by Jackson, that notions of fracture and decomposition in Dostoevsky are intimately bound up with a contrary image of ideal form: that the world, though lost to “bezobrazie” (“formlessness”) remains eminently capable of recovering “obraz” (“form,” “image,” “icon”), and that this achievement, as Dianne Oenning Thompson writes, “was most closely approximated” in Dostoevsky’s last novel (*Memory* 273). Numerous critics articulate what Malcolm Jones calls this “glimpse of the ideal” (*Novel of Discord* 26) in *The Brothers Karamazov*, whether their focus is on the “hope of a sinless society” (Gibson 181) and the novel’s “vision of social harmony” (Murav, *Holy Foolishness* 166),

or the personal “transformations [that] are within the individual’s reach” (Hackel 222), or more generally on the “dynamic of conversion and healing” (Miller, *Unfinished Journey* xiii) and the “visible aspect of a world becoming whole” (Kasatkina, “Commentary” 267). From their varying perspectives and individual points of view, scholars tend to agree that *The Brothers Karamazov* presents the prospect of a grand overcoming as a matter of radiant potential.

Critics also speak in different ways about how the achievement of such an ideal state can be dramatized or incarnated within the realism of the novel form. In writing about *The Brothers Karamazov* many refer to the image of the “seed” that is woven throughout the text: a figuration of human relations as an anarchic proliferation of bonds and affiliations in which one’s influence on one’s fellows spreads imperceptibly, in which the seeds of salvation may leap unpredictably from one corner of the community to another, and in which even the most extended intervals of spiritual dormancy may suddenly erupt in an efflorescence of grace and love.¹ Indeed, the metaphor of propagation in Dostoevsky figures a universe in which even the most debased characters or malevolent behaviors are linked organically to the most exalted qualities of mind and soul. As Robin Feuer Miller writes, in Dostoevsky “conversion hovers on the edge of perversion; perversion may, by an infinitesimal shift of the kaleidoscope, by a minute rearrangement of identical elements, become conversion” (*Unfinished Journey* 149). In *The Brothers Karamazov* in particular, depravity and salvation often reside side by side in contiguous locales and human aggregations. This characteristic of the novelistic universe is often considered a narrative representation of a conceptual vacuity in Eastern Orthodox

¹ Belknap writes that “the novel can be looked at as the record of the action of grace upon a group of people” (*Structure* 74); Wasiolek refers to the transformative “spark of love” (186).

thought: that is, its omission of the Western conception of Purgatory as the middle ground between salvation and sin. As Ivan A. Esaulov writes, not only is there “an explicit lexical convergence between the most repulsive and the most exalted characters” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but for every character there is also the possibility of “instantaneous transition from the realm of *sin* to the realm of *holiness* and back” (“Law and Grace” 125, 124)—with the addendum of “and back,” functioning as an important caveat. Even transcendence, in Dostoevsky’s “apophatic art” is a matter of contingency rather than a permanent or irrevocable accomplishment, there being no “positive truth” that guarantees a reunion with paradise (Flath 10).²

This distinctively ephemeral quality of grace in Dostoevsky is also attributable to what Robert Belknap calls the “coexistence of two kinds of narrative awareness” in the novels (*Structure* 88), or what V. E. Vetlovskaja refers to as “the double meaning of the narrative subject matter (the concrete and the universal planes)” [“двойное значение сюжетной темы (план конкретный и план общий)” (*Poetika* 154)]. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, characters are both historically specific, sentient creatures and allegorical figures: Alyosha is “sometimes himself and sometimes Christ” (Belknap, *Structure* 88), and indeed, as Thompson says, anyone “in this novel’s world...can momentarily be an imitator of Christ” (*Memory* 277); according to Vetlovskaja, “the path toward universal renewal and salvation...is conceivable only through the renewal of each individual soul according to the image and likeness of Christ” (*Poetika* 159)]. Even material objects partake of this shifting status between the literal and the symbolic. Miller points out that

² The notion of instantaneousness is significant as well, especially in comparisons between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. See Caryl Emerson’s “Tolstoy versus Dostoevsky and Bakhtin’s Ethics of the Classroom” (in *Approaches to Teaching Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina*) on the subject of “вдруг” (“suddenly”) in Dostoevsky versus Tolstoy’s “всегда” (“always”).

a stone, the most undifferentiated of substances, “can be a stone, a weapon, a word, and it can, miraculously, turn into bread; it is the thing itself and something other” (182). Most important, it can be the rock on which a church is built, as is true of Ilyusha’s stone at the end of the book. In this way, the text as a whole functions much like Alyosha’s valedictory address at the stone (or like Zosima’s homilies earlier in the book), on the level of allegory or Christian typology in which, as Perlina writes, “the everyday meaning of words [is united] with their Biblical meaning” (192).

In this sense *The Brothers Karamazov* can be read in the spirit of Biblical exegesis, by which the Old Testament is simultaneously a chronicle of actual events and a prefiguration of the Christian redemption narrative. On one level, the novel maintains a strictly mimetic agenda; Dostoevsky, famously, depicted the state of his country and countrymen with blunt accuracy, combing the newspapers for characters and events and perhaps even adhering to what Terras, somewhat hyperbolically, refers to as “a veritable cult of fact” (*Reading Dostoevsky* 34). At the same time, Dostoevsky’s text, as Thomson points out, is characterized by what Erich Auerbach called “figural realism,” in which historical events are granted “a double level of signification” (*Memory* 66) and human life is viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*.³ According to Jackson, “realism in Dostoevsky’s fictional universe, as in Dante’s *Commedia*” (another Auerbachian touchstone) “is vertical” (*Quest for Form* 84). Liberated from what Murav calls a “horizontal time frame” (*Holy Foolishness* 134), the facts of our lives, according to Jackson, are represented with no embellishment and “sometimes even with naturalistic precision, but they are selected in such a way as to illuminate the hierarchical reality of the human

³ In *Mimesis* Auerbach himself claims that in the modern age the practice of figural realism might be said to have “attain[ed] its true fulfillment in the “great Russians,” Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (523).

spirit” (*Quest for Form* 84). Residing in the details of the everyday and the commonplace, in short, is another order of existence—reminding us always of the proximity of this world to “other worlds.”⁴

This double perspective—both horizontal and vertical, and admitting of both lateral and hierarchical relations—is also discernable on the level of narrative structure in *The Brothers Karamazov*: in the sense that, as Victor Terras writes, “the various motifs...are linked by a variety of syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic bonds” (“Narrative Structure” 217), or that the text is composed of both the elements of plot and what David K. Danow calls “iconic structure[s]” like incorporated tales (127). Which is to say that the text is governed equally by metonymic and metaphoric drives—perhaps a determining factor in what so many readers have discerned as the novel’s structural idiosyncrasies: its defiance of conventional expectations about logical or chronological sequencing; its repetitions of imagery; and the scattering of similar concerns and verbal idioms among diverse characters, so that scenes and characters that exist at remote distances from one another are brought closer by shared vocabulary and imagery.⁵ In Dostoevsky’s vast web of associations, words and ideas spread and take on a life of their own, shadowy affinities cut across boundaries of time and space, and analogical similarities among characters hover over all of their literal relations, creating widespread

⁴ As Robin Miller writes, for Dostoevsky the experience of conversion is the “sensation of ‘contact with other worlds’” (*Unfinished Journey* 149); according to Thompson, while “for the modern realist there is only this world,” “for Dostoevsky this world, while it never loses its concrete historicity, reflects ‘other worlds’” (*Memory* 224); as Harriet Murav says, in *The Brothers Karamazov* “our world and other worlds converge, to use the language of the novel” (*Holy Foolishness* 134); Vetlovskaja similarly speaks of “the proximity of ‘this world’ and ‘other worlds’” in Dostoevsky (*Poetika* 147).

⁵ For more on the novel’s subversion of the reader’s expectations in terms of logic, chronology, and cause and effect, see Belknap (*The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov*), Terras (“Narrative Structure in *The Brothers Karamazov* in *Critical Essays on Dostoevsky*, ed. R.F. Miller), and Vetlovskaja (*Poetika romana Brat’ia Karamazovy*).

connectedness and kinship. This myriad of associations and resemblances is the foundation for the novel's ideal of universal fellowship and its vision of a community that excludes no one, even the most lowly and depraved. To many readers, the almost imponderable complexity of its labyrinthine architecture gives *The Brothers Karamazov* a distinctly unmoored quality, even if it is also, as many critics have noted, "the most carefully and consciously planned and structured of all Dostoevsky's novels" (Jones, *Novel of Discord* 166) (although this notion may, in truth, say more about the structural irregularities of the author's previous works than it does about the relative control exhibited by his last).⁶ Nevertheless, it is perhaps this careful balance of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations that gives the novel its headiness and heft while at the same time grounding it in felt reality.

All of these characteristics of the novel come into play in the notion that, as Carol Apollonio Flath writes, in *The Brothers Karamazov* "matter—flesh—miraculously transcends the laws of nature that lead inexorably to violence and evil" (9). If this is a work in which transformation, both social and cosmic, is possible, then objects are both sturdy and elastic, concrete and imaginative, and transfiguration occurs even on the level of physical matter. Liza Knapp has written about the extent to which, though Dostoevsky's universe is certainly "beset by inertia and other physical laws" (*Annihilation* 2)—such as entropy, which she examines in the context of *The Adolescent*—it is especially in the last novel that the author hints of the "eventual triumph of a new physics that would rescue the universe" from material determinism and the

⁶ G.M. Friedlander writes similarly that *The Brothers Karamazov* is "by far the most complex of Dostoevsky's novels in terms of artistic structure" (326). For an overview of the novel's structure book-by-book, see his *Realizm Dostoevskogo*, 331-3.

inevitability of disorder and decay (173). “Dostoevsky introduces a vision of a world ruled by ‘God’s mystery,’” she writes, “suggesting that what has decomposed may be recomposed, in defiance of nature” (172), such that “even physical decay is...part of a process of ‘becoming’” (215). Certainly this triumph, no less than the novel’s complex design, is related to Dostoevsky’s notorious hostility to Western notions of determinism, scientific rationality, and empiricism. (We remember here, in anticipation of the extended comparison with *Bleak House* that follows, that inertia and entropy are precisely the laws that plague Dickens’s mournfully deterministic universe.) If *The Brothers Karamazov*, from one perspective, seems to maintain a strict fidelity to evidentiary truth, then it also suggests a distinctively capacious conception of factual evidence—especially in relation to questions of corporeal vulnerability, physical decay, and mortality.

Ian Watt, famously, connected the birth of the novel in Europe to the Enlightenment heritage of scientific reason and empiricism, and it is by now a well-established critical position that Dostoevsky’s novels both reflect and repudiate the assumptions of fictional realism. The distinctive qualities of the Dostoevskian world view (and his mode of what is variously called “romantic realism” or “fantastic realism” or, in his own words, “realism in a higher sense”) are founded, as many critics have noted, on his tendency, in Sven Linner’s words, to “brush...[the] boundary-line” (49) between the natural world and the miraculous without crossing over into mysticism or magic, and his capacity to spiritualize the physical universe without violating natural law. Michael Holquist discusses Dostoevsky’s “distinctive place in the series of the modern novel” (28) specifically in terms of the author’s grappling with “the distinction between

eternity and history” (17). Kate Holland, taking her cue from Lukacs’ famous formulation of “the novel as the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,” discusses the almost miraculous overcoming of this gap in the “Cana of Galilee” chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which “Dostoevsky seems to move out of the traditional realm of novelistic narrative into a world of silence, unity, and myth.” Yet the novel, she points out, does not end here: “this kairotic moment notwithstanding, Alyosha goes back out into the world, Fyodor Karamazov is murdered, Dmitry is arrested; the novelistic machinery continues turning” and transcendence is folded, quietly and seamlessly, into plot (“Novelizing” 63).

The Brothers Karamazov is also a work, as critics have noted, that violates the conceptual schema of the novel as the genre of secular, urban, bourgeois life and its valorization in the form of the reified nuclear family.⁷ Perhaps the most dramatic statement of Dostoevsky’s distinctiveness in this regard is Michael Holquist’s claim that the structuring principle of the novel might well be the least romanticized version of family relations ever imagined —“the scientific myth of the father of the primal horde” (*Group Psychology* 86; quoted in Holquist 177), which Freud, in his psychic turn on Darwin and the early ethnographers, explained in terms of the universal fantasy of parricide in *Totem and Taboo*. Yet it is equally the case that the novel, while dramatizing the most violent impulses of the sons against the father, also elevates and sanctifies the notion of the family as an exalted, hieratic entity and site of transcendence. In his conception of the family in a higher sense—as the universal human fellowship that

⁷ Liza Knapp has written extensively on such matters in her discussions of Dostoevsky’s notion (and his novels) of the “accidental family.” See her “Introduction to *The Idiot*” in *Dostoevsky’s The Idiot: A Critical Companion*, as well as her forthcoming *Dostoevsky and the Novel of the Accidental Family*.

transcends both conventional ties of marriage and kinship and their intrinsic antagonisms—Dostoevsky manages to “reconcile, and indeed to merge . . . realism with idealism,” as Jackson puts it (*Quest for Form* 91)—a fairly acrobatic feat, in other words, of combining iconoclasm with otherworldliness.

It is not my intention here to rehearse (or dispute) any of these well-established critical formulations. Like many critics, I am interested in the ways in which Dostoevsky, to use Holland’s word, “novelizes” the concept and the experience of transcendence. But I am interested specifically in exploring this topic by means of a comparative examination of Dostoevsky and the English novelistic tradition (specifically, a comparison of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Bleak House*, with *Moll Flanders* residing further in the background). Much of the comparison will take place on the level of imagery. Dostoevsky and Dickens share many of the same preoccupations (with matters of heredity, family structure, generational exchange, and psychic determinism; of communal organization; of material reality; of accusation, detection, and judgment; of narrative form; and of the connections among all of these elements), and they also associate similar imagery (figures of bodily wounds, scarring, and disfigurement and also, remarkably, of fingers and finger-pointing in particular) with these far-reaching concerns. Yet in narrative universes that are founded on very different assumptions about the possibility for healing, regeneration, personal fulfillment, and social harmony, these complexes are organized quite differently. It is my hope that by discussing some of the cultural and ideological forces driving these texts, and by homing in on scenes or images in which these larger concerns coalesce and take shape in apparently similar but often antithetical ways, we will enrich our understanding of these two different novelistic

universes: their different expectations and mechanics. Indeed, I hope that the comparison will work in both directions: that the various burdens and frustrations of *Bleak House* illuminate Dostoevsky's novelistic ambitions, but also that *The Brothers Karamazov* elucidates some of the deeper drives and wishes buried in Dickens's imagination. And with *The Comely Cook* as the backdrop for our reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, I hope that the following will offer a picture of the distinctive traits of the Russian realist novel as it can be viewed through these two representative works.

As in *Bleak House*, most of the men and women populating *The Brothers Karamazov* are deformed and afflicted creatures. From the “hunchbacked” Dmitry (PV 74, PSS 14:69), to the epileptic Smerdyakov, to the mysteriously indisposed Lise, nearly every character is suffering from one disorder or another. Even the minor figures, described only in passing, are characterized more often than not by their ailments, and the most seemingly robust individuals (such as Grigory, who is described as “incorruptible” [PV 92, PSS 14:86] and yet who turns out to suffer from bouts of paralysis three times per year) betray at least periodic infirmities.⁸ The apparent omnipresence of Herzenstube, the German doctor who seems forever to have just visited whichever household the reader happens to enter, is a particular testament to the ubiquity of maladies in this book: this is a novel in which everyone is, first and foremost, a patient.

These personal complaints are not only corporeal but also moral, psychological, and spiritual; and they are presented frequently as manifestations of a larger form of

⁸ The ailing minor characters include the “ailing Samsonov” (PV 344, PSS 14:311), Ilyusha's “hunchbacked and crippled” (PV 198, PSS 14:180) older sister and his mother, also a “crippled lady” (PV 201, PSS 14:183), Fyodor's neighbor Maria Kondratievna, “a bedridden old woman who lived with her daughter” (PV 102, PSS 14:95), and Maksimov's first wife, who makes no appearance in the novel but whose lameness is a subject of conversation.

social distress. The hysteria that seems to afflict nearly every one of the female characters is a disorder bearing all of these dimensions, moving beyond its etymological derivation as a female bodily complaint to figure, according to Knapp, “a feminine and ultimately maternal reaction . . . against the suffering and violence of the world, and against masculine assaults on what they hold sacred” (“Mothers and Sons” 40)—a characterization that pictures physical, metaphysical, and societal abominations all converging on the persons of these unfortunates. The “brain fever” that either besets or threatens several of the characters (Ivan is incapacitated by the illness at the end of the book, and both Dmitry and Katerina Ivanovna are presented as potential victims) is a physical manifestation of intense moral and spiritual degradation and strain, just as Smerdyakov’s particular misery is much more than a medical complaint. Perhaps the character who most self-consciously manifests the connections among moral perplexity, social dis-ease, and enduring physical abnormality is Lise, who is pushed around in a chair and describes herself as “freak” [“урод”] (PV 184, PSS 14:167), who is haunted by visions (or hallucinations) of institutionalized cruelty and communal disharmony (such as the notion that Jews torture children as part of the Sabbath ceremony) and by her self-declared inclination toward “disorder” [“беспорядок”] (PV 581, PSS 15:21), and who is the most fretted over convalescent in the novel. Perhaps the most potent emblem of the convergence of personal degeneracy, the threat of collective chaos, and physical decay is Fyodor Karamazov himself, who in Jackson’s words virtually “embodies the theme of desecration, or profanation . . . of moral and aesthetic shapelessness and of the loss of all sense of measure and form” (*Art* 305), and whose literal ugliness not only represents, but is also a catalyst for, the family crisis on which the novel centers. Dmitry, for example,

announces the possibility of Fyodor's impending murder by referring to his father's ugly face: "Maybe I won't kill him, and maybe I will. I'm afraid that at that moment his face will suddenly become hateful to me. I hate his Adam's apple, his nose, his eyes, his shameless sneer" (PV 122, PSS 14:112).

As in Dickens, too, it is not only individuals who are figured as patients but also (or especially) the family, as well as the country itself—both the fictional Russia of Dostoevsky's imagining and the contemporary Russia that he portrays. Like Dickens's England, Dostoevsky's Russia is a country in disarray—as Dostoevsky wrote in his *Diary of a Writer*, "unquestionably there is in Russia life . . . a state of decomposition" (PSS 25:35; quoted in Linner 16)—and the characters' bodily symptoms are in part manifestations of this national affliction. The narrator himself makes reference early on to "a special, national form of [muddleheadedness]" ["бестолковость"] (PV 7, PSS 14:7) plaguing the community, a nationwide distress that is figured most decisively in the novel in its disordered family relations: the severing of ties between parents and children and among siblings that is embodied in the dispersed condition of the Karamazov nuclear family—some of whose members, we are shocked to learn at the beginning, are seeing each other for the first time within these pages.⁹ The narrator's complaint is echoed by the prosecutor Ippolit Kirillovich when, at the end of the novel, he speaks of the "general malaise" embodied in "a great number of our Russian, national, criminal cases" (PV 694, PSS 15:124), and also by the defense attorney, Fetyukovich, who speaks of "a Russia immersed in disorder and suffering from a lack of proper institutions" (and also, notably,

⁹ The breakup of the family was a contemporary Russian problem that, as Vladimir Golstein tells us, was of primary interest for Dostoevsky toward the end of his career ("Accidental Families and Surrogate Fathers"). See also Knapp on the Dostoevskian accidental family (footnote 7).

from “all that muddled Karamazovism”) (PV 667, PSS 15:99). It seems that the debilitated state of the nation is something about which even these fierce adversaries can agree.¹⁰ And as in *Bleak House*, the indigenous disorder is manifested in the inept legal system and the chaotic shape of criminal proceedings (an element of Dostoevsky’s verisimilitude, since the book takes place during the period of the Great Reforms, which instituted a new, Western-style juridical system in Russia that was debated fiercely in journals and newspapers throughout the country, much in the way that the British Chancery system portrayed in Dickens’s novel was the focus of a national furor). All of these forms of dysfunction coalesce in the trial of Dmitry and the accusation of parricide—the act that is perhaps the central figuration of perversion and rupture in the novel and the most haunting emblem of the Russian national malady.¹¹

From descriptions of characters’ behavior, their physical traits, and their emotional states, to characterizations of family life and the larger undertakings of the collective as a whole, the most frequently employed words in the novel are those indicating disorder and disintegration: “беспорядок,” “безобразие,” “расстройство,” “неустройство,” “растроенный.” These words also might be applied to the narrative itself, with its sprawling proliferation of characters and cacophony of voices, its frenetic activity, its often unpredictable shifts of perspective, its patchwork assemblage of

¹⁰ Of course, neither Fetyukovich nor Ippolit Kirillovich can be considered a mouthpiece for the author. (As we will see, they are the sites of a considerable amount of Dostoevskian satire and in fact represent a perspective on Russian society that is contradictory to the outlook of the novel as a whole.) But as is so often the case in Dostoevsky, even these essentially wrongheaded figures speak in a vocabulary that echoes throughout the text and that embodies the narrative’s guiding concerns.

¹¹ As Friedlender writes, the novel’s represented world is virtually permeated with the conflict between old and young (or between fathers and sons), which reaches a climax in the parricide: “In Russia there remains not one quiet corner where this battle isn’t raging...Even in the provincial monastery...the stubborn, secret battle between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ is boiling” [“в России не осталось ни одного самого тихого уголка, где бы не кипела...[такая] борьба...Даже в провинциальном монастыре...происходит упорная скрытая борьба “старого” и “нового”...” (328)].

interpolated texts, and its elusive narrator (whose various idiosyncrasies will be discussed in Chapter 4). If the novel were a domicile, in other words, it would look flagrantly unkempt, like a *Bleak House* (or a Bleak House) that has rejected the ministrations of Esther. Even the meta-structure of the narrative, as the so-called author explains in the preface, exhibits the ubiquitous pathology of disintegration and fragmentation: in that the work, as the author claims, has been conceived as a whole of which the book we read is only the first half, it appears that this is a novel that has “broke[n] itself into two stories” [“разбился сам собою на два рассказа”] (PV 4, PSS 14:6). As Belknap writes, with all of the narrative gaps, and the confusion that the narrator seems to provoke deliberately, we may even be tempted to consider this a “willfully ill-made novel” (*Structure* 91).

But if *The Brothers Karamazov* presents us with an initial vision of individual, communal, and textual decay that is strikingly reminiscent of the muddy streets, the troubled heroine, and the divided narrative of *Bleak House*, it is also clear that in Dostoevsky’s novel these pathologies are conceived of rather differently—a contrast that can be glimpsed, initially, in terms of the seemingly simple matter of the novelistic hero’s identity. In Dickens’s novel, as we have seen, Esther’s status, paradoxically, is both undisputed and ambiguous; her sovereignty over a private narrative dominion that is nearly as spacious as the one devoted to the public domain figures her centrality to, but also her narcissistically self-enclosed marginality and isolation within, the textual community as a whole; and the underlying pathology of her first-person narration stands in for the endurance of her disease, as well as the incurable rift between self and world, that the novel depicts. In other words, by granting pride of place to Esther, *Bleak House* both assures her paradoxical exclusion and creates its own failed integration.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast, no such radical dichotomy exists between singular protagonist and manifold others (or between first- and third-person viewpoints). Not only does the book, in classic Dostoevskian fashion, grant first-person rights, in the form of storytelling, to a remarkable number of personages in the novel, but the privileged status of novelistic hero, as many readers point out, belongs properly not to one but to three individuals, who share narrative space with one another amicably.¹² As A. Boyce Gibson writes, “Dmitry commands the plot; Ivan is the ideological centre; Alyosha is the spiritual climax.... None of them can be neglected and all must be held together at every turn of the road” (175). This diffusion of narrative focus makes itself felt despite the author’s explicit granting of the status of hero to Alyosha, and even his claim that the work as a whole constitutes that character’s “biography” (an assertion that, in truth, comes from such a tonally ambiguous authorial voice and is so overrun with equivocations that it seems to leave readers free to decide otherwise).¹³ Such a dispersal of narrative attention, beyond opening up the text to a larger number of voices, grants the primary protagonists a freedom of movement that is quite different from Esther’s

¹² As David K. Danow says, the “storytellers” in the novel include Fyodor, Ivan, Dmitry, Zosima, Grushenka, Katerina Ivanovna, Captain Snegiryov, the peasant women, Miusov, Fetyukovich, Ippolit Kirillovich, Kolya, Herzenstube, Lise, Ferapont, the devil, Pan Vrublevsky, Maksimov, and Dmitry’s coachman, all of whom are granted their own first-person accounts (124). Certainly, this proliferation of tellers is (perhaps heightened) manifestation of the polyphonic underpinnings that Bakhtin discerns in all of Dostoevsky’s novels. (For a discussion of the somewhat different manifestation of polyphony in Dostoevsky’s last novel as opposed to his previous works, see Nina Perlina, *Varieties of Poetic Utterance*.)

¹³ The first paragraph of the author’s preface reads: “Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity. Namely, that while I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, so that I can foresee the inevitable questions, such as: What is notable about your Alexei Fyodorovich that you should choose him for your hero? What has he really done? To whom is he known, and for what? Why should I, the reader, spend my time studying the facts of his life?” (PV 7, PSS 14:5) And yet Alyosha in no way assumes the amount of narrative space that Dickens grants to Esther, who, despite her feelings of unfairness and invisibility, is quite a formidable presence; though by no means a minor player, and certainly deeply instrumental to the functioning of the work as a whole, Alyosha is not the focus of attention (even when the narrative is given over to his voice he assumes the role not of autobiographer but of scribe).

autonomous but also isolated narrative position. If Esther is stuck in a state of jarring and systematic alternation between narrative control and narrative neglect that figures her sickness, then Alyosha, Dmitry, and Ivan are free to come and go from the plot as they please, frequently and unpredictably disappearing from the narrative for large chunks of time and yet remaining always not far from our minds. As Belknap points out, Dmitry is missing from more than one-quarter of the novel at one stretch, and Alyosha is similarly unrepresented for a good 250 pages; and yet “Dostoevskij...keep[s] them in the reader’s mind when they are not involved in the action before the reader” by mentioning them in the voice of either the narrator or the other characters (*Structure* 62). Whereas Esther, in chapters that belong to the omniscient narrator, is virtually effaced from the story, absent characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* are neither banished nor overlooked, but are simply elsewhere, and free to return to the embrace of the narrative at any moment—a generous, community–building approach that is welcoming and sustaining rather than forbidding and closed. (Perhaps for that matter part of what is at stake here is the difference between a novel that bases its picture of psychic and social life on the experience of the only child—with her axiomatic position of simultaneous all-importance and isolation—and a novel that figures human relations as the negotiations that take place among siblings.¹⁴)

In its basic structural elements, then, *The Brothers Karamazov* presents the possibility of health and integration that eludes Esther and her world. It is also the case that, unlike the closed system of *Bleak House*, this world is characterized by a flexibility that bears the potential for redemptive change. In what might be seen as the inverse of

¹⁴ I would like to thank Liza Knapp for this insight.

the predicament of Dickens's novel, in which the enduring exile and deformity of one person figures a world with a dire fault, *The Brothers Karamazov* endows a single individual with the capacity to nurture the faltering many and even to indicate the path to revival for the whole. As Ivan says, "it's enough for me that you are here somewhere, and I shall not stop wanting to live" (PV 263, PSS 14:240): a tribute to Alyosha's presence as a source of spiritual sustenance in a despoiled universe and a sentiment that is shared with a number of characters, including Dmitry, Grushenka, and Lise. Alyosha's salubrious influence extends to virtually all members of the novelistic community; even the repulsive Fyodor Pavlovich, as Thompson points out, exhibits a certain degree of moral improvement under his youngest son's tutelage (*Memory* 171).¹⁵ In *The Brothers Karamazov* an imperfect world, no matter how oppressed its inhabitants, may always be reminded by a single, shining human exemplar that renewal and healing are abiding possibilities.

In fact, it is not only individuals who bear the capacity to improve and nurture the whole, but even the smallest gestures, moments, or acts. From Zosima's brother, who claims ecstatically on his deathbed that "even one day is enough for a man to know all happiness" (PV 289, PSS 14:262); to Dmitry, who wonders whether "one minute of [Grushenka's]...love [might be] worth the rest of my life" (PV 437, PSS 14:394-5); to

¹⁵ Fyodor tells Alyosha that "with you alone I have kind moments, otherwise I'm an evil man" (PV 174, PSS 14:158); Dmitry exclaims that "there is a man that I love...my dear little brother, whom I love more than anyone in the world, and who is the only one I love" (PV 154, PSS 14:142); Lise says to Alyosha that "I need only your tears...as for all the rest, let them punish me and trample me with their feet..." (PV 585, PSS 15:25); and Grushenka tells him that "all my life I've been waiting for such a one as you, I knew someone like that would come and forgive me..." (PV 357, PSS 14:323). Rather than indicating the extravagant importance of Alyosha to all other characters in the novel, these proclamations of Alyosha's importance indicate that in this debased universe, the presence of merely a single good seed is sufficient grounds for hope. It may be precisely this ability to influence one's fellows, rather than any kind of outstanding singularity on Alyosha's part—either in his personal characteristics or in his place in the narrative—that makes the author call him the novel's hero.

the famous parable of the onion, which figures the mere offering of an onion as the ticket to heaven; to Dr. Herzenstube's gift of a bag of nuts to the child Dmitry, a kindness that Dmitry retains for the rest of his life; to Zosima's homiletic exhortation that "even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve some day for our salvation" (PV 774, PSS 15:195)—characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* hearken repeatedly to the significance of the most diminutive gesture or experience. Even Dmitry's wild spending of Katerina Ivanovna's money, the center of so much controversy within the novel, partakes of what might be called the novel's ethic of the "wee bit" ("с малым" [PV 224, PSS 14:204]): for it appears that Dmitry might plausibly go on his improvident benders, whittling down the sum of money little by little—but that as long as he preserves just one kopek he might, according to the ethic of the novel, remain a candidate for salvation.¹⁶ Just as hope for the entire collective might be manifest in the stirrings of one young's man soul, the tiniest grain of generosity, joy, integrity, or love bears a transformative potential for both individual and community. As Zosima proclaims, "all is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world" (PV 319, PSS 14:290). Whereas Freud might have raised an eyebrow at such a conceit—and in fact explained the sensation of the "oceanic" as a fantasy of the immature ego recollecting the undifferentiated bliss of

¹⁶ During his first trip to Mokroye Dmitry squanders half of the heiress's 3000 rubles but preserves the other half with the intention of returning them—a gesture that, according to Holland, "stands for the possibility of a person achieving moral resurrection even at the moment he or she seems most debased" ("Legend of the *Ladonka*" 196). On his second trip to Mokroye he squanders roughly half of the 1500 rubles that remain (when he is apprehended, the officials find exactly 836 rubles and 40 kopeks still on his person [PV 481, PSS 14:433])—another spree that, according to the novel's principles, still allows him to retain the seeds of his own salvation. We imagine that if the novel had permitted it, Dmitry might have continued spending half of the remaining money while always preserving the other half intact, in a kind of financial (and spiritual) instantiation of Zeno's famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise (I would like to thank Liza Knapp for this last suggestion.) Although in yet another Dostoevskian logical tangle, the notion (that the divine spark in Dmitry, no matter how much it gets whittled away, still remains) is expressed, paradoxically, within a rather Dickensian vision of the conservation of matter.

infancy—this exquisite receptiveness for Dostoevsky is salvific, the enduring promise of a world in which “if you yourself were more gracious than you are now, if only by a drop, still it would be easier” (PV 319, PSS 14:290).

The notion that such a salutary influence is exercised by the novice monk Alyosha in particular—rather than, say, by the physician Herzenstube (who more often than not is described as able to “make nothing” [PV 181, PSS 14:165] of a particular ailment and is conspicuously uninvolved in any character’s steps toward recovery, discounting, of course, the gift of the nuts) is a further indication of the distinctive assumptions upon which Dostoevsky’s novel is based. In *Bleak House*, doctors and detectives are figures of authority whose capacity to diagnose and prescribe earns them universal respect, even if their efforts are ultimately fruitless; by the same token, the narrative itself follows a diagnostic and forensic trajectory, tracing the manifestations of disease (individual and communal, physical and moral) along the lines of a case study, an epidemiological report, or the self-examination of spiritual autobiography, with the goal of enlightenment and cure.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast, all civil, professional, and temporal authorities—not only physicians, but also lawyers, judges, policemen, and the like—are divested of their usual aura of gravitas and expertise, while the effort of personal and communal correction is transferred, significantly, to much humbler figures. Similarly, the narrative itself engages in no investigatory or corrective endeavors. Though the first book covers the early life experiences of the three Karamazov brothers, it does so in large brushstrokes, only vaguely acknowledging the influence of childhood on the adult persona before moving on to present-day matters. And because the narrative never

lingers over the thoughts or point of view of any one character for very long, there is little room for Esther-like introspection. The most protracted personal history that we are given is the interpolated “Life of Zosima,” which, unlike Esther’s self-contained autobiographical musings, is in many ways a collective endeavor: compiled by Alyosha from Zosima’s words, the account is Dostoevsky’s version of a saint’s *vita*, in which the emphasis is not on the personal but on the universal, and on the private journey as a model for communal salvation. The document is also “incomplete and fragmentary” [“не полна и отрывочна”], a haphazard accretion of “much that had apparently been said at different times and for various reasons . . . brought together, as if in a single whole” (PV 323, PSS 14:293)—and thus it resembles the incomplete, fragmentary, and yet aesthetically satisfying novel itself. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the goal is not the retrospective illumination of the past, either in terms of spiritual epiphany and atonement or even a secular working-through. Rather, the text encourages a more abstracted and emotive appreciation of the mysteries intrinsic to each chapter of life. In particular, as we will see, the narrative itself may be said to embrace a foundational assumption of Eastern Orthodoxy: that “the impenetrable mystery of God is not a puzzle to decipher or a defect to expunge; it is something to contemplate and adore” (Clendenin 150). And accordingly, its underlying ethic involves a renunciation of all forensic endeavors, whether carried out by a character or a text. The detective novel, one might say, looks quite different in a culture in which mysteries are not meant to be solved.¹⁷

¹⁷ These ideas about the persistence of mystery in the Russian detective novel might also be connected to what Malcolm Jones calls “the paradox of apophatic theology”: “that one may come close to an experience of the fullness of the divine presence through an encounter with the dark silence of total ignorance” (“Modeling the Religious Dimension” 46)—a compelling expression of Russian culture’s relative lack of interest when it comes to matters of enlightenment and illumination as they are conceived of in the West.

The purpose of this chapter and the next is to examine the various ways in which *The Brothers Karamazov* depicts personal, communal, and narrative disorder, as well as the distinctive values and mechanisms that allowed Dostoevsky to limn the potential achievement of wholeness and regeneration in the real world and realist narrative. If *Bleak House*, like *Moll Flanders*, is burdened by the suspicion that, in the real world and realist narrative, healing and reconciliation are unlikely, then *The Brothers Karamazov* embraces the transformative capacity of the Real itself; with its grounding in Christian convictions about salvation, transcendence, and return, and specifically in Eastern Orthodox assumptions about the malleability of, and the potential housed within, the things of the temporal world, as well as in Orthodoxy's distinctive notions about communal life and the symbiotic link between self and collective, it upholds the faith that genuine melioration is possible for even the most wayward of heroes, communities, and narratives. In fact, if *Bleak House*, like *Moll Flanders*, is palpably oppressed by its own efforts to achieve closure and form—such that the enduring faults of these novels remain buried beneath rather anxious assurances of recovery and wholeness—*The Brothers Karamazov*, like *The Comely Cook*, reveals unabashedly its own formal inconsistencies and fissures and even presents such shortcomings as a foreshadowing of eventual transcendence. Indeed it is in these very initial disorders that one discerns the aureate glimmerings of salvation. And yet unlike Chulkov's work, Dostoevsky's text, in its depiction of family and communal organization and in its narrative architecture, also maintains a careful balance between formlessness and form; between anarchy and organization; between the waywardness of metonymically driven plot and static, iconic structures; and between the contingencies of day-to-day living and reminders of eternity.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* the regeneration of the faulty self, community, and text, though certainly not achieved by the novel's end, is not precluded from the start, and it is these syntheses that allow for the possibility of recovery.

As with the discussion of *Bleak House* in the previous chapter, the interlocking concerns of *The Brothers Karamazov* are perhaps best addressed separately. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine the text as a family novel that interrogates problems of generational conflict and the influence of heredity and family life on individual and communal wellbeing. The next chapter will open up the examination to consider the novel's engagement with the larger institutions and structures of the outside world, and especially its handling of criminal and juridical proceedings. This chapter, therefore, will now focus on the work as a bildungsroman (albeit one in which the *bildung* is dispersed among many characters). The next chapter will examine the book as a detective narrative. Certainly, both of these plotlines are standard fare for the nineteenth-century realist novel, and they are similarly entwined in *Bleak House*. But, as we will see, in *The Brothers Karamazov* they both assume a distinctive and idiosyncratic shape.

In many ways, *The Brothers Karamazov* is Dostoevsky's *Fathers and Sons*. In the January 1876 issue of *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky first made reference to his intention to write a work in which he would "take fathers and children from every level of Russian society" and "follow the children from their earliest childhood"—and though he claimed that *The Adolescent* constituted his "first attempt at...[dramatizing this] idea," he implied that its fullest fictional treatment would lie in the future (PSS 22:7; quoted in

Golstein 90).¹⁸ Golstein points out that Book 1—which depicts the scattered upbringings of the three Karamazov boys, and specifically the different ways in which each child was abandoned by his degenerate father—is virtually a template for the rest of the novel, which constitutes a rearrangement of the elements and themes that are introduced at the outset: “fathers, sons, failed upbringing, tragic death, and the repercussions that are remembered through the years” (91). To all appearances, the “bezobrazie” that Jackson discerned as a “structuring moral and aesthetic categor[y]...in Dostoevsky’s art” (*Art* 18) can be glimpsed first and foremost in the chaotic and violent family circle at the center of the novel, and the various forms of cruelty and disorder that are traced in the first few chapters seem to presage lasting misery in the characters’ lives: a vision of the hold of the past that is Dickensian in both mood and outlook.

In this sense, *The Brothers Karamazov* announces from the start its own concern with the ubiquitous nineteenth-century novelistic preoccupation—the nature of inheritance. Not surprisingly, the contested monetary inheritance that serves as the catalyst for the narrative and that dominates Dmitry’s storyline (since as the eldest son, Dmitry is his father’s primary heir) stands in for the larger matters of generational exchange that are intrinsic to any father-son story: for all of the debts, obligations, and burdens (or more rarely, assets and benevolence) that are passed around between parents and children. Dmitry, who we learn “had a false and inflated idea of...[the] property” owed to him by his father, and who technically at the start of the book “might even be in debt” (PV 12, PSS 14:12) to his parent, virtually admits that his quest for what he feels is rightfully his transcends the technicalities of statutory obligation: “legally he owes me

¹⁸ Golstein writes that of all of Dostoevsky’s novels it is his last “that analyzes the modern-day fathers and children most extensively” (91).

nothing...” he says, “but morally he surely owes me something, doesn’t he?” (PV 120, PSS 14:111). Dmitry is intuitively aware that his father’s financial chicanery—the man’s “special skill at knocking money together, and at knocking it out of people” (PV 22, PSS 14:21), his amassing of large sums of rubles at the expense of others, and his intention to “sav[e]...up more and more, for [him]self alone” (PV 173, PSS 14:157)—figures all of the selfishness and neglect that characterize his behavior toward his sons, who may be considered, in this sense, no less orphaned, and yet also no less oppressed by their parentage, than Esther Summerson. There is also, similarly, a shadowy sexual component to the fraught relationship between the Karamazov brothers and their father, in that lechery and “sensualism” (like Lady Dedlock’s adultery), and possibly even rape, are part of the burden of the parental endowment.¹⁹ For the Karamazovs, just as for Esther (or perhaps any of us, for that matter), one of the burdens of one’s heritage is a coming to terms with the always illicit, mysterious, and unseemly act of procreation—and part of the aim of the narrative writ large is the overcoming of this fundamentally childlike confusion about, and repulsion toward, one’s own origins.

If Fyodor withholds not only money from his children, but in fact all manner of paternal benevolence and generosity, then he certainly seems to have passed on other endowments that constitute an extremely dubious family legacy. Taking his cue from the novel itself, Belknap refers to this paternal bequest as “Karamazovism,” and he conceives of it virtually as an existential presence within the novel, “an inertial, paradoxical force which rests on the contradictory and fluctuating presences of intellect and lechery,

¹⁹ There is even some indication that not only Smerdyakov, but perhaps the other Karamazov brothers as well, are the products of rape, or at least of some sort of sexual attack: as Fyodor says of his relations with Alyosha’s and Ivan’s mother, “I always used to take...[her] by surprise” (PV 136, PSS 14:126), adding that “I knew that that was how her sickness usually began, that the next day she’d start shrieking again...” (PV 137, PSS 14:126).

vileness and pride, love of life and self-destruction, half-wittedness and revolt” (*Structure* 34). Certainly, these are qualities that radiate outward from the confines of this nuclear family, infecting nearly all of the characters in one way or another; but they are also presented primarily as inherited traits that are associated with the family name, passed down along the Karamazov family line, and manifesting themselves physically in the “crooked” and “twisted” bodily features of all the Karamazov men. Not only Dmitry’s hunchback, but also Ivan’s crooked gait (he “swayed as he walked, and...his right shoulder, seen from behind, appeared lower than his left” [PV 264, PSS 14:241]), and his periodically “twisted” face, seem to be markers of their affiliation with Fyodor Pavlovich—whom Alyosha describes at a certain point as “not an evil man...just twisted” (PV 174, PSS 14:158). Even Alyosha, the most physically robust and certainly the most beautiful of the brothers, bears some Karamazovian traits that periodically mar the pristine proportions of his person.²⁰ When Alyosha “grin[s] crookedly” (PV 80, 337; PSS 14:74, 305), or when he flashes a “twisted smile” (PV 243, PSS 14:221), we recognize that even this “angel on earth” (PV 105, PSS 14:97) is, by his own admission, “also a Karamazov” (PV 218, PSS 14:199). As Rakitin tells Alyosha menacingly, “you are a Karamazov yourself, a full-fledged Karamazov—race and selection do mean something” (PV 80, PSS 14:74).

Dostoevsky’s novel is thus an interrogation not only of inheritance, but also of heredity and hereditary determinism. Rakitin, with his interest in the budding field of natural science, expresses these concerns through the lens of evolutionary theory, and this perspective on questions of inherited endowment is carried throughout the book in the

²⁰ “Alyosha was...a well-built, red-cheeked nineteen-year-old youth, clear-eyed and bursting with health” and was indeed “quite handsome” (PV 25, PSS 14:24).

repeated references to Claude Bernard, whose principles of experimental medicine and scientific determinism were hotly debated among the Russian intelligentsia and whose name is consistently associated in the novel with the atheist intellectuals Rakitin and Ivan. For Bernard, as Harriet Murav writes, “the rule of determinism...applie[d] equally well to psychological phenomena” (*Holy Foolishness* 38), such that in the novel his name is a buzzword for notions about the predictability of behavior not only in bodies but also in minds, as well as the reliable transmission of both physiological and psychic traits from generation to generation.

This complex nexus of associations in the book—whereby Karamazovism is linked conceptually, via the inquiries of Rakitin and Ivan, to matters of natural selection, genetic transmission and even, as in Freud, the indelible imprint of infantile wishes and childhood experiences on the adult psyche—has the effect of rendering the most salient human qualities as virtually predetermined. And it does seem that in various ways, not only in physical appearance but also in behavior and psychic makeup, the Karamazov boys have been created in their father’s noxious image.²¹ Certainly, Dmitry’s recklessness and Ivan’s streak of rebellion seem to be paternal endowments. Even Alyosha’s behavior, as indeed several characters notice, can be seen as bearing the germ of their father’s orgiastic sensualism, his lechery, and his propensity for unbridled self-indulgence.²² The family dynamic at the start of the novel, furthermore—which is the

²¹ Of course, the Karamazov brothers are their mothers’ sons as well, and much critical attention has been devoted recently to maternal inheritance within the novel (see Knapp, “Mothers and Sons of Skotoprigonievsk.”) These matters will be discussed in the next chapter.

²² As Dmitry says to Alyosha of Karamazovian sensualism, “all of us Karamazovs are like that, and in you, an angel, the same insect lives and stirs up storms in your blood. Storms, because sensuality is a storm, more than a storm!” (PV 108, PSS 14:100); Alyosha similarly admits to Lise that “you are more innocent than I am” for “I, too, am a Karamazov!” (PV 218, PSS 14:199)

point at which the sons, who are well into their twenties and have been scattered virtually since childhood, are first becoming acquainted—bears the unmistakable imprint of a father who has forgotten and disowned his children. It is no wonder that there is such a dearth of brotherly care in the family, since each of the sons seems to have imbibed, or at least been deeply affected by, his father's ethic of abandonment.²³ Dostoevsky has engineered a situation in which the father's imprint on his sons can be depicted in terms of both heredity and deed: for while the similar qualities exhibited by all the sons must, it seems, be genetic endowments (since they grew up in different households), they are also indisputably scarred by the paternal abandonment that they all experienced. When it comes to questions of nature versus nurture, the Karamazov boys are doomed from both directions.

In many ways, then, *The Brothers Karamazov* opens with a vision of all of the ways in which children are determined, deformed, and generally oppressed by their parentage. (Significantly, the title of the first chapter is "Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov," while the very first words of the book constitute the full name of his youngest son—almost a visual representation of the premise that one's own story can be initiated only in the house of the father.) In fact, nearly all the afflictions that we encounter throughout the novel are presented as family endowments, and not only within the Karamazov circle: from the Snegiryovs, in whom decrepitude is a common trait; to Kolya Krasotkin, whose disruptive influence, as we will see, is determined in part by the lasting dominion of his dead father; to Lise Khokhlakova, whose disorder seems to be linked to her unhealthy embroilment (contemporary pop psychology might even term it a co-dependent

²³ Ivan explicitly rebels against the notion of being his "brother's keeper" (PV 231, PSS 14:211), and even Alyosha at one point forgets his promise to attend to Dmitry.

relationship) with her mother (who herself claims to be “suffering” [PV 55, PSS 14:51]); to hysterical misery generally, which is understood as an inescapable perpetuation of the mother’s malaise—deformity and disease are almost always presented as the markers of consanguinity.²⁴ By the same token, in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky presents the genetic family as the birthplace of the destructive forces infecting the universe at large, and in this sense it is the Karamazov family itself that stands at the center of the general degradation. Many of the examples of malicious transmission in the book, as well as instances of cruelty or defilement—Ivan’s apparent indoctrination of Lise in atheism and depravity; Smerdyakov’s instruction of Ilyusha in the killing of animals; Dmitry’s brutality toward Snegiryov, with its wide-ranging effects—radiate outward from the Karamazov family. It almost seems as if Fyodor, the source of so much Karamazovian depravity, might be considered the hub of corruption in the community as a whole.

Like *Bleak House* and even *Moll Flanders*, then—both of which present heroines who are unable to overcome the double legacy of parental abandonment and parental omnipresence—*The Brothers Karamazov* poses a number of questions about the nature of inheritance. Are children merely copies of their parents? Are they as marred by their parents’ failings as they are marked indelibly by their DNA? Are family relations overshadowed inexorably by the specter of biological and psychic determinism? Are the destructive energies incubated within the hothouse of family life released inevitably upon the community? In short, is this a world in which genetic determination and psychic scarring condemn each successive generation to a static repetition of the disorders and

²⁴ For more on the subject of this female distress, see Knapp’s “Mothers and Sons in *The Brothers Karamazov*” in *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*.

fragmentations of the past, a universe caught in a downward spiral of disorder and decay?

Perhaps the bleakest vision of such a world is presented by Ivan's devil, who posits that

our present earth may have repeated itself a billion times; it died out, let's say, got covered with ice, cracked, fell to pieces, broke down into its original components, again there were the waters above the firmament, then again a comet, again the sun, again the earth from the sun—all this development may already have been repeated an infinite number of times, and always in the same way, to the last detail. A most unspeakable bore.... (PV 644, PSS 15:79)

As Murav writes, in the devil's account of the universe “nothing new could ever enter the cycle; everything is already given and already known”—and it is appropriate that this picture of repetition in the guise of progress is voiced by Ivan's imago, since more than any of the brothers Ivan bears a relationship to his father characterized by “demonic repetition” (*Holy Foolishness* 147). This image of interminable, dulling repetition is a cosmic version of what Dickens presented, more farcically, as social critique: a world in which each Old Smallweed will inevitably give rise to a Young Smallweed, who will eventually bear another Young Smallweed in turn; or a world in which an exchangeable set of clerks—Coodle, Doodle, Foodle, and eventually Zoodle—replace one another in the same government post.

Indeed, a novelistic world in which a father's gross misconduct gets him murdered by his own sons (each of whom contributes to the murder in his own way), thereby creating a closed circle of retroactive and repetitive wrongdoing, might be considered a heightened version of Dickens's more mundane picture of intergenerational violence—in which nearly every individual act is a blight on the universe that can never be erased, and in which the consequences of one's actions are ruinous for one's progeny, oneself, and the community at large. The parricide that stands at the center of *The*

Brothers Karamazov is presented as the inevitable consequence of a family situation in which the sins of the father have been visited on the children, and parricidal rebellion is thus the ultimate expression—and the dark corollary—of hereditary determinism. Parricidal sentiments are also raised to the status of ideological conviction among characters whose radical political and theological positions contain hints of deicide and tsaricide. Perhaps, from this perspective, similar emotions contribute to the oppressive pall that hangs over *Bleak House*, although here all of the repressed rage on the part of beleaguered children toward inadequate parents never finds an outlet; if it expresses itself at all it does so only indirectly, as a neat trick of novelistic displacement in the form of Hortense's turbulent outburst.

From another perspective, however, the comparison of *The Brothers Karamazov* with *Bleak House* may be instructive in a different way, since for all of the Russian novel's preoccupation with matters of recursiveness, redundancy, and grim predictability, these phenomena are not enacted formally, and the world of *The Brothers Karamazov* is simply not as airtight a system as *Bleak House* is. If Ivan's imaginings of sterile repetition, changelessness, and decay evoke the bleakness of Dickens's universe—and if, as the son who converts his anger toward his father into theological, philosophical, and political positions, Ivan is the perhaps the brother most hopelessly mired in parricidal impulses—then his is also a world that offers a vision of other possibilities, even for himself. In fact, the deft metaphysical alchemy accomplished in the novel, whereby the scientific principles of genetic and psychic determinism are converted into a demonic force, suggests that Dostoevsky's universe presents us with alternatives: for unlike the

incontrovertible mandates of science and physics, the devil and the devil's minions have powerful adversaries.

Similarly, the novel's depiction of the three brothers is as much a portrayal of intra-family difference as it is of dulling continuity, and each brother, as Susanne Fusso writes, though equally "abandoned and abused," pursues "his own spiritual and moral path" ("Family" 190). They also are distinctive individuals in terms of personality and demeanor. Alyosha, at least in his overt behavior, is sexually modest, and "seem[s]...not to know the value of money" [PV 21, PSS 14:20]); Ivan, the reserved intellectual, bears very little resemblance to Dmitry, the reckless sensualist. Unlike Dickens's novel (which at its more farcical moments imagines children as veritable carbon copies of their parents), and unlike Defoe's (which, in picturing Moll practically two steps behind her mother in her first trip to America and even sending her back a second time, figures a child's life path as a recursive set of reenactments of the parent's peregrinations), *The Brothers Karamazov* offers a vision of simultaneous likeness and difference within the family collective: presenting us, from the start, with a wider set of possibilities for even those children who are struggling under the yoke of parental malfeasance.²⁵

²⁵ According to Fusso, Dostoevsky, "like Freud...seeks the origins of spiritual disease in childhood," but he does not "fall prey to determinism" ("Family" 190)—an epistemology that is represented convincingly in the novel only to be refuted. Of course, it is indeed possible to interpret Karamazovism deterministically. As F. F. Seeley writes, Alyosha's "'absurd, frantic modesty and chastity'" is "a transparent reaction-formation, into which he ha[s] 'sublimated' his inheritance of sensuality" (121), and the same thing may be said in regard to Alyosha's relationship to money. Belknap anticipates Seeley's formulation, though in less strictly psychoanalytic terms, in his claim that "the presence of opposites is...a component of Karamazovism" (*Structure* 33) (a contention that figures radical deviation itself as a signal of family likeness), as well as in his vision of the "hierarchy of sensuality" (32) on which all of the novel's characters are situated. Such a hierarchy places Fyodor at the top, Alyosha at the bottom, and Dmitry and Ivan somewhere in the middle, although any differences among the brothers are understood as variations on the same theme. But whatever causal explanation we may attribute to the divergent manifestations of the Karamazov family inheritance, and whatever sameness we might discern within all of the images of discrepancy, the fact remains that the family circle in *The Brothers Karamazov* is not only a prison house of repetitive behaviors but also a locus of variation and possibility.

Perhaps more important is the extent to which *The Brothers Karamazov* represents the possibility of genuine change. If this is a novel in which familial endowment can express itself in surprising or counterintuitive ways, then it is also one in which the weight of family history does not preclude the possibility of peripeteia and reversal. Central to any reading of the novel is the chapter “Cana of Galilee,” during which Alyosha, in his despair at Zosima’s death and the man’s precipitous bodily decay, and in his subsequent experience of sexual temptation, comes at last to a head-on confrontation with his family inheritance of sensualism, rebellion, and spiritual doubt. The climax of this distress is presented as a conversion, during which the “threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all c[ome]...together in [Alyosha’s]...soul” (PV 362, PSS 14:328) and he falls to the earth, shedding ecstatic tears and feeling “something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul.” “Some sort of idea...,” the narrator tells us, “was coming to reign in his mind—now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life” (PV 363, PSS 14:328). Readers tend to agree that the remainder of the novel bears out these assurances of the lasting change in Alyosha wrought by this experience: as Fusso writes, after “Cana of Galilee” Alyosha “has become a sober, self-possessed man” (“Sexuality” 149), and though her reading centers on the sexual imagery that accompanies the scene, one need not view the episode specifically as a loss of virginity to discern a sudden onset of maturity. Indeed, when we next see Alyosha, after a long absence from the narrative, he has “changed very much...and was now wearing a finely tailored coat and a soft, round hat” (PV 533, PSS 14:478) instead of his former skirt-like, novice’s cassock: a visual representation of his

transformation that seems, to be sure, more secular than spiritual, but a striking vision of achieved manhood nonetheless.

This vision of spontaneous and momentous transformation is a far cry from Esther's quest for recovery and deliverance: an arduous process of "labour[ing] up colossal staircases" (555) that figures her confessional endeavor writ large and that—her fevered condition notwithstanding—resembles the systematic investigation (or self-investigation) of a detective, a physician, or a religious pilgrim. Alyosha's kairotic moment is portrayed as sudden, unforeseen, and sublimely disorienting; he moves through the experience in a fugue state, in which

no single sensation stood out, making itself felt too much; on the contrary, one followed another in a sort of slow and calm rotation...Fragments of thoughts flashed in his soul, catching fire like little stars and dying out at once, to give way to others....He would ardently begin a prayer...But having begun the prayer, he would suddenly pass to something else, lapse into thought, and forget both his prayer and what had interrupted it.

Yet despite the fragmentary, disordered movements of his spirit, he maintains a consciousness during the entire experience of "something whole, firm, assuaging" (PV 359, PSS 14:325); and unlike Esther, who recovers from her illness but remains just as confused as she was at the outset (or Moll, whose supposed prison conversion appears questionable at best), he regains his equilibrium as a changed man. The positioning of Alyosha's metamorphosis at virtually the mid-point of the novel—making it not only the work's emotional high-point but also its structural fulcrum—also places it in contrast to the equivalent moments in the English novels: apparent conversion scenes that are really, as Hal Gladfelder writes of Moll's prison confession, "point[s] on which nothing turns" (124). In Dickens and Defoe, as we have seen, the forces of inertia and stasis that are

built into the narratives ensure that the heroines are never emancipated from the weight of the past. Though structured as bildungsromans, the novels are stories of perpetual children whose final conditions of achieved domesticity only barely camouflage the discontent and confusion roiling underneath, and who can ultimately do nothing but birth perpetual children in turn. From this perspective, in fact, Dostoevsky appears to turn the English novels precisely on their heads, since the work's governing ethic, as Dmitry voices it, is that "there are little children and big children, [but] [a]ll people are 'wee ones'" ["есть малые дети и большие дети. Все—дите"] (PV 591, PSS 15:31). Alyosha may dress like a grownup, but it is the conversion experience, and the implicit embrace of his status as a child of God, that allows him to become an adult.

Alyosha's conversion also takes place in the presence of others (Father Paissy, who is reading out loud from the Gospel of John, and Porfiry, who is sleeping soundly) rather than in solitude, and his achievement of maturation and change contains a promise not only for the individual, but also for his progeny and the future generally—the turning point in the individual *bildung* representing the potential deliverance of later generations as well. It is worth pausing here over the episodes in the novel that focus on Alyosha's interaction with the group of schoolboys: the other fraternal collective that is central to the book and that, in its own way, is just as troubled as the Karamazov family. For as many critics have noted, Alyosha's transformation is evident particularly in his newfound ability to nurture others—a shedding of his father's malignant influence that represents not only his own achievement, but also the potential liberation of other similarly beleaguered sons and brothers.

Kolya Krasotkin, the charismatic leader of the group whom we meet just before Alyosha's re-entrance into the narrative, is another child who has been forsaken by his parent—although this abandonment is literal, since his father is dead. Understandably, he is haunted by the mysteries of his origins, and it is no coincidence that the collection of volumes that his father has left him, over which Kolya often pores instead of going outside to play, includes some “dirty book[s]” (PV 546, PSS 14:493) and other material that “he should not have been given to read at his age” (PV 516, PSS 14:463). (It is interesting to note that in the scene directly following the description of the bookshelf, Kolya is uncharacteristically interested in a conversation between his two younger wards on the topic of where babies come from. It is also worth pointing out that the association here between the mystery of origins, sexual secrets, and sexual shame might have been lifted wholesale from the pages of Esther's narrative.) From this treasure trove of forbidden knowledge, which contains not only pornographic materials but also Smaragdov's *Universal History*—as if the library offers enlightenment not only into sexuality but also into all the enigmas of the universe—Kolya acquires the information with which he is able to “show up” [“собьет”] his teacher, Dardanelov; when he poses the question, ““Who founded Troy?”” Dardanelov can give “only a general answer,” though the entire class knows that Kolya is in possession of the details. The other schoolboys fixate on acquiring this arcane knowledge for themselves, but Kolya, we learn, “would not give away his secret, and the glory of his knowledge remained unshakably his own” since “no one [else] had a copy of Smaragdov” (PV 518, PSS 14:465). When later in the novel his friend Kartashov sneaks a peek at the book while Kolya's back is turned, he becomes “somehow embarrassed and could not bring himself

to reveal publicly that he, too, knew who had founded Troy”; when he finally confesses and gives away the titillating secret, the young fellow “blushed so much that it was pitiful to see” (PV 550-1, PSS 14:497).

In this episode several figures of patriarchal authority—Kolya’s father, Kolya’s teacher, and the ancient founding fathers—all represent, in various ways, knowledge, law, and creation, and their power is clearly associated with sexual secrets. Or alternatively, their authority is shored up by a mystique of hidden knowledge as it is embellished in the imagination of the child, who for his own satisfaction needs to portray the teacher (who is, not coincidentally, Kolya’s mother’s paramour) as posturing and impotent in order to bury his already deceased parent. Kolya’s confrontation with origins is characterized by a simultaneous affiliation with, rebellion against, and triumph over paternal control—with the episode of the book representing, in microcosm, the archetypal primal battle, although in Kolya’s case the struggle is more of a childish, inchoate rebellion. Later Kolya will carry his campaign against patriarchal law to absurd heights when he announces that he “deeply despise[s] classicism” and that the study of Latin is a “police measure...to dull one’s faculties” (PV 552, PSS 14:498), figuratively participating, at this point, not only in the destruction of Troy but also in the fall of Rome. The image of the father still looms so large in his imagination that in order to vanquish the paternal bookcase once and for all, he has to repudiate all human learning.

The clear affiliation here between the circle of boyish comrades and the circle of Karamazov brothers is somewhat more than metaphorical: we learn that Kolya received many of his heretical ideas from Rakitin, including his self-proclaimed socialism and atheism, and therefore Rakitin is a literal link between Kolya and Ivan. In the same way,

the specific embroilment in which Alyosha first encounters the boys—the stand-off between Ilyusha and the rest of the group—is both a version and a result of the Karamazov family drama: in the sense that the ensuing conflict among the children parallels the tensions among the estranged Karamazov brothers themselves, and also that the entire imbroglio, in the plot’s trajectory, was initiated by Dmitry’s beating of Ilyusha’s father. It is as if the pre-pubescent boys in the throes of filial rebellion and fraternal strife are stand-ins for the now twenty-something Karamazov brothers, with the two groups representing successive stages in the ascension into manhood. For the boys as well as for the brothers, inter-generational conflict breeds intra-generational conflict: an iterative process that overtakes fraternal collectives like a disease.

It is no coincidence that after his conversion Alyosha appears next, in his new manly clothing, in the presence of the gang of boys, and that his influence on them seems to have undergone a transformation as well. In his first encounter with the group before the “Cana of Galilee” chapter, he had attempted to intercede in the altercation between Ilyusha and the others, and the intervention had only exacerbated the sense of discord. Now, following his conversionary experience, Alyosha is a changed man whose inward spiritual certainty manifests itself in an outward calm and an air of assuredness and forbearance—the demeanor of a beneficent father toward a rebellious adolescent son. Kolya is particularly impressed at one point by “Alyosha’s uncertainty...in his opinion of Voltaire” and his willingness “to leave it precisely up to him, little Kolya, to resolve the question” of Voltaire’s religious feelings (PV 554, PSS 14:500)—a demurral of authority on Alyosha’s part that figuratively demolishes the overbearing paternal bookshelf.

It is also significant that Alyosha, needless to say, is not the biological father of any of the children. As such he is “an ideal foster parent” (105), as Golstein writes, to the twelve boys. Indeed, adoption, foster parentage, and nonconsanguine brotherhood seem to be the foundations of the social ethic that follows from religious conversion.

Alyosha’s explicit teachings, as we see especially in his oration at the end of the novel, are modeled on the wisdom of Zosima, Alyosha’s own ideal parent,²⁶ and the fraternal bonds that Alyosha forges among the young men transcend not only genetic but also generational boundaries. For it seems that Snegiryov, Ilyusha’s father, is also included in the fraternal embrace, especially by Kolya—the son of a dead father and the father of a dead son coming together as a source of comfort for each other.²⁷ And we suspect that under Alyosha’s influence Kolya, having outgrown his phase of parricidal rebellion, will also be capable of nurturing the next generation in turn—the little “squirts” [“пузыри”], like the children of his neighbors (PV 520, PSS 14:467), whom he had once been able to love only inchoately and intermittently. Unlike Esther Summerson, whose own little Esthers continue to bear the traces of their grandmother’s illicit act and their mother’s psychic wounds, Kolya, we expect, inheriting the mantle of Alyosha and Zosima, will be one of the guardians of brotherhood and compassionate fathering whose inspiration is perpetuated throughout the generations, *ad infinitum*.

²⁶ As Nina Perlina writes, all the elements of Alyosha’s speech at the stone “originate in Zosima’s exhortations” (192).

²⁷ Ilyusha’s deathbed request is that his father adopt Kolya as a companion in mourning: “visit my grave...you must bury me by the big stone where we used to go for our walks, and visit me there with Krasotkin, in the evenings...” (PV 561, PSS 14:507)

The notion that recovery and healing in *The Brothers Karamazov* are predicated on a new type of family grouping has been addressed in a great deal of Dostoevsky criticism, particularly the author's emphasis on what he called the "accidental family" ["случайное семейство"], a term he coined in his *Diary of a Writer* to denote an alternative to the traditional "genetic" family "based entirely on blood and name" (Knapp, "*The Idiot*" 27).²⁸ Of course, on its face, the word "accidental" is ambiguous, suggesting randomness that can be either lucky or unfortunate or perhaps just affectively neutral. According to Knapp, Dostoevsky's notion of "accidental" was based on the transmogrification of unhappy circumstances into felicitous ones—on the accidental family as a social arrangement, "crucial to the survival of Russian society," in which "chance and love [would] bind." Significantly, the fictional representation of this newly imagined institution would also require a new kind of literary form, a novel structure possessing virtually "its own poetics" (36).

As a collective devoid of strict age grades or biological affiliation, the Dostoevskian accidental family offers a universal embrace withheld from the likes, for example, of Moll and Esther, who in their official status as wards of the state are subjectively and existentially the wards of precisely no one. As D.A Miller writes,

what brought carceral institutions into being in the first place were lapses in the proper management of the family: in its failure to constitute itself (the problem of illegitimate or orphaned children and the institutional solution of foundling hospitals and baby farms) or in its failure to sustain itself by means of a self-sufficient domestic economy (the problem of poverty and debt and the institutional responses of workhouses and debtor's prisons). (*The Novel and the Police* 59)

²⁸ As Dostoevsky wrote in his July-August 1877 edition of *Diary of a Writer*, "the contemporary Russian is becoming more and more an *accidental family*" (PSS 25:173).

In the English novel, as we have seen, the break-up of the family and the problem of orphans is the starting point for the pernicious system of institutionalized discipline that Miller examines throughout *The Novel and the Police*—a bureaucracy that only makes the criminal element more intractable by cordoning it off from the rest of society. In *The Brothers Karamazov* there is a similar trajectory—Dmitry's abandonment by his father is surely what makes him at least a *potential* criminal, and it is part of the reason he ends up in jail. But if Dickens and Defoe dramatize the erosion of the family unit and the proliferation of penal institutions as mutually reinforcing phenomena—a vicious cycle of social pathology in which orphans become criminals and the imprisonment of criminals creates more orphans—Dostoevsky imagines an alternative, the blossoming of compassion and love in creatively assembled and reconfigured family collectives.²⁹

Knapp's discussion of *The Idiot* centers on family units that decay or scatter and are then forced "to constitute [themselves]...anew" by admitting new members and redefining family roles. In the Lebedevs, for example, the loss of a wife and sister prompts both a widening of the family circle and a rearrangement of the players: "sister becomes mother, nephew becomes son" (*The Idiot* 36). The nuclear Yepanchin family, which at the end of the novel embraces the estranged and distant cousin Myshkin, functions according to the same principle. Notably, in neither family is biological connection eschewed entirely—it is simply reconfigured and made flexible. Perhaps it is in part the shifting and unstable nature of the family structure that makes *The Idiot*, in

²⁹ In fact, it appears that Dostoevsky even imagines the uplifting corollary to the problem of "children of the state" as it is depicted by Defoe and Dickens. As Hruska writes, in *The Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky suggests that orphans and illegitimate children be made "universal children" ['obshchie deti'] belonging to everyone, with their education to be paid for by the taxpayers" (481). Though the pragmatism of his idea may be surprising, the optimism associated with such an imagined arrangement of communal nurture stands in direct contrast to the sense of defeat in Defoe and Dickens, for whom orphan care is the province of an impersonal bureaucracy.

particular, feel so unstructured and diffuse.³⁰ Or alternatively, perhaps the sense of anarchy that readers discern in so many of Dostoevsky's novels is a formal embodiment of the breakdown and rearrangement of the family structure—"the disorder that results," in Knapp's words (although it is eventually a benign disorder), when "the balance is tipped" away from biological affiliation and "toward compassion and forgiveness" (205). One might add that the cultural echoes with Chulkov's parentless and polymorphous family collective are unmistakable here, insofar as Martona could easily find herself (along with her ever-metamorphosing entourage of brothers/sisters/ lovers/husbands) quite comfortably ensconced in a Dostoevskian accidental family.

But what I would like to suggest is that in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky presents us with a *new* poetics of the accidental family, in the form of a novel that maintains a careful balance in both family and narrative formations between order and disorder, form and formlessness, kinship and difference, real and ideal; and that allows, furthermore, for the preservation of the very genetic family that the novel appears to repudiate. If the novels of Dickens and Defoe doom their characters from two directions at once by presenting familial connectedness as a hopeless encumbrance and familial breakdown as an intractable social problem, then Dostoevsky suggests that a reimagined family unit might reinvigorate biological ties themselves.

The members of the Karamazov family to whom we are introduced at the beginning of the novel appear in some ways to represent the idea of "accident" as pure contingency; if they constitute a family at all, it is family as the epitome of relatedness

³⁰ As Malcolm Jones writes, "it is in *The Idiot* above all that diffuseness as a constituent part of Dostoevsky's fictional world comes into its own" (*Novel of Discord* 110), both as a thematic element and a structural principle.

without connection. The offspring of one father but different mothers (both of whom are now dead), the three brothers seem to be related “accidentally” rather than by love or affinity; along with their common parent, they are not even a cohesive unit, and the boys have spent their childhoods being passed around among a series of guardians. At the same time, there is indeed a vision of functional family life in the first few chapters, and it is the “accidental” kind in the positive sense. We learn that at least some of those who assumed responsibility for the boys’ upbringing (servants, distant relatives, and other benefactors) had treated their charges with remarkable generosity.³¹ In this way the back story of *The Brothers Karamazov* presents a situation similar to that of *The Idiot*, in which members of a scattered family are taken in by unrelated or distantly related others and new family units are formed according to an ethic of compassion, nurture, and neighborly charity.

Yet these two connotations of “accidental” do not tell the whole story, since it is precisely the genetic connection that is a focus of interest from the start, and the ramifications of biological ancestry and descent are a prominent theme of the novel. In the opening pages we see the brothers returning to their hometown, reconstituting the nuclear family in its place of origin, and confronting their biological progenitor and his inheritance. What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that the family formation that is pictured at the very end of *The Brothers Karamazov* is different from *both* of the above configurations: it is neither the genetically predetermined accident of nature that constitutes the family in common parlance nor the makeshift collection of quasi-family

³¹ In particular, the general’s widow and Yefim Petrovich, who care for Alyosha and Ivan for most of their childhoods. (Dmitry, however, has been raised separately and has not been the beneficiary of such selflessness, which might go some way toward explaining the particular role that he ends up playing in the novel.)

members thrown together by the vagaries of circumstance that is imagined in *The Idiot*. Rather, it is a melding of the ideal and the real, or the real as it is transfigured by the spiritual guidance and exemplary image of the ideal.

The ideal company of brothers represented by Zosima, Alyosha, and the boys is indeed a family, but it is one in which the conventional roles have been effaced altogether, or in which they are so fungible that each individual assumes several roles, functioning alternatively or simultaneously as a brother, a father, and a son to all the rest.³² While the line of inheritance passes through a succession of generations (from Zosima, to Alyosha, to the group of boys), there is no notion of generational rank or hierarchy, and the structure, in this way, is both formal and formless, sturdy and flexible; it also represents a distinct contrast to the condition of the Karamazov clan at the beginning of the novel, in which the father-son hierarchy is both insurmountable and oppressive. Purged of the filth and brutality of conventional family life, the picture of relatedness with which the novel ends provides us with an ideal vision of kinship—a communal arrangement free of the embroilments of heredity and inheritance and existing in a state of simultaneous connectedness and freedom, in which generational succession, transmission, and exchange (Zosima's instruction of Alyosha; Alyosha's communication of Zosima's words to the boys) are inspirational rather than imprisoning.

An appropriate name for the communal state achieved by Alyosha and the boys might well be “mnogoedinstvo” or “multi-unitarian kinship”—the concept of harmonious

³² If the vision of brotherly relations at the end of the book embraces the likes of Snegiryov, chronologically much older than the rest of the boys, then perhaps this is because the spiritual family that Zosima has begotten is one in which brothers and fathers are virtually indistinguishable from the start: as Marcia Morris writes, the narrative makes certain to present the church elders not only as fathers, but also as brothers, both to each other and to their disciples—such that Zosima is simultaneously Alyosha's metaphorical father and his brother, “functionally analogous not only to Fyodor Pavlovich, but also to Dmitry” (616).

human relations associated with the Russian religious thinker Nikolai Fyodorov, whose affinity with Dostoevsky has long been noted by readers (and was even acknowledged by the novelist himself [Lord 176]).³³ In this ideal state, a perfect reconciliation between “I” and “we” manifests itself as the sensation of “unity without confusion” and “difference without separation,” in which each individual finds himself perfectly free and independent and yet also comfortably submerged in, and buoyed by, the community. (Once again, an association here to the psychoanalytic notion of “oceanic” bliss is perhaps unavoidable, as long as it is purged of Freudian cynicism and pathologizing. By the same token, the idea of the accidental family itself has resonances with Freud’s “family romance”: the fantasy of a child in the throes of filial rebellion that life has deposited him in a family of strangers and that he actually derives from nobler stock—the generic gypsy kidnapping narrative, as it were.) This all-encompassing, fluid state is the perfect realization of Zosima’s ethic that “each of us is undoubtedly guilty on behalf of all and for all” (164, PSS 14:149).³⁴ It is this position of simultaneous kinship and self-possession that Tatiana Kasatkina claims the boys achieve under Alyosha’s tutelage, for “in their circle a wrong committed against another is perceived, in the end, as a wrong

³³ Certainly, there is a compelling coincidence in their shared notion that the achievement of paradise on earth must begin with, in Fyodorov’s words, “find[ing] a means of loving our parents intensely, of burying all our feelings of antipathy or rivalry” (quoted in Lord 180). To Fyodorov, as Sven Linner writes, “the disintegration of mankind began with the schism between fathers and sons” (199)—and, as for Dostoevsky, this is a rift that can, and must, be overcome. Of course, Fyodorov’s suggested method for the reversal of parricide—the harnessing of all of mankind’s scientific knowledge and technical mastery in order to collect the scattered molecules of humanity’s dead ancestors and, literally, resurrect each and every one—is one of the most preposterous propositions in nineteenth-century religious philosophy; it is also a far cry from Dostoevsky’s tenet of the unpredictable insemination with love and grace. (In fact, it looks forward to the Soviets in its emphasis on the efficacy of human will in the establishment of the ideal collective.) But as we will see, Dostoevsky shares Fyodorov’s belief in the tractability of the material universe—a universe in which “what has been dispersed” can always be “put...together” again (Fyodorov, quoted in Lord 179), and one so capacious as to admit the achievement of our wildest fantasies—though his notions about how we might go about overcoming generational strife are spiritual rather than faux-scientific.

³⁴ As Robert Lord writes, in Fyodorov’s ideal collective “there would be no more criminals” (185); there would also, presumably, be no more orphans.

committed against the self. And there is no way to shift the blame [переложить: literally, to displace] onto another, because that other is *you*” (“Ob odnom svoistve” 121)]. This is also the state that Esther and her cohorts are implicitly denied, condemned as they are to live in a world in which the balance between “I” and “we” is an impossible accomplishment, in which isolation is inevitable and connectedness is always a form of self-depletion, in which displacement is the norm—and in which we are all, in the final analysis, criminals and orphans.

And so if Fyodor Pavlovich is the source of corruption in the novel, and Zosima is the wellspring of purification and recovery—the two father figures competing, as it were, for ideological ascendancy—then perhaps Alyosha’s choice of Zosima as mentor and guide may be seen as an outright rejection of the genetic family just as surely as it is a repudiation of the biological father’s depravity. But Alyosha, of course, does *not* abandon his real family for the ideal one, and the ideal of *mnogoedinstvo*, as Dostoevsky embodies it, is in no way a brief for celibacy or asceticism (the condition of Fyodorov’s theorizing and the outcome, interestingly enough, of Tolstoy’s soul searching as well, although sex and marriage for the brothers are, notably, deferred to some unspecified future). The ideal, rather, is a sublime vision of immaculate conception that counters, for example, the sexual pollution of the Karamazov family without repudiating sexuality and the biological family altogether. In fact, Zosima’s most exigent instruction is that Alyosha care for his biological brothers, and Alyosha’s final soliloquy is particularly moving because it is partly a valediction, or at least an expression of an expected hiatus. “We shall be parting soon,” he tells the boys, in words redolent of Jesus’s farewell to his disciples, for “right now I shall be with my two brothers for a while....We will never

forget....Whatever may happen to us later in life, even if we do not meet for twenty years afterwards, let us always remember...” (PV 774, PSS 15:195). Alyosha is turning not toward his heavenly relative but toward his earthly ones, although his structural role as intermediary between the real and the ideal remains central. The genetic and ideal families are kept separate within the text, both in the sense that they constitute the novel’s bookends and iconic alternatives, and also in the literal sense that each member of the ideal family is able to maintain his original, independent ties with his own biological kin. But the intercession of Alyosha (the model for all of the boys, each of whom may similarly serve as an intermediary between the ideal collective and their own genetic family) provides for the possibility that the biological family itself might be rehabilitated under the influence of the spiritual family’s ethic. If the sublime collective at the conclusion of the novel rises on the ashes of the broken Karamazov family circle, then it also, reciprocally, provides for the potential regeneration of that initial family. Though at the end of the book Alyosha must leave one group of brothers to be with the other, this parting is far from an act of parental or brotherly abandonment. Alyosha can, in a sense, abide with both his accidental and his genetic families by carrying them all in his memory and in his heart.³⁵

Indeed, the moral improvement that we witness in Dmitry and Ivan is intimately bound up with Alyosha’s care. Dmitry experiences a moment of intense soul searching and moral turnabout when, directly before his incarceration, he has his “wee one” dream—a compassionate vision, “entirely out of place and out of time,” that makes him feel “a tenderness such as he had never known before surging up in his heart” and the

³⁵ For more on the role of memory in the novel and in Dostoevsky’s Christian and aesthetic imagination, see Diane Thompson, *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory*.

sensation of turning “towards some sort of light”—and he rises “with a sort of new face, as if lit up with joy” (PV 507-8, PSS 14:456). Though the scene takes place more than a hundred pages after Alyosha’s conversion, it occurs, within the chronology of the *fabula*, at approximately the same moment—and surely the experience has been helped along by Alyosha’s demonstrations of brotherly devotion throughout the early part of the novel. Though the dream does not quite transform Dmitry into the nurturing father, brother, and son that Alyosha becomes after “Cana of Galilee,” it does lead him to regard Grushenka in a new spirit of devotion and to take on the spiritual burden of his father’s death—an act, if not quite of filial piety, then at least of filial repentance, and an enactment of Zosima’s teaching, passed on through Alyosha, that “all are guilty for all.” As Dmitry explains to Alyosha, “I’ve sensed a new man in me, a new man has arisen in me!” [“воскрес во мне новый человек!”] (PV 591, PSS 15:30), and the experience transforms him, as Marcia Morris says, if not into a consummate father, brother, and son, then at least into a man much more advanced along the path to decency, honor, and spiritual insight.³⁶

The same is true even of Ivan, the most hard-hearted of the brothers. Though we witness no momentous conversion in him within the course of the narrative, his hallucinatory encounter with the devil, as many critics agree, is as much a sign of impending salvation as it is of mental or spiritual degradation.³⁷ As Alexandra F. Rudicina writes, “in Ivan’s descent into the cleansing void of death, emblemized by his submersion into the oblivion of his mental illness...lies... his birth into a new life. His

³⁶ According to Morris, “Dmitry’s dream...partly transforms him” (621).

³⁷ As Morris writes “we have grounds to think that the essentially monologic stream of babble that comprises Ivan’s dream might, in the end, serve (like the dreams of Alyosha and Dmitry) to transform him into a genuine brother and a genuine keeper of his brothers, if only in part” (624).

very disease becomes the sign and symptom of his awakening” (1072). Immediately preceding the demonic vision we see signals of an impending change in Ivan—his feeling of “an infinite firmness in himself: the end to his hesitations” (PV 633, PSS 15:68), echoing Alyosha’s conversionary experience of “something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend[ing] into his soul” (PV 363, PSS 14:328). And directly after his recovery, in his frank admission to Alyosha of his feelings for Katerina Ivanovna, we glimpse a distinctly new side to a man who had spoken mostly in riddles and whom Dmitry had described as “a grave.” Most important, Ivan goes on to announce publicly his sense of guilt over his father’s death—and in so doing, as Morris writes, he “cleanses himself of sin” (624).

According to Murav, for all three brothers, “conversion depends on descent” (*Holy Foolishness* 136), and indeed, each one has his own fire-and-brimstone visions. Ivan, trapped within the inferno of his own mind, has an encounter with the devil that may or may not have been inspired, in part, by the heat of two candles whose flames are extinguished by the time he regains consciousness (PV 650, PSS 15:84). Alyosha, before his conversion, is confronted with diabolical temptation during his visit to Grushenka, who “sets him on fire” [“разож[жет] его”] (PV 356, PSS 14:322) with her “hot lips and eyes” (PV 346, PSS 14:313). Dmitry, visiting “Sukhoy Possyolok” (“Dry Village”) to arrange for the sale of timber at the same moment that Alosa is appearing at Grushenka’s small cottage, finds himself in an “overheated” (PV 375, PSS 14:339) room in the forester’s hut, where he spends the night next to a lighted candle and wakes up, groggy and dehydrated, to find the place full of fumes. Appropriately, Alyosha, after his brush with fiery passion, returns to the monastery, falls to the earth, and weeps, just as

Dmitry, after awaking in Sukhoy Possyolok, douses the room with water, makes his way to “Mokroye” (“Wet Place”), and experiences a state of ecstatic reverie in which his “whole soul” feels “shaken with tears” (PV 508, PSS 14:457)—both responses functioning as figurative enactments of Zosima’s instruction to “water the earth with the tears of your joy” (PV 362, PSS 14:328). For these two brothers, at least, the dark night of the soul is an experience of spatial constriction that is both stifling and scalding, and the hedonic state of ecstasy and relief that follows is portrayed as a watery release: an extinguishing of infernal impulses that cleanses the spirit and irrigates the ground for further spiritual flowering. Of course, Ivan experiences no such liquid emancipation, and indeed, as Thompson points out, he is the only one of the three brothers who does not weep once within the space of the novel (*Memory* 182). But perhaps the steepness of his descent foreshadows the splendor of his eventual uplift—even if the gift of grace is bestowed only after the book has ended.

If the novel begins with the literal reconstitution of the genetic family as its members converge in their home town, then by the end, in the individual transformations accomplished by each of the brothers and in the picture of future harmony that Alyosha announces, we are given a glimpse of its spiritual resurrection. It is also worth remembering that many of Zosima’s teachings, and especially the notion that “all are guilty for all,” originated with his own biological brother, whose deathbed conversion had set Zosima off on his path toward the monastery long before the novel’s inception. By the same token, perhaps part of the significance of Grushenka’s transfiguration is its suggestion of potential renewal for a future Karamazov: for Grushenka, in the novel’s afterlife, will likely marry Dmitry, her disgraceful embroilment with the Karamazov

father transforming itself into a union with the Karamazov son that is both spiritually uplifting and socially sanctioned. And with the forging of all these bonds, the Karamazov name itself is in the process of triumphant rehabilitation: certainly a notion inscribed in the famous cry, “Hurrah for Karamazov,” with which the novel ends (PV 776, PSS 15:197).

It is even possible that the benefits of Alyosha’s and Zosima’s ministrations have been extended to Fyodor, the man who despoiled the Karamazov name in the first place. We see evidence of Fyodor’s capacity to improve morally, or at least to sustain a spiritual jolt to the system, when the narrator reports at the beginning of the novel that he “suddenly felt in himself, in his drunken moments, a spiritual fear, a moral shock, that almost, so to speak, resounded physically in his soul” (PV 93, PSS 14:86): the sloshy inebriation standing in, if only in a perversely conflated fashion, for the experiences of spiritual descent and watery release that characterize true conversion. Furthermore, as Thompson writes, “it has never been sufficiently remarked that Fyodor changes, slightly but significantly,” within the course of the novel—a development that is manifested in his growing love for Alyosha as well as in his donation, under Alyosha’s influence, of a thousand rubles to the monastery in honor of his late wife (*Memory* 171). “If the seed of new spiritual growth can reside in a Fyodor Karamazov,” Thompson says, “then perhaps it exists in everyone” (178), although it is the presence of such potential in Fyodor himself—the originator of so much of the novel’s disorder, Zosima’s apparent antithesis, and the beastly oppressor of his three sons—that may be the true marvel.

Of course, Fyodor dies before such potential can ever be realized, and he is killed, as Thompson writes, by his own “unexpiated sins” as they are embodied in Smerdyakov,

the consequence of Fyodor's rape of Lizaveta Smerdiashchaia. And yet the death of Fyodor, unlike the death of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, does not function as a dead bolt on the aspirations of others, for as Zosima says, if individuals "are not saved now, they will be saved later. And even if they are not saved, their sons will be saved" (PV 322, PSS 14:292). Unlike Esther, who is denied fellowship and family both literally and ontologically by the death of her mother, the Karamazov brothers do not need to reconcile with their living parent in order to heal. Perhaps the contrary indication—that recovery and liberation are predicated on a father's gruesome death—endows Fyodor's murder with an oddly sacrificial glow. As opposed to the central crime in *Bleak House*—Tulkinghorn's murder, which, as a displaced expression of both Esther's and her mother's rage, does nothing to exorcise the seething violence in the novel's world—the killing of Fyodor may very well serve a cathartic function: for just as Alyosha experiences his conversion after beholding the rotting corpse of his spiritual father, Zosima, Ivan and Dmitry seem to improve as a result of their father's gruesome murder. (This rather disturbing implication—that the parricide is justified by the brotherly care that results—is a suggestion that the novel, perhaps, does not quite come to terms with.)

And then of course there is Smerdyakov, who, if one defers to Olga Meerson's critical insights about the novel's shameful neglect of the fourth brother (a crime of omission that is committed by characters, readers, and the narrator alike), has been left out of the discussion for far too long.³⁸ As Meerson writes, though the word "brother" is

³⁸ The narrator claims at one point that he is "ashamed to distract my reader's attention for such a long time to such ordinary lackeys" (PV 100, PSS 14:93), and in general he refuses to give Smerdyakov the role he deserves as brother, protagonist, or illuminated consciousness. Indeed, according to Belknap, this narrative neglect is part of what dooms Smerdyakov, for, "by the abdication of insight into Smerdyakov's mind, Dostoevsky has created a monster" (*Structure* 86).

employed “densely” in scenes that include Smerdyakov, the word never refers to him directly, “as if there were a field of magnetic immunity...around him” (186). Perhaps the worst offender in this sense is Alyosha himself, who, in one of the few encounters pictured in the novel between the two half-siblings, refers repeatedly to both Dmitry and Ivan as his “brothers” but treats Smerdyakov as a mere servant. Even Zosima—who preaches a universal brotherhood founded, above all, on the notion that one’s servant should be treated as kin—instructs Alyosha to “be near your brothers. Not just one, but both of them” (PV 77, PSS 14:72), leaving Alyosha’s third brother conspicuously out of the picture. Perhaps Zosima’s and Alyosha’s self-contradiction with respect to Smerdyakov—that is, the failure of those who preach that one’s servant is one’s metaphorical kin to accept that a servant might also be one’s literal kin—indicates most emphatically the exclusionary potential of the accidental family: the danger of abandoning the literal for the metaphorical, the biological for the consocial, the real for the ideal. Alyosha’s ostracism of Smerdyakov is of course the fundamental sin in the novel, but it is both figured and compounded by his blindness to their literal kinship.

The pervasive denial of Smerdyakov’s patrimony is paradoxical, though, since of all of the brothers he is presented as the one most ineluctably bound, and debased, by his heritage. As critics have noted, this constriction is discernable in his name: with a first name (Pavel) and patronymic (Fyodor) that are exact reversals of his father’s, and with a surname that marks him as “forever tainted” (Golstein 100) by his disgraceful origins, Smerdyakov seems to be the brother most conspicuously burdened by his legacy.³⁹ If the

³⁹ For more on Smerdyakov’s name and the taint that it represents, see Murav, *Holy Foolishness* 147.

ethic of adoptive parenting bears the potential for transformation and change for the other Karamazov brothers, then Smerdyakov is denied even this promise: his foster father, Grigory, is himself a limited man, whose tendency to read the same two books over and over indicates, as Golstein writes, that “there is no possibility of change or growth in his world” (99). Grigory does indeed do “his best to prevent Smerdyakov from growing” (100), reminding him repeatedly that his origins condemn him to an ontological condition of lowliness and deformity: “you think you’re a human being?...you were begotten of bathhouse slime,” he says—words that Smerdyakov “could never forgive” (PV 124, PSS 14:114) and that beget his existential entrapment just as surely as they express his foster father’s cruelty. Significantly, of all of the disorders and ailments that the book presents, Smerdyakov’s epilepsy is the only one that is explicitly described as incurable.

When Alyosha questions Smerdyakov about the whereabouts of “my brother Dmitry,” Smerdyakov responds contemptuously that “it’s not as if I were his keeper” (PV 226, PSS 14:206)—a verbal gesture that contains spiraling iterations of affiliation and renunciation, since even in its negative construction it proclaims his kinship with Dmitry, and it is precisely the brotherly neglect that marks him as a fully-fledged Karamazov.⁴⁰ Perhaps, in fact, all of Smerdyakov’s acts of rebellion against father figures and authority (his atheism; his lack of interest in Smaragdov, an inversion of Kolya’s fascination with the volume) are instances of this paradoxical assertion—with his crime of parricide representing his most striking and desperate affirmation through denial, a profession of his place in the family through the violent impulses that, while perhaps a filial

⁴⁰ For more on paradox in Dostoevsky, see Gary Saul Morson, “Paradoxical Dostoevsky”; for more on Smerdyakov’s relationship to paradox, see his “Verbal Pollution in *The Brothers Karamazov*” in *Critical Essays on Dostoevsky*, ed. R.F. Miller.

endowment in all sons, are without question a Karamazov birthright. His exclusion from the family circle, in other words, is precisely what drives him to recreate the primal crime that is the essential marker of his belonging, just as his petulant rebellions against the God the Father and Smaragdov are also perverse announcements of his place, as a prodigal son, in the human community under God and universal history.

Admittedly, this is a somewhat contrary reading of Smerdyakov's crime, since all of his practical machinations, as well as the insistence that he was only carrying out Ivan's unconscious bidding, serve to mitigate his responsibility for the murder, if not to the reader's satisfaction then at least in the judgment of the larger novelistic community and the jury members. But the suggestion here is that his crime is both a transgression and an act of clamorous self-assertion, and that it is accompanied by the conscious or unconscious determination to be caught—for to be recognized as a parricide is to be recognized as a son and a brother and also, in this novel, to be granted space as a central protagonist. Of course, as an attempt at gaining both family and narrative attention Smerdyakov's crime is unsuccessful, and it fails to elevate him to the status of either brother or fictional hero. The jury trial places a different brother at the center of the collective gaze, with Smerdyakov himself, a dead body by the time the verdict is rendered, just another piece of physical evidence to be revealed and contested, analogous to the pestle or the bloody clothes. The prosecutor's dismissal of Smerdyakov as a genuine object of attention—for he does not have "even the shadow of a motive for murder such as the defendant had" (PV 709, PSS 15:138)—is perhaps the most decisive denial of Smerdyakov's heritage and his claim to parricidal rage. And even those who do identify him as a murderer do not recognize him as a parricide; Alyosha's explanation of

his father's death to the group of boys ("the lackey killed him, my brother is innocent" [PV 768, PSS 15:189]) relegates the murder to a rather pedestrian crime along the lines of "the butler did it." (In fact, Alyosha's statement here is doubly erroneous, since not only is Smerdyakov one of his brothers, but Dmitry himself is by no means innocent. The true version of that sentence would be "my brother killed him, my brother is guilty," with the referents "Smerdyakov," "Dmitry," and "Ivan" all interchangeable in both clauses—to be followed, of course, by "and I am guilty, too.")

Smerdyakov, in these ways, appears to be a doomed creature: imprisoned within his own lineage precisely because he is excluded from it, with his suicide representing the self-annihilating force of that paradox. Yet even the soul of Smerdyakov, as many critics have noted, is not presented as unsalvageable. As Dostoevsky's readers know well, Smerdyakov's affliction of epilepsy is a privileged disorder in his fiction, granted often to the most favored characters and encompassing both the depths and the heights of human experience. If it is an incurable condition, perhaps it is also a disease from which one should not be cured. This entanglement of the best and the worst of human possibility in one man is also expressed in the narrator's widely recognized association of Smerdyakov with Kramskoy's *The Contemplator*, a peasant whose physiognomy shows him to be equally capable of "wander[ing] off to Jerusalem to save his soul, or...[of] suddenly burn[ing] down his native village...or perhaps...both" (PV 127, PSS 14:117). Within the world of the novel we witness only the latter impulse in Smerdyakov: a destruction of origins that is a version of the incineration of one's hometown. But both the epilepsy and the Kramskoy analogy support the notion not only that his storyline admits an antithetical

ending, but also that such an alternative is not entirely out of reach, even after the murder has been committed.⁴¹

Lee D. Johnson claims that Smerdyakov's epilepsy is just one of the many signals of his "deep yearning for the sacred" (76), an "innately felt but consciously stifled yearning... for true theosis" (75), and that "in this seemingly base character... [Dostoevsky] embod[ies] some of his most cherished religious beliefs" (74).⁴² In this context, it is notable that Smerdyakov is the first character in the novel to bring up the notion of the "seed" (or grain—"зерно") as it relates to questions of faith and grace.⁴³ One should also remember that Smerdyakov is the son not only of Fyodor but also of Lizaveta Smerdyashchaya ("Stinking Lizaveta"), who is referred to as a "righteous woman" ("праведница") by Grigory and as a *iurodivaia* by the narrator, and as such is perhaps the most distinctive representative in the novel (among a "gallery" of contenders, as Murav puts it) of the Russian Orthodox phenomenon of the holy fool (*Holy Foolishness* 129-30). According to Murav, "the single most important feature of the *Lives* of the canonized holy fools ...[was] the discovery of that which is exalted in that which is debased" (6), a confluence of spiritual ecstasy and earthly brutishness that might well apply to the novel's depiction of epilepsy, too. Smerdyakov has inherited not only

⁴¹ Both Hruska (485) and Sergei Hackel (226) note that Zosima makes a point of praying for suicides and extending to them the possibility of improvement and salvation.

⁴² In fact, Johnson, through in-depth close readings, demonstrates how many of the various signs of Smerdyakov's exclusion from the familial embrace (Grigory's insult to him; his father's insistence on calling him "Balaam's ass") can be read, in a contrary manner, as signals of grace.

⁴³ "Consider for yourself, Grigory Vasilievich,' Smerdyakov went on gravely and evenly, conscious of his victory but being magnanimous, as it were, with the vanquished enemy, 'consider for yourself: in the Scriptures it is said that if you have faith even as little as the smallest seed and then say unto this mountain that it should go down into the sea, it would go, without the slightest delay, at your first order'" (PV 130, PSS 14:120). Smerdyakov's hearkening to the Scriptures is, in its manifest content, an oratorical trick aimed at winning an argument; but the notion that this all-important concept is introduced into the text by his mouth is indisputably significant.

his mother's name and "stink" but also her otherworldliness, and his mysterious seizures endow him with a patina of grace that is unmistakable, however much he may confuse his symptoms of divinity with impurity and attempt to mask them with perfumes and pomade.

We also need to recall that Smerdyakov is not only the offspring of the despicable Fyodor and the soiled Lizaveta but that he is also, in all likelihood, the child of a rape. Fyodor's ravaging of Lizaveta among the nettles and burdocks is presented as speculation by the narrator and is left undramatized, but the references to it are so vivid and viscerally disturbing that it is emblazoned as fact in the reader's mind. At the same time, as brutal as such a crime is, there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding its significance. The vile perpetrator, Fyodor, is a participant in the unbridled licentiousness of his reveler companions and even outdoes them in terms of his carnal appetite, insisting that this sad specimen, no less than any other female, "could [still] be regarded as a woman" (PV 98, PSS 14:91). Yet later, when he declares that "there's no such thing as an ugly woman" and that in every single one of them "one can damn well find something extremely interesting" (PV 136, PSS 14:126), the verdict on Fyodor is somewhat more mixed; one could almost take these statements as expressions of gentlemanly respect and the ennobling power of universal love, if only they did not come from the mouth of a rapist. Flath also points out that the imagery associated with the "pungent" and "earthy" Lizaveta (whose hair is described as "dirty with earth and mud," with "little leaves, splinters, and shavings stuck to it" (PV 97, PSS 14:90) figures the rape as a sensual act that in effect anticipates Alyosha's voluptuous embrace of the earth in "Cana of Galilee" (362). Once again, spirituality and sexuality are not mutually exclusive endowments,

even in this abhorrently perverse enactment. Lizaveta, despite her “condition,” manages to breach the fence around Fyodor’s property in order to give birth in his garden, a feat considered nothing short of miraculous. The biblical resonances are so thick here—from the notion of despoiled innocence, to exclusion from the garden, to the mysterious paternity of the unborn child, to the hastily improvised nativity setting—that they manage to muddle together the most exalted sentiments and the most abominable act. Smerdyakov’s debased origins are not just an inversion, but apparently also a version, of the immaculate conception.

Even Smerdyakov’s employment as cook in his father’s house has multiple implications since such “kitchen work,” while lowly in nature, is statistically speaking a promising vocational background, according to Murav’s analysis of hagiographic accounts, for an afterlife of sainthood.⁴⁴ This commingling, once again, of the mundane and the celestial is particularly paradoxical in Smerdyakov, because he is not only a cook, charged with the nourishment of the household, but also a vector of putrefaction—his “squeamishness” in culinary matters notwithstanding. Indeed, as Gary Saul Morson points out, the lesson that Smerdyakov transmits to Ilyusha is “on how to pollute food.” Yet if as a chef he is, as Morson writes, “both cook and gatekeeper” in his father’s house and thus “in a strategic position to do harm—to pollute and poison—if he chooses” (“Verbal Pollution” 235), he is also perfectly positioned to cleanse and purify, and to function as a medium for the divine.

⁴⁴ According to Murav, many holy fools in Russian hagiography (such as Isidora and Isaac Pecherskii) were cooks, and as such their life stories are “a carnivalesque mixture of food and dirt, of upper and lower bodily imagery” (47). Inevitably, we also think here of Martona, the “comely cook,” even though the designation is more of a euphemism in that work, and we don’t actually see her in any kitchen.

From this perspective it seems that it is in part the Karamazovs' affiliation with Smerdyakov that accounts for the possibility of the regeneration of the family line. Early in the novel Rakitin, as if foreseeing the murder that will take place three hundred pages later, says to Alyosha, "it stinks in your family [of crime]" ["Смердит у вас (УГОЛОВЩИНЫ)"] (PV 78, PSS 14:73). Although it bears mentioning that the family name Karamazov can itself be translated as "black-smear," it is clear that Smerdyakov is the character who embodies most directly these qualities of criminality and stink. The observation therefore has the effect of drawing all of the brothers into the metonymic association with Lizaveta, as well as confirming the kinship between the Karamazovs and Smerdyakov, thus allowing them to share figuratively not only in Smerdyakov's sordidness, but also in his blessedness. If Smerdyakov can be saved precisely because he is a stinker, then the same must be true of all of his foul and sullied brothers. We also can begin to identify the seed of Ivan's moral rehabilitation not only in Alyosha's spiritually enlightened acts, but also in Smerdyakov's homicidal one, precisely because it forces Ivan to confront his own parricidal impulses and guilt. As Ivan says, "if it was [Smerdyakov] who killed him, and not Dmitry, then, of course, I am a murderer, too" (PV 617, PSS v. 15 54)—a wrongheaded statement in part (since Ivan would be equally guilty no matter who committed the crime), but one that indicates, at least, the dawning of some self-knowledge thanks to the existence of Smerdyakov.

In these ways, even Smerdyakov—an individual privileged by the author if not, as Meerson writes, by the "wholly unsympathizing narrator" (200); a man whose very lowliness is a mark of his majesty; and a brother who is a source of deliverance for the Karamazov clan—is granted the potential for sublimity and inclusion within the human

community. But, just as important, he is also allowed to glimpse the possibility of embrace by his own biological family. When Meerson writes that the word “brother” never refers to Smerdyakov within the space of the novel, she is not entirely correct. At his first meeting with Smerdyakov after Fyodor’s death, Ivan enters exclaiming that “you have a lot to explain to me right now, brother” [“Ты мне, брат, многое разъяснить сейчас должен...”] (PV 606, PSS v. 15 44), unwittingly employing the word to which Smerdyakov is otherwise almost “magnetic[ally] immune” (Meerson 186). If the sense of kinship that Ivan betrays here is predicated on an intimation of their shared responsibility for their father’s death, then so much the better, since such an admission of common guilt is the prelude to salvation. In Dostoevsky’s paradoxical universe, it is Ivan (among the three legitimate brothers, the one who has progressed the most slowly along the path to grace, and as Tatyana Buzina points out, the only brother besides Smerdyakov who is at a certain point “denied [his]...lineage”⁴⁵) who extends to Smerdyakov the invitation into the family, just as Smerdyakov, paradoxically, provides for Ivan’s regeneration—the two outcasts forming a bond that incorporates both criminality and (potentially) deliverance. Perhaps, in fact, it is Ivan’s possession of this one bit of surplus in the stockpile of brotherly love that Alyosha refers to when he remarks, enigmatically, that “brother Ivan will surpass us all” [PV 763, PSS v. 15 184]).

Like Esther, then—that other illegitimate child, whose primordial wound is similarly figured by her perpetual condition of domestic servitude⁴⁶—Smerdyakov is the

⁴⁵ This occurs at the end of the scene in Part One, Book III, Chapter 8, in which Fyodor, famously, forgets that Alyosha and Ivan share the same mother.

⁴⁶ Hruska discusses the connection between the portrayal of Smerdyakov and Dostoevsky’s grappling with the “historical wounds” (487) of serfdom; she also notes what was first pointed out by Vladimir Kantor: that “‘smerd’ can mean not only ‘stink’ but also ‘rabble,’ or ‘serf’” (478).

object of a significant omission: excluded both from his own family circle and from the collective at large and a discarded corpse by the novel's end, he is, in a sense, the character on whom the narrative's vision of an all-inclusive community is hanging. But unlike Esther, whose biological origins remain an irrecoverable source of shame, whose ontological condition of orphanhood is unalterable, and who, despite the domestic satisfactions of marriage and motherhood, remains hopelessly isolated from the world at large, Smerdyakov, or at least Smerdyakov's spirit, is endowed with a nimbus of uplift and inclusion which even his suicide does not destroy. And unlike *Bleak House*, whose happy ending is predicated on the reader's suppression of the fault line dividing Esther from her community, *The Brothers Karamazov* asks us implicitly to acknowledge Smerdyakov's role: to accept the notion that we "share in at least some of the characters' moral responsibilities in the novel" (Meerson 203), to repent of our erasure of the fourth brother, and to embrace him as a protagonist and fellow human being.⁴⁷ In other words, unlike the incurable gap of *Bleak House*, this particular flaw is one that we can correct—and judging from recent literary criticism, we are well on our way to doing so.

Perhaps, for that matter, we are in the process of shedding the errors of the scholarly past in the same way that Dostoevsky's characters are able to extricate themselves from their personal and familial histories. In *Bleak House*, as we have seen, the past is conceived of as a collection of errors, transgressions, and grievances that accumulates within an individual or a community, like detritus that cannot be expelled, and that becomes increasingly corrosive over time. In Dostoevsky, too, the abuses of the

⁴⁷ As Vetlovskaja writes, much of the moral force of the novel lies in its appeal to the reader: "you too are sinful, you too are guilty, but for you (as for all people), rebirth is an open possibility" (*Poetika* 158).

past dog the individual, and individual malfeasance spreads throughout the community like a bad seed. “See, here you have passed by a small child, passed by in anger, with a foul word, with a wrathful soul,” says Zosima; “you perhaps did not notice the child, but he saw you, and your unsightly and impious image has remained in his defenseless heart. You did not know it, but you may thereby have planted a bad seed [семя...дурное] in him, and it may grow....” (PV 319, PSS 14:289). Zosima’s description of mankind in its more despicable aspect—“man, do not exalt yourself...you...fester the earth by your appearance on it, and leave your festering trace behind you” (PV 319, PSS 14:289)—sounds remarkably like the depiction of Phil Squad in Dickens’s novel, with the rank smear he leaves on everything he touches.

Yet throughout the novel Zosima’s generative vocabulary is imaginatively potent in its positive sense as well, starting with the epigraph from John 12:24-26 and repeated in numerous contexts as the essence of the monk’s homiletic wisdom: “Only a little, a tiny seed is needed: let him cast it into the soul of a simple man, and it will not die, it will live in his soul all his life, hiding there amidst the darkness, amidst the stench of his sins...” (PV 294, PSS 14:266). The vegetative metaphor is given literal and material substance in the form of homely agricultural products like an onion (the ticket to heaven) and the pound of nuts (the gift from Dr. Herzenstube to Dmitry) that miraculously transform lives. If bad seeds proliferate throughout the community, then good seeds do as well, and even the most modest acts of generosity or benevolence cause them to take root and germinate. In this sense Dostoevsky’s vision almost turns Dickens’s world on its head, since for the Karamazov boys the past, while ugly and burdensome, also contains the seeds of its own correction. The distinction is borne out with particular force

if one compares the explicit conversion episodes in *Bleak House* and the *Brothers Karamazov*; an experience that for Esther is a protracted, and only partially successful, struggle to exorcise the demons of her past is for Alyosha a sudden access of joyous memories that effectively banish all vexations.

Esther is also fated to carry forever on her body the physical manifestations of her past and persistent suffering—the scars on her face which are, no less than the prison marking on Moll Flanders' hand, the objective correlative of her outsider status. *The Brothers Karamazov*, as we have seen, is populated similarly with crippled and wounded creatures, but the injuries they sustain tend to be impermanent or reversible. Most frequently, wounds take the form of bruising or swellings. After Dmitry's attack on his father early in the book, Fyodor wakes up with a “badly swollen” nose and a “large purple bruise on his forehead”: raw evidence of the venomous ill-will harbored by Dmitry which, presumably, does not stick around as a constant reminder (PV 141, PSS 14:130). Even the most bloody manifestations are temporary. Alyosha's finger spills blood when it is bitten, Lise's finger is “blackened” and “oozing” after she slams it in the door (PV 585, PSS 15:25), and Grigory's head gash bleeds so copiously that Dmitry's handkerchief becomes soaked, but we never hear anything about permanent scars.

These instances of copious bleeding are undoubtedly affiliated with the scenes of tearful release that accompany Alyosha's and Dmitry's conversions, demonstrations that seem to conflate the suffering of Jesus and the tears of Mary in a grandiose display of grief and ecstasy. They are also undoubtedly connected to Zosima's ethic of watering the earth, and they represent a heightened emotionalism that the Elder identifies as a cultural characteristic of the “long-suffering” Russian people, a “lamentation” that “does not

even want consolation” on the part of those who “need to constantly irritate the wound” (PV 48, PSS 14:45). Unlike the well-mannered Esther Summerson, whose capacity for emotional expression seems as damaged as (and likely results in) her disfigured face, Dostoevsky’s characters bleed, wail, and rage—and as we know, a wound that is perpetually reopened can never form a scar. As Malcolm Jones writes, in Dostoevsky “the capacity for feeling intensely... leaves open the possibility of salvation” (*The Novel of Discord* 47).⁴⁸

The most obvious form of physical “bezobrazie” in the novel is that of the vile and apparently unredeemable Fyodor, whose hideousness is both an indicator of his moral decrepitude and a stimulant for Dmitry’s parricidal rage. As Jackson writes, with his “bloated” face, “long and fleshy bags” under his eyes, and “fleshy and elongated Adam’s apple” (26), Fyodor is “dissolving, sagging, losing his features” (*Art* 306)—a form of fluid attrition that offers a striking contrast to Esther’s hardened, calloused exterior.⁴⁹ Like the most famous instance of bodily corruption in the novel (Zosima’s rotting corpse), it is precisely Fyodor’s material amorphousness and decomposition—the dissolving features that are the corollary of his moral dissoluteness—that admits of both future reversal and even, potentially, wide-scale transformation. For just as Zosima’s

⁴⁸ To be perfectly accurate, there is indeed one instance of scarring in the novel: Zhuchka, Ilyusha’s lost dog, is missing one eye and bears “a little nick on his left ear” (PV 544, PSS 14:491). But these markings allow Kolya to find the animal and bring him back to the family fold (this is also, notably, the one instance in the novel in which detective work is valorized). At the beginning of the scene we see Ilyusha with his replacement pet, the Medelianka puppy; but Ilyusha is lost in despair because “it was not Zhuchka, Zhuchka was not there, but if there could be both Zhuchka and the puppy together, then there would be complete happiness” (PV 541, PSS 14:487). After Zhuchka is returned, the old dog and the new puppy, Snegiryov, Aloysha, and the group of boys all gather on and around Ilyusha’s bed: an accidental family in which the coexistence of parent and children, the old and the young, even embraces the canine world. See Kasatkina (“Commentary on a Commentary”) for more on this scene.

⁴⁹ Fyodor is not the only character in the novel to bear such facial elasticity: we learn that “the face of Kuzma Kuzmich...had [also] become extremely swollen recently: his lower lip, which had always been thick, now looked like a kind of drooping pancake” (PV 369, PSS 14:334).

decay nourishes the sweet-smelling blooms at Ilyusha's funeral (during which we see a coffin "adorned inside and out with flowers" and a corpse from which, "strangely, there [is]...almost no smell [PV 768, PSS 15:190]—the "expected miracle" [PV 358, PSS 14:324] surrounding Zosima's death having been transferred miraculously to his spiritual grandson), the essence of Fyodor's dissolving features is detectable in the next generation in his youngest son, Alyosha, who is described as an "indefinite, indeterminate sort" ["деятель неопределенный, невыяснившийся"], and whose inchoate formlessness marks him not only as a man whose path is undetermined, but also as a being who is receptive to the presence of the divine (PV 3, PSS 14:5). It even appears that Fyodor's drooping countenance has been passed on to Alyosha in the form of a "slightly elongated face" (PV 25, PSS 14:24)—an element of Alyosha's beauty, and a quality that A.L. Volynskii, for one, associates with the characteristic features of Russian iconography.⁵⁰ In a world in which corporeal matter is fluid rather than fixed, it is precisely the bodily markers of Fyodor's sins that become the attributes of his son's saintliness.

Certainly, this literal manifestation of "bezobrazie" becoming "obraz" bears significant allegorical associations. Perhaps wounds are remediable in *The Brothers Karamazov* in part because, in a world in which we all bear godlike potential, they are all potential versions of the wounds of Christ. Ivan, who meditates a great deal on the topic of discord between fathers and sons, repeats the apocryphal legend of the heavenly Father's anger regarding the Son's wounds in "Khozhdenie bogoroditsy po mukam," although of course these "nail-pierced hands and feet" (PV 247, PSS 14:225) of the

⁵⁰ "His quiet gaze, the longish oval of his face, the animation of his expression—all this merges into the sort of icon-like image found in old tsarist documents—an image in which there is nothing provocative, nothing sharply individual" (quoted in Vetlovskaiia, "Alyosha Karamazov and the Hagiographic Hero" 207).

Christ story are also the prelude to resurrection and the recovery of bodily comeliness and form.⁵¹ We do see at least one instance of a resurrection in the novel: Lise, who has been paralyzed for at least half a year when we meet her and is immobile throughout most of the book, does rise and walk at one point. Lise's improvement occurs just after her attack of moral despair, when she admits to Alyosha that she wants to set fire to her house, that she "sometimes...ha[s]...dreams about devils...in all the corners, and under the tables" (PV 583, PSS 15:23), and that she has been reading the "bad books" that her mother hides under her pillow (PV 582, PSS 15:23)—and then she slams her finger self-punishingly in the door. If the capacity for feeling intensely, as Jones says, leaves open the possibility of salvation, then Lise's breakdown valorizes even the disturbed and volatile emotionalism of female hysteria; the parallels between her collapse and the spiritual crises of the Karamazov brothers are plain, and this is also the scene in which Lise throws herself to the ground and kisses her maid's feet, like Jesus washing the feet of his disciples or Zosima prostrating himself before his servant immediately before he decides to enter the monastery. We witness no dramatic transformation in Lise after this episode, and she remains variously afflicted, both spiritually and physically, until the end of the novel. Despite the high drama of her rants, or the intensity of the brothers' infernal visions, one of the principles of what Flath calls Dostoevsky's "apophatic art" (10) seems to be a reluctance (that is either aesthetic, or theological, or both) to represent recovery and transcendence directly, perhaps an interesting quality of understatement to his famously "maximalist" imagination. Still, Lise's renewed mobility indicates to Alyosha

⁵¹ Murav quotes a phrase from *The Festal Menaion* whose vocabulary is especially resonant: He "became human and died on the cross 'without life or form, having neither shape nor *comeliness*'" (158; italics mine).

that she will “be well” [“выздоровеете”] (PV 184, PSS 14:167) some day, at least by the time of their marriage—a potential for reintegration that is proffered to all the injured, fractured, and ailing creatures housed within the novel.

Just as important are the implications contained within these images of bodily recovery for the undoing or overcoming of hereditary determinism. Not only does Alyosha’s beauty constitute a reversal in the morphological expression of his inheritance, but Lise’s recovered mobility similarly figures an escape from stasis and an extrication from her mother’s oppressive influence. Interestingly, many of the novel’s ailing creatures are, like Lise, crippled or else somehow damaged in their lower extremities: Ilyusha’s sister is “hunchbacked and crippled, with withered legs” (PV 198, PSS 14:180) and walks with crutches; his mother is similarly a “crippled lady” who can “walk, but very little” (PV 201, PSS 14:183); Dmitry feels “unbearable shame” about his feet, for “all his life...he had found both his big toes ugly, especially the right one with its crude, flat toenail, somehow curved under” (PV 484, PSS 14:435); Ivan walks with a limp; Grigory’s bout of near-paralysis leaves him with unbearable pain in his right leg that also forces him to limp (PV 393, PSS 14:355); Kuzma Samsonov and Ilyusha’s mother have “swollen legs” [“распухш[ие] ног(и)”] (PV 344, PSS 14:311). This latter affliction, in the context of a novel centered on an act of parricide, has particular resonance, since the name Oedipus, we recall, means “swollen foot,” and the uneven gait of that literary touchstone signals the inevitability of his crimes. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, as in Sophocles, physical imperfection, and particularly bodily asymmetry, is associated with the possibility or inevitability of the parricidal act. In the case of Ivan, the limp is literal. (Smerdyakov also bears a peculiarity of the foot that speaks of his crime, since he hides

the money that he steals from Fyodor during the murder “far down in his stocking,” so that the evidence of the parricide literally resides at his feet and travels with him with every step [PV 624, PSS v. 15 60]). But sometimes it is symbolic: Ivan’s face twitches and becomes especially “twisted” during the conversation with Smerdyakov that, unbeknownst to him, sets the murder in motion (PV 273, PSS 14:249); in that same scene it is Smerdyakov’s “squinting left eye” (PV 268, PSS 14:244) that seems to speak elliptically to Ivan about the homicidal plan; Alyosha flashes a “crooked” smile when, at his moral low-point, he echoes Ivan’s parricidal philosophizing and proclaims that he “does not accept this world of God’s” (PV 341, PSS 14:308). Whether or not Dostoevsky actually read Sophocles is unclear,⁵² though perhaps there is an even larger chicken-and-egg question here, since such imagery (helped along, in the twentieth century, by Sigmund Freud’s antonomastic adoption of the term “Oedipal” to refer to incestuous and parricidal fantasies) is by now firmly planted in the collective imagination. One wonders, therefore, whether Sophocles invented the association or merely brought it to light.

Yet in many ways Dostoevsky’s novel not only anticipates Freud’s insights (or echoes Sophocles’) but also loosens their hold. According to a detail that is small but telling (and important enough to be announced both in a chapter title and in an interpolated poem), Lise’s mother, Madame Khokhlakova, experiences her own swollen foot just around the time that her daughter finds herself able to walk; the symptom is even

⁵² Belknap writes that Dostoevsky was an avid reader of the classics, and he enumerates the Greek and Roman authors whose works Dostoevsky either possessed or mentioned in letters. Sophocles is not among these writers. Though this factual absence, as Belknap says (*Genesis* 25), is certainly not definitive in any particular case, the suggestion here is not necessarily that Sophocles’ play represents an intertext for *The Brothers Karamazov* but rather a general allusion: according to Belknap, “it may be safe to say that Dostoevsky’s upbringing, his education, and his omnivorous reading...made him more likely to reinvent a classical insight or to take a modern version of it than to borrow it directly from its original text” (24).

troubling enough that she expects to be “carried in... a chair” to Dmitry’s trial, and we imagine that she may be transported in the very same conveyance that her daughter had abandoned so recently (PV 572, PSS 15:14). The reverse symptomatology here (the transmission of affliction from daughter to mother rather than vice versa) may be another subtle repudiation of Western notions of inheritance, causality, and psychic determinism, although the assumption that in a benevolent universe Madame Khokhlakova, like her daughter, will eventually be healed may have even larger implications. Perhaps, in fact, the possibility of metamorphosis and healing is extended to all of the imperfect, limping characters in the novel, and indeed to the fractured Karamazov family as a whole. Perhaps such potential embraces even the actual parricide Smerdyakov—who, according to Morson’s principle of sideshadowing and the novel’s own claims about the character, may kill both his father and himself in the universe of the novel, but whose life admits of other possibilities. In *The Brothers Karamazov* intergenerational strife is certainly devastating, but it is not the inevitable product of incurable primal wounds, and thus what Freud called “the chief and primitive crime of humanity” (8) is not destined to play itself out, either psychically or symbolically, in tragic cycles of reenactment. This is a work, in other words, in which parricide *does* occur, but perhaps not as an ever-enduring human inheritance, and in which, furthermore, the horrible Oedipal offense of incest is not an inevitability or a menacing threat. For if the ethos of the accidental family banishes the carnality, competition, and intrafamilial strife that beget parricidal intentions, then it also engenders a world of social and spiritual reconciliation in which everyone knows where he belongs. There are no orphans or illegitimate children, like Moll Flanders or Esther Summerson, in the kingdom of heaven.

Chapter 4

The Brothers Karamazov: Approaching Form

There are many ways in which *The Brothers Karamazov* may be viewed as a successor to *The Comely Cook*—or at least as the fulfillment of some of the novelistic impulses that are discernable, in embryonic form, in Chulkov’s work. The main *dramatis personae* of the eighteenth-century text, for example, constitute an earlier (and perhaps even more unfettered) version of Dostoevsky’s accidental family, with Chulkov’s novel also imagining a widening and a loosening of the family circle, or a severing of kinship ties from both generational hierarchy and biological strictures. Other resonances between the works are abundant as well: the association between spiritual-moral regeneration and cathartic release (usually tears, but other liquid manifestations in *The Brothers Karamazov*, such as bleeding, qualify too); the inverted association between sexual license and spiritual ascendance (as with Grushenka, who might in this sense be seen as a successor to Martona); the surprising bending, at times, of gender stereotypes (including the fact that the two characters in Dostoevsky’s novel who are periodically indisposed—unlike Lise, whose condition is more or less unchanged until the very end—are Grigory and Smerdyakov). Even the structural anomalies that provoke critical discussions about the finality or resolution of both novels (does *The Comely Cook* stand on its own, or is it a fragment of a larger work? Did Dostoevsky really intend to write a sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*? Do these questions even matter?) add to the sense of similarity.¹

Perhaps, indeed, all of these elements might be seen as manifestations of the distinctive

¹ For various perspectives on the question of the finished or unfinished nature of *The Brothers Karamazov*, see G.M. Fridlender (*Realizm Dostoevskogo* 325), Nina Perlina (193-4), and Tatiana Kasatkina (“Ob odnom svoistve epilogov piati velikix romanov Dostoevskogo” 117). For a discussion of the two possible versions of the sequel to the novel as projected by Dostoevsky in his writings, see Igor Volgin, “Alyosha’s Destiny” in *The New Russian Dostoevsky: Readings for the Twenty-First Century*.

drive of the Russian realist novel to liberate itself from traditional structures, both domestic and narrative, and to picture instead more flexible arrangements.

But whereas both the plot trajectory and thematic content of *The Comely Cook* are predicated on the absence of both ancestors and offspring, leaving Martona and her cohorts free to construct a system of lateral family relations and to plan a future in any way they please, Dostoevsky's novel performs no such erasure. In presenting the Karamazov family circle in its two successive generations, and in depicting the burdensome imprint of the father on the sons, *The Brothers Karamazov* represents outright the very problems of genealogical connectedness and generational succession that *The Comely Cook* evades through omission. In fact, whereas *The Comely Cook* bases its vision of communal and personal well-being on societal arrangements that are independent of law and order strictures of all sorts—familial, biological, and also civil—*The Brothers Karamazov* pictures a world in which such limitations have already been introduced; alternatively, it reflects the real world of the next century in which civil institutions have been more firmly established and scientific laws more definitively codified. And yet, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, these restrictions have been discovered or invented only to be overcome, alternately conceived, or reconfigured. This is a world in which the individual *does* have origins and parents, but in which these impediments, as well as all law and order restrictions, can be cast off or transcended.

These notions about the malleability of social institutions can be glimpsed, for example, in Dostoevsky's conception of marriage. Just as Chulkov circumvents the dreariness of domestic settlement in the form of an ongoing love triangle, Dostoevsky presents a series of shifting and interlocking romantic triads (Fyodor-Grushenka-Dmitry;

Dmitry-Katerina Ivanovna-Ivan; even Alyosha-Lise-Ivan, though this threesome is short-lived). *The Brothers Karamazov* eventually abandons this arrangement, which it replaces, by the end of the novel, with a collection of “ordinary couples” who drive the narrative, according to Robert Belknap, toward “conclusion and stability” (70). But we also witness a telling scene toward the very end of the book in which Katerina Ivanovna (now pledged solely to Ivan) visits the imprisoned Dmitry (now pledged solely to Grushenka) and announces that “now, for one minute, let it be as it might have been... You now love another, I love another, but still I shall love you eternally, and you me...” (PV 766, PSS 15:188). Surely there is a gesture here toward a world in which domestic settlement and transgressive, boundary-breaking love might coexist—in which triads resolve themselves into pairs but a woman can still love two brothers at once, and in which that love, though still pulsating with erotic energy, is somehow sanitized and spiritualized. That Vladimir Golstein calls the ideal family in *The Brothers Karamazov* a “school of love” (95) may indicate to us with particular force the similar spirit driving the two works.

At the same time, these romantic arrangements achieve a feeling of stability without really coming to a resolution, or even being consummated. Alyosha and Lise pledge to “put off kissing” until they are old enough to marry (PV 218, PSS 14:198); Dmitry and Grushenka exercise similar self-restraint at Mokroye because, as Grushenka says, “I’m not yours yet” (PV 441, PSS 14:398); and the romance between Katerina and Ivan has been put on hold while he convalesces from brain fever. All three surviving brothers are also residing on their own in temporary living arrangements: Alyosha has rented a room from a family of tradespeople, Ivan is living in the wing of a house

belonging to the widow of an official, and Dmitry is in jail. But unlike Moll and Esther, for whom domestic settlement gathers family members under one roof without seeming to settle very much, the Karamazov brothers, though geographically separated, look forward to a future reunion and the founding of harmoniously functioning households—in this latter sense resembling Martona, but with a somewhat clearer blueprint for how their conjugal lives might be configured.

The present chapter will go on to discuss other social and cultural institutions (specifically, the processes of monetary exchange and the criminal justice system) that are reimagined in the novel. As in *Moll Flanders* and *Bleak House*, the operation of these institutions is deeply imbricated with both the constitution of the material world and the organization of the family. But if in the English novels the deterministic, empirical laws of the universe limit the range of options for collective living, then the radically uncodified and untethered nature of reality in *The Brothers Karamazov* makes the possibilities for the future virtually limitless.

As we have seen, one of the determining factors in Ian Watt's conception of the birth of the English novel was the growth of industrial capitalism, a development that gave rise to tales of characters who "pursue money...very methodically according to...profit and loss book-keeping" (63). Watt focuses on the eighteenth century, but surely in Dickens, no less than in Defoe, the inexorable laws of the universe are reproduced and modeled, with oppressive specificity, in the capitalist system of exchange that now permeates everyday life—a frenzied and heartless circulation of currency and goods in which obligations are incurred and debts are paid but no one really feels enriched, and in which all the self-

generating activity does not really progress anywhere. And in *Bleak House*, no less than in *Moll Flanders*, the human subject, inevitably, is caught up in this all-pervasive, dog-eat-dog system. While Esther's sense of duty and willingness to serve seem very different from Moll's economic ruthlessness, her campaign of self-advancement is no less fierce. She may be a more decorous and civilized creature than Moll is (just as her narrative is a more sophisticated piece of prose and she is a more rounded, psychologically complex character). But if she is not quite the *homo economicus* of the picaresque novel, then she certainly is a fully acculturated citizen of the modern capitalist world.

Of course, the West did not invent money or commerce (or greed, self-interest, or financial ambition), and many of Dostoevsky's characters are similarly preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth or monetary gain.² In *The Brothers Karamazov* money is a site of universal obsession and manipulation: Fyodor's financial dealings are a hub of activity in the book, their effects branching out not only to his sons, but also to Grushenka (who is involved in her own financial maneuvers as a money lender and who collaborates with Fyodor) and to Snegiryov (who works as Fyodor's collector). The novel, furthermore, is a veritable ledger of bookkeeping details (Katerina Ivanovna's dowry; the inheritance Dmitry believes he is owed; the sum lost by Katerina Ivanovna's father and the amount lent to her by Dmitry; the expected earnings from the sale of Chermashnya; and of course the amount of Katerina Ivanovna's money that Dmitry spends at Mokroye), and we are

² As Boris Christa writes, the many, and extremely specific, references to money in Dostoevsky's novels are one element of the author's verisimilitude: "he knows exactly what a ruble will buy, mentions the various currencies of Europe in a casual and authoritative way and is even familiar with the rates of exchange" (94).

tempted to track all of the monetary receipts and disbursements with the precision of an accountant or a forensic auditor.

Yet Fyodor's brand of acquisitiveness is not the only financial policy in the book. In general the fiscal behavior that we see is neither coldly rational nor predictable, and the novel also portrays acts of extravagant generosity. From Yefim Petrovich, Alyosha and Ivan's caretaker, who educates the boys at his own expense in order to "k[ee]p...intact" the thousand rubles that they have each inherited from the general's widow (PV 15, PSS 14:49); to Alyosha himself, who is provided with the money to travel to his hometown and who returns half of it to his benefactors with the intention to travel third class; to Katerina Ivanovna, who distributes her own ample inheritance to individuals in need of salvation; to the peasant woman who entrusts Zosima with sixty kopeks to be given "to some woman who's poorer than I am" (PV 52, PSS 14:49); to Grushenka, who donates money to the Pole even after discovering that he is a scoundrel; to Andrei, Dmitry's troika driver, who refuses Dmitry's proffered fifty rubles and takes only five—the universe of *The Brothers Karamazov* is one in which unexpected bounty is bestowed and accepted. Of course, such gifts rarely add to anyone's actual stockpile in any significant or at least straightforward way, and some of them are also compromised either by financial recklessness or less-than-pure motives. Yefim Petrovich leaves his affairs "in disarray" so that later, "owing to red tape and the various formalities quite unavoidable among us," the boys are delayed in obtaining their own money and Ivan is a pauper during his first years at university (PV 15, PSS 14:15). Katerina Ivanovna's bequest to Dmitry is tied up with her own hysterical self-conceit and is implicated in the chain of events that lead him to prison.

Instead, the fruits of these generous acts are often spiritual or moral rather than material, and in many cases they become known only after a delay. Yefim Petrovich's kindness to the Karamazov boys may trouble Ivan in his childhood, but it also, we suspect, plants the seeds for his eventual rehabilitation, and it surely has something to do with Alyosha's admirable qualities; Katerina Ivanovna's three thousand rubles get Dmitry into trouble in the short run, but they are also the occasion of his moral self-interrogation. In general the significance of these monetary exchanges can be appreciated only by a reader who, in the spirit of the novel itself, relinquishes literal-minded expectations about profit and loss. Zosima figures love as an investment when he says "with love everything is bought, everything is saved....Love is such a priceless treasure that you can buy the whole world with it, and redeem not only your own but other people's sins" (PV 52, PSS 14:48). The metaphorical association that he fashions here between love and money emphasizes the fiduciary aspect of economic transactions, which transcends the technicalities of exchange rates and interest accrual, or conventional notions of benefit or cost. It thus has the effect of ennobling the latter rather than diminishing the former.

The most famous instance of irrational economics in the novel is Dmitry's handling of Katerina Ivanovna's three thousand rubles; his capacity to preserve half of it in an amulet (*ladonka*) while allowing himself to go on a wild spending spree with the rest confounds the law enforcement officials, who assume that such conflicting impulses cannot exist side by side. His financial behavior may seem strange to us as well. While the money he receives from Katerina Ivanovna is certainly adequate for him to finance a new life with Grushenka, he is fixated on the idea of obtaining his inheritance from

Fyodor in order to do so—which makes no sense if we apply a strictly rationalist epistemology to his thinking. But to Dmitry, funds are not interchangeable and assets have a provenance and value that are not quantifiable. They also function as part of a complex psychological and moral algorithm; he has convinced himself that “...in order *to have the right*” to take Fyodor’s three thousand rubles—that is, in order not to be a thief—“it was necessary beforehand to return the three thousand to Katerina Ivanovna” (PV 366-7, PSS 14:331). Like Alyosha, as the narrator describes him, no one in the novel seems to “know the value of money” (PV 21, PSS 14:20), reminding us of the haphazard fiscal behavior in *The Comely Cook* as opposed to the systematic and mercenary maneuverings of Moll or, as another example, the indiscriminate coveting of goods that is exhibited by Krook. It is of course an obvious point that all of the economic and sociological developments attendant on the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism in the West—and codified by theorists from Adam Smith to Max Weber—did not apply to Russia, and that in this sense it is no wonder that money plays quite a different role in the Russian novel. But perhaps more interesting is the way in which for both Dostoevsky and Chulkov, a culturally distinctive perspective opens up the possibility for generosity, joy, communal healing, and even spiritual salvation. Kate Holland writes that Dmitry’s amulet represents “the possibility of...achieving moral resurrection even at the moment [a character]...seems most debased” [“The Legend of the *Ladonka*” 196]). Even the spending spree itself might be viewed charitably, as an act of haphazard generosity resembling Martona’s bounteous dispersal of her loveliness.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* money is not only circulated in surprising ways, but it even seems to partake of an ontological status that is *sui generis*. Sums of currency are

presented not as items of symbolic exchange, or as the medium of anonymous distribution, but as distinct physical objects, elements of the material world. As Belknap writes, in *The Brothers Karamazov* “money...is definitely a *thing*...It may be trampled into the ground, put in a French lexicon, in a bag over one’s heart, in a stocking, under a mattress, in a casket, behind an icon” (*Structure* 67), and so on. Oddly enough, it is the very thingness of money—its participation in a material universe ripe for transfiguration—that provides it with its distinctive role. Perhaps most telling in this context is the scene in which Alyosha offers Snegiryov “two new, iridescent hundred-rouble bills” as repayment for his brother’s offenses (PV 209, PSS 14:190). Snegiryov, responding with vengeful pride, stomps the money into the ground; but when Alyosha bends to pick up the notes, he finds that “they were just very crumpled, flattened, and pressed into the sand, but were perfectly intact and crisp as new when [he] spread them and smoothed them out” (PV 212, PSS 14:193). Later, he again offers Snegiryov “the...same two hundred roubles” and Snegiryov accepts—the successful transfer representing a step in the reconciliation of the two families and in the consolidation of the group of boys around Alyosha and Ilyusha (PV 216, PSS 14:196). Like human bodies, whose crippling never precludes the possibility of re-integration, the rubles here are governed by the forces of regeneration, and it is this participation in the processes of a flexible material universe that allows for their effectiveness as a medium of human communion. And unlike the commercialization of human relations in *Bleak House*—in which the mass production of industry has been replicated on the level of administrative efficiency, so that various Smallweeds can replace each other like identical objects on a conveyer belt and any individual law clerk is interchangeable with the next—the return

and preservation of the rubles in *The Brothers Karamazov* (a sort of anthropomorphizing of currency or humanizing of mercantile exchange) represents the possibility of resurrection and renewal.

A similarly labile conception of matter (and even of money) applies to the signifying material that functions as crucial evidence in the novel's detective plot. At Dmitry's trial, the famous defense attorney Fetyukovich claims, as part of his argument, that he had "calculated precisely," "as on an abacus," the amount of money that Dmitry must have spent during his first trip to Mokroye" (PV 669, PSS 15:102). Inevitably we are reminded here of the unnervingly keen and empirically precise Detective Bucket, the practitioner of a forensic science based on hard evidence and deductive logic. At first glance, Dmitry's trial is presented similarly as an exercise in forensic agility; both Fetyukovich and the prosecutor, Ippolit Kirillovich, "work back[ward]," as Holland writes, from the fact of the murder and piece together a "linear narrative" ("The Legend of the *Ladonka*" 193) of the events that led up to it by marshalling what Victor Terras calls "the power of simple, concrete fact" (*Reading Dostoevsky* 135). Yet as Holland points out, the attorneys' explanatory methods also diverge: for if Ippolit Kirillovich elaborates a supposed chain of events that resulted in the murder, and presents his explanation as incontestably true, Fetyukovich offers "a labyrinth of parallel possible narratives in which the truth becomes illusory, chimerical, vacant" (195).

Fetyukovich operates like Bucket, then, according to the logic of hard, empirical facts and material evidence that can be calculated as on an abacus; his reasoning is conspicuously different from that of Ippolit Kirillovich—who "assumes that what is probable must be true"—in that he "insists that unless something is definite, it cannot be

true” (Holland 105). Yet there is an odd and counterintuitive chiasmus here in terms of the weighing of evidence and the difference between factual legitimacy and truth: for it is Fetyukovich, the hard-nosed empiricist, who manages to construct the unimpeachable logical argument that material evidence leads to no truth whatsoever, that facts are labile and shifting, that the money he has added up both does and does not result in a specific sum. For Fetyukovich the facts, though marshaled just as scrupulously as Bucket collects his evidence, lead to no firm conclusion whatsoever—a logical muddle that is his professional aim, since, as a crafty courtroom strategist, he is committed to getting his client off the hook by whatever means necessary. In fact, both Fetyukovich and Ippolit Kirillovich deploy the same scraps of evidence to opposing ends, and the defense attorney, no less than the prosecutor, manipulates the details in the service of his client, although for a different purpose (acquittal rather than indictment). There are, in other words, multiple turns of the screw here, since Fetyukovich, in proving that the matter and facts of the material world are labile, ineffable, and epistemologically shifting—in acting as the unwitting mouthpiece for the wisdom of the novel—is also playing a vile courtroom game that demonstrates, counterintuitively, the despotic potential of cold empirical reasoning. Unlike the central court case in Dickens’s novel, whose self-generating absurdity reveals itself only belatedly, as a paradoxical form of inertia, Dmitry’s trial is quite frankly a farcical rendition of civil authority in which the matter at hand is obscured beneath the lawyers’ grandiloquent oratory and casuist reasoning.

In addition, it turns out that every scrap of evidence revealed in the courtroom, despite its apparently matter-of-fact solidity, is indeed a piece of fiction, no matter which way the lawyers wish to interpret or distort the evidence. All of the items that can be

presented as an indictment of Dmitry—the rubles found on his person, his bloody clothing, the letter in which he admits his guilt, and even the presumptive murder weapon—are really just distractions and false leads. It is even significant that the supposed murder weapon is, of all things, a homely pestle. For unlike the gun that enacts the killing in *Bleak House*, such an object has many possible uses: perhaps it is a murder weapon, perhaps it is just a kitchen utensil, and in this matter as in all others the application of human judgment and analysis is likely to lead one astray. Moreover, if a firearm, and the predictable linear trajectory of its bullet, is an emblem of a fixed material world, then this ambiguous instrument stands for an amorphous physical setting, unfettered from the strict laws of physics and hence thoroughly resistant to forensic investigation. If law enforcement is a farce in *Bleak House* because, mired as it is in the very same mechanisms that govern physical reality, it can do nothing to fix all of the various personal and communal disorders, in *The Brothers Karamazov* it is a farce because it misunderstands the workings of the very universe it purports to police.

The novel's distinctive perspective on the material world can perhaps be discerned most clearly in the figure of the amulet³ in which Dmitry stores the preserved half of Katerina Ivanovna's money—a multiply signifying object on which the themes of economic life and of criminal justice converge. It is also in the material essence and fate of this item that the contrast between these notions and the depiction of matter in *Bleak House*—as, similarly, both the object of detection and the fruit of industrial production—is especially evident. Much like many of the items cluttering Krook's warehouse,

³ Holland concentrates on this item in her article “The Legend of the *Ladonka* and the Trial of the Novel” in another sense: she examines the implications of the “amulet narrative” in the trial scene for the novel's own generic self-designation and its “defense of the novelistic perspective” (79).

Dmitry's amulet is, essentially, a rag: as he proclaims in court, "I...once filch[ed] [my landlady's] bonnet for a rag [тряпки], or maybe to wipe a pen...It wasn't good for anything, I had the scraps lying about, and then this fifteen hundred, so I went and sewed it.... I think I sewed it precisely in those rags" (PV 498, PSS 14:448). The amulet is also the subject of perhaps the most sustained courtroom interrogation within the novel: the prosecutor quizzes Dmitry about its size, how it was made, where the material came from, whether it was cotton or linen, where the needle and thread used to sew it up were procured; he wonders whether a "piece might be found tomorrow in your lodgings" and even asserts that "you [had] better show us the scraps of it... You must have them somewhere," since they would be "material evidence in your favor" (PV 497, PSS 14:447-8). (Later the prosecutor demands of the jury: "how could we not have found it in his suitcase or chest of drawers, if such a...[rag] indeed existed?" [PV 721, PSS 15:149]).

If Ippolit Kirillovich were living in the world of *Bleak House*—in which matter decomposes but is never ejected and the scraps of all of the commodities ever produced languish in one rag and bottle shop or another; in which the factory origins, the method of production, and the post-production trajectory of an item can be accounted for with accuracy; and in which the court of law employs all of this material build-up in its evaluations of innocence and guilt—then this sly line of questioning would make sense. In a world ruled by material determinism, Dmitry's inability to describe clearly or produce the evidence would indeed make us suspect that no such object had ever existed, since in such a universe matter cannot simply vanish. And in such a universe, the vagueness of Dmitry's description, as well as the literal absence of the amulet, would understandably be taken as proof of guilt.

But in the environment of *The Brothers Karamazov* Dmitry is right to scoff at the prosecutor's line of reasoning, and his inability to provide any certain answers represents much more than his own absentmindedness. Just as the presence of certain objects in the courtroom—the bloody clothes, the pestle—has nothing to do with a defendant's innocence or guilt, neither does their absence. When, “in the dark” of night, Dmitry drops the amulet “in the square somewhere” (PV 497, PSS 14:447), the rag even, for all intents and purposes, performs the deed it could not pull off even in the fantastical spontaneous combustion of Dickens's universe: it disappears without a trace. In fact, if all the detritus littering the London streets in *Bleak House* represents the pathology of a universe in which catharsis is impossible—and in which the only remedy for the encroaching sludge is Esther's frantic housekeeping, an attempt at organization and sterilization that is bound to fail—then perhaps the mysterious disappearance of the amulet embodies the possibility of just such an emptying-out in the world of *The Brothers Karamazov*: a manifestation, on the level of material reality, of the kenotic ideal that so many readers have discerned as Dostoevsky's governing moral principle and his key to personal salvation. In the same way, the repurposing of the “old rag,” the remnants of a bonnet that had been “washed a thousand times” and is “not worth a kopek” (PV 498, PSS 14:448), as the amulet—the protective casing for an impressive sum of rubles and the symbol of Dmitry's potential for moral transformation—represents the reversal of material decomposition, as well as the metamorphic capacity granted by the text to even the most worn, insubstantial, and seemingly worthless of items. Perhaps Dmitry's inability to describe or label the material in any definitive way—for he only “think[s] it was a bonnet” but does not “remember...firmly”—indicates an unwillingness

to confer a precise identity on an article ripe for such transformation (PV 498, PSS 14:448).

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, though, investigation, detection, and censure are fruitless not only because physical evidence is misleading. If a detective's judgmental forefinger is an insurmountable and inevitable nemesis in *Bleak House*, in *The Brothers Karamazov* this appendage can only be pointed in the wrong direction either literally (as in the prosecution of Dmitry) or metaphorically—for accusation itself, whatever the facts of the matter, is fundamentally misconceived. In fact, if finger-pointing is a figure for virtually all of *Bleak House's* ailments, then in *The Brothers Karamazov* it represents not only the novel's fundamental problem but also, in another respect, the potential for salvation held out by the text.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, human fingers are associated symbolically with both the ontologically wrongful act of accusation and with primal cruelty—a corollary, perhaps, to the role of the foot and lower limb as indicators of evil wishes. As Belknap notes, fingers are correlated with sadism throughout the novel, from the “fingers that damn Grigorij's dying child”—and incur Grigory's wrath—“by numbering six” (*Structure* 35), to Lise's horrific vision of the Jews who cut off children's fingers, to Snegiryov's defiant and censorious cry to Alyosha (“...but before I go whipping Ilyushechka maybe you'd like me to chop off these four fingers, right here, in front of your eyes, for your righteous satisfaction, with this very knife?” [PV 200, PSS 14:182-3]). They are also, we have noted, the sites of bodily loss and damage, as with Alyosha's bitten digit and Lise's finger slamming. In the scenes in which this damage occurs, Dostoevsky turns the purveyor of human cruelty (the forefinger) into its object, one

example of the many reversals that characterize what Anne Hruska calls the “vicious cycle of abuse” in Dostoevsky (472).⁴ But like so many other manifestations of suffering in the book, wounds to the finger also indicate, at times, the potential for growth and change.

When Alyosha’s finger is bitten by Ilyusha during his first confrontation with the group of boys, the act may well be understood as anticipatory punishment for his various failures throughout the novel, all of which consist in one way or another of finger-pointing: either a wrongheaded assignment of blame or a form of exclusionary picking and choosing. Alyosha literally “point[s] directly” [“указал...прямо”] (PV 676, PSS 15:108) to Smerdyakov as the guilty party in the murder investigation, although in a sense that is precisely what he has been doing all along in his identification of Smerdyakov as the only individual in the community unworthy of love. Even Alyosha’s reaction to Ilyusha’s attack (“what have I done to you?” [PV 179, PSS 14:163]) is a momentary departure from Zosima’s inclusive ethic that all are guilty before all, since it fails to recognize that, according to this wisdom, while Alyosha may have committed no material offenses against Ilyusha, he is still responsible before the boy.⁵ As V. E. Vetlovskaja writes, even Alyosha’s preferential devotion to Zosima is misguided, in that it positions the elder as the object of commitment above all others and is hence a failure

⁴ Hruska specifically concentrates on children as both the victims and the perpetrators of cruelty throughout the novel. As we have seen, children are also frequently involved in scenes of damage to fingers.

⁵ In fact, Alyosha *is* guilty before Ilyusha even on the literal level of the plot, if only via a tortuous causal sequence. The finger-biting is the result of a chain of displaced violence that was initiated by Dmitry: Dmitry beats Snegiryov as an act of displaced rage against his own father; the hurt is then taken on by Snegiryov’s son Ilyusha, who, in an act of displaced rage against Dmitry, bites Alyosha. Alyosha, then, rightfully stands at the end of the sequence, for if he had been a better keeper to his brother the chain of violence might never have been initiated in the first place.

of the all-inclusive love advocated by Zosima (*Poetika* 180)—a form of compassion, as Sven Linner writes, that is “not selective” (37).

Alyosha’s finger injury, in this way, may serve as a reprimand directed at his worst self; as the outcome of an act of violence committed by a child, it is a reminder of his failures in fatherly caretaking. But as a wound that temporarily immobilizes his own instrument of malfeasance, it is also a bid and an opportunity for improvement. In this sense, the damaging of fingers is not only a representation of torture and pain in the novel, but it is also, at times, an act of chastening, and perhaps even a reminder that we must relinquish our most violent instincts. And indeed, Alyosha’s wound does improve when, under orders from Lise, he soaks the finger in cleansing water.

Of course, Alyosha’s sins are by no means washed clean altogether, and, in his continued rejection of Smerdyakov, he continues to be guilty of finger-pointing throughout the novel. By the same token Lise herself—who is “struck...terribly” (PV 182, PSS 14:166) by Alyosha’s wound and later, at her spiritual low-point, slams her finger in the door in imitation, perhaps as self-punishment against her own worst impulses—is by no means rehabilitated by her injury. But perhaps these acts (and especially Lise’s masochistic behavior) might be seen as versions of Dmitry’s redemptive gesture of self-flagellation in assuming the burden of guilt for his father’s death. When, during the trial, Alyosha refers to a memory he has of Dmitry “precisely pointing with his finger” [“а именно указывал пальцами”] (PV 678, PSS 15:110) at his own chest (at the amulet in which, as Alyosha correctly surmises, Dmitry had stored the fifteen hundred rubles), he does so in an attempt to prove his brother’s innocence. In a larger sense, though, it is not the exact location of the target that is significant but rather the direction

in which Dmitry's pointing finger is aimed, toward the self: a Christ-like acceptance of guilt that is also the incontrovertible proof of innocence.

Perhaps this self-sacrificing finger-pointing is the one human gesture that belongs in the company of the other central digital image in *The Brothers Karamazov*: that of the “unseen finger” [“перст невидимый”] of God that guides our species with all-inclusive benevolence and reminds us that all actions and events must be viewed under the aspect of eternity. In this sense, while originating from on high, it not only points the way forward, but also reminds us to gaze upward: another instance of what Jackson and Murav call the liberating verticality of *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the context of this critical study, however, there are added resonances here—for if finger pointing in *Bleak House* represents the social pathology of accusation and blame, it also figures the textual woes of metonymic narration, in which goods, money, ideas, and influence (or their narrative equivalents) can be transferred laterally from one recipient to the next but progress or amelioration are precluded and the burdens of humanity (the legacies of guilt, genetics, and urban slime) are merely displaced from one person to another. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast, the vertical orientation is surely a component of what critics call the “figural realism” of Dostoevsky or the “emblematic realism” of Tolstoy (see chapter 3): a manifestation of the “metaphoric” imagination of the Russian novel, in which the elevation of the spirit is immanent in the details of everyday life.

The meaning of “metaphoric” here is admittedly complex; as literary scholars and theorists have long noted, in any language specimen the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is difficult to parse, and in many ways I am thinking of metaphor as everything that metonymy is not, and as a corrective to the metonymic imagination. With

a nod to the inevitably reductive nature of my discussion, I will confine the following discussion of metonymy in *The Brothers Karamazov* to J. Hillis Miller's conception of this trope, and specifically the subset of synecdoche, as it functions in *Bleak House* (and as discussed in Chapter 2): as the figuration of the part for the whole (as in the small clues that to Bucket contain the larger solution) and also the linguistic or conceptual equivalent of psychic displacement, whereby one's attention is shifted from one entity to the next as if by the process of free association.⁶ The resulting conglomeration in *Bleak House*, as we have seen, tends ultimately to be redundant and self-enclosed. As Naomi Schor writes, "from Brunetière to Barthes, from Lewes to Lukacs...the detail occupies...a privileged position in the theory of realism" (701), and as such the proliferating details and minutiae of Dickens's novel—the rags and bottles that pile up indiscriminately, and the clues and symptoms to which the text turns our attention without providing a solution—represent the text's struggle with its own generic underpinnings.

Like *Bleak House*, *The Brothers Karamazov* pursues its own investigation of the tyranny of details, and it almost engages in a polemic against synecdoche: a mechanism that, from the novel's point of view, has the effect of privileging the part to the neglect of the whole. Dmitry, for example, recognizes that it is the officials' synecdochic small-mindedness that does him in, and that "if it weren't for all these small details"—the rubles, the blood, the pestle, which the policemen and lawyers assume stand for the whole of Dmitry's person—"we would come to an understanding at once" (PV 464, PSS

⁶ In critical literature since Jakobson (and Lacan), the discussion of metaphor and metonymy as linguistic devices, literary tropes, and psychic mechanisms is of course vast. For good overviews, see David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*; Hugh Bredin, "Metonymy"; and J.D. Sadler, "Metaphor and Metonymy."

14:418). Rakitin defines Karamazovian sensualism as the proclivity to “fall...in love...with just one part of a woman’s body” (PV 79, PSS 14:74), and indeed, Dmitry’s interest in Grushenka is expressed fetishistically as a lusting after “a certain curve to her body” that “shows in her foot, ...[and is] even echoed in her little left toe” (PV 118, PSS 14:109)—a particular focus that may also be an inversion of his fixation on his own unsatisfactory right toe.⁷ Even the sudden burst of poetic inspiration that leads Rakitin to plead in verse “For the Recovery of My Object’s Ailing Little Foot” creates an association between body fetishism and the sin of venality, since the real object of his ardor is not even Madame Khokhlakova’s foot, but rather her money. This kind of part-for-whole mentality is a destructive force in the novel’s universe; according to this imagery, the object of Dmitry’s desire even connects the synecdochic gaze of lechery with the crime of parricide, and we also remember that Dmitry’s murderous impulses are incited in part by a close-up vision of the details of Fyodor’s face, which he presumably interprets (along with the rest of us, admittedly) as emblematic of Fyodor’s general corruption.

⁷ Both Jakobson and Lacan discuss the function of metonymy in realism by citing examples (both taken from Tolstoy—though the question of metonymy versus metaphor in Tolstoy is a vexed one, as we saw in the introduction) of images of women’s bodies. For Jakobson, Tolstoy’s “fond[ness]...[for] synecdochic details” can be glimpsed in his focus on Anna Karenina’s handbag or in the extent to which, in *War and Peace*, “the synecdoches ‘hair on the upper lip’ and ‘bare shoulders’ are used...to stand for the female characters to whom these features belong” (77). For Lacan, metonymy is similarly “appreciable in certain passages of Tolstoy’s work; where each time it is a matter of the approach of a woman, you see emerging in her place...the shadow of a beauty mark, a spot on the upper lip, etc” (quoted in Gallop 126). It seems that both theorists, in citing Tolstoy’s synecdoches as emblematic of the realistic procedure as a whole, discern a certain amount of male sexual fetishism in the synecdochic method of the realist writer. These are the very notions that are suggested by Dostoevsky’s text in its meta-commentary on realism and its relationship to the “small detail,” although the novel itself is more explicit about the violence inherent in the realist’s synecdochic gaze. (For an interesting discussion of gender and metonymy, and of the different uses of metonymy by male and female novelists in Victorian England—a subject tangentially related to this discussion—see Robyn R. Warhol, “Narrating the Unnarratable: Gender and Metonymy in the Victorian Novel.”)

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the words “realist” [“реалист”] and “realism” [“реализм”] are pejorative terms. Ivan’s devil, in order to demonstrate his fidelity to “realism,” sprinkles his conversation with naturalistic details about his head cold or about travel distance as measured in kilometers, and his monologue is certainly an impressive performance of metonymic free association that ultimately leads nowhere; Madame Khokhlakova, in frustration over the failure of Zosima’s corpse to manifest the expected miracle, vows from then on to devote herself to “reali[sm]” and “practical activity” (PV 385, PSS 14:348); early in the novel the narrator points out that a “realist,” if actually presented with a miracle, would simply appropriate it as a new discovery of natural science (PV 25, PSS 14:24). In the first instance, the devil’s “realism,” as Ivan argues, is pure sophistry intended to overwhelm him⁸; it resembles the behavior of Fetyukovich, who tries to hoodwink the jury with irrefutable evidence and arithmetic sums. In the second example, Madame Khokhlakova’s “realism” is equated with the limited breadth and depth of her imagination. And in the third, “realism” is a tyrannical dogma in its own right, in which the primacy of naturalistic explanations for all phenomena is a premise that cannot be tampered with, despite the evidence of miracles all around us. As Terras writes, “those who subscribe to ‘realism’ in the conventional sense...are shown to be wretchedly shortsighted and wrong even in their own empirical terms” (“Narrative Structure” 221).

But even more significantly, all of the moral failings within the novel—all of the violence rooted in perceptions of others as material aggregates (as ugly faces or graceful feet) rather than as spiritual wholes—are rooted in conventional realism, with its trading

⁸ It is also interesting to note that, like Jakobson and Lacan, Ivan’s devil makes reference to Tolstoy as a wielder of the realistic detail *par excellence* (PV 639).

in synecdochic details and the minute observations of the physical world. When Fyodor's grotesque face provokes paroxysms of parricidal rage in his son, or when Dmitry lusts after Grushenka's foot, he is demonstrating the limited perception of the realist. When Rakitin clumsily tries his hand at poetry, his ode to the left foot of Madame Khokhlakova (the supposed object of his affection who is identified in the title, appropriately, as his "object") only accentuates his essence as an objectifying, prosaic realist. And certainly the devil's prodigious skills as a realist narrator in Ivan's hallucination are all the evidence we need for the insidiousness of this trade in facts and figures. (Dmitry also links realism with hellish forces, consistently associating the minutia of his case with the devil in exclamations such as "devil take the small details!" [PV 464, PSS 14:419] or "devil knows where in the square [I dropped the amulet]!" [PV 497, PSS 14:447]). Realism, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is the devil's work and the genre of hell.

Men are not the only perpetrators of synecdochic observation in *The Brothers Karamazov*, although their behaviors are often particularly ugly manifestations of perverted sensuality or filial resentment. In one fairly absurd exchange Madame Khokhlakova, a self-proclaimed "genuine realist" ["совершенная реалистка"], tells Dmitri that she has been studying his "gait," and that from this data she has incontrovertible proof, supported by science, that he would be a successful gold miner (PV 385, PSS 14:348). One might say, in the same way, that the narrator (and also the reader) are guilty of a similarly reductive maneuver in connecting Ivan's uneven gait, the afflicted lower limbs of various characters, and the crime of parricide. But this may be the point: that just as people should not be anatomized and reduced, the eradication of

parricide would make such details meaningless. By the same token, if realistic detail and synecdochic minutiae are the apparatus of the devil, this means that Dostoevsky's novel (unlike *Bleak House*, in which synecdochic mechanisms are so thoroughly grounded in the cultural milieu that they cannot possibly be transcended) implicitly provides us with an alternative. In the chapter containing the poem to Madame Khokhlakova, Rakitin refers to Pushkin as a writer of "women's little feet" (PV 576, PSS 15:17)—a comment that Dmitry, with his own unsavory tendencies to particularize the anatomy of women, later picks up: "What he says about Pushkin I quite understand...all he wrote about was little feet!" (PV 590, PSS 15:29-30). This benighted and even comically reductive interpretation of *Eugene Onegin*⁹ says much more about the characters' weird fascination than it does about the poem; in fact, around the time that *The Brothers Karamazov* was published, Dostoevsky delivered a speech on Pushkin in which he lauded the national poet's far-sighted view of the whole and his "capacity for universal sympathy" (F.M. Dostoevsky, "Pushkin," PSS 26:145). Perhaps, indeed, the corrective to Rakitin's and Dmitry's fetishistic reading is Dostoevsky's own allusion to Pushkin in the voice of Snegiryov, who, upon glimpsing his dead son's "patched little boots" in a corner, cries out in anguish, "Plyushechka, dear old fellow, dear old fellow, where are your little feet?" (PV 773, PSS 15:194). The scene is so wrenching that little more needs to be said about the sanctioned uses of synecdoche (as a figure of speech employed in the service of love), as opposed to its abuses (as an objectification of the Other).

⁹ "I love [ladies'] little feet...Oh! I could not forget for long/ Two little feet...O little feet, where are you today?...These sorceresses' words and gaze/ Deceive one...like their little feet" ["Люблю их ножки...Ах! долго я забыть не мог/ Две ножки...Ах, ножки, ножки! Где вы ныне?...Слова и взор волшебниц сих/ Обманчивы...как ножки их"] (A.S. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, 1:30-34; PSS 3:283-285)

This replacement of perversion with love is the implicit goal of the novel, and if such a moral and spiritual transformation can be thought of in terms of literary tropes, it is the transformation of metonymy into metaphor (or, in Lacanian terms, of the psychic mechanism of displacement into condensation). When Dmitry embraces Grushenka as a “wee one” he is thinking metaphorically: perceiving her not in terms of one or another body part or as an object of rage or lust, but as a whole person who, like himself and everyone else, is a child of God. The wisdom of Christian love, in other words, is metaphoric, and it is this message that rescues Dmitry from his condition of synecdochic error and leads him on the path toward becoming, like Pushkin, a poetic soul, or, like his author, a “realist in a higher sense”—a narrative embodiment of the principle of theosis if ever there was one.

In a sense, then, conversion in the novel always involves the metamorphosis of a character’s realist vision into this higher mode of perception. And as in all matters spiritual, Ivan, the realist who dreams up the realist devil, is the furthest of the three legitimate brothers from being cured of his errant ways. He is also the Karamazov who is most repelled by the brute physicality of the natural world (though his aversion for matter is mirrored in Smerdyakov’s squeamishness), a tendency that reveals itself particularly in his misanthropic disgust for the human face: “It is still possible to love one’s neighbor abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance” he says, but it is impossible to do so “up close,” for “as soon as [a man]...shows his face—love vanishes.” He is no monster, though, and he does make an exception for children, acknowledging that “one can love children even up close, even dirty or homely children” (PV 237, PSS 14:215-16). The next step is simply for Ivan to see the spark of divinity in all human bodies—that is, to

see adults, in Dmitry's words, as "big wee ones." In this sense, the novel (which is itself jam-packed with realistic details of all sorts) encourages not an abandoning of detail but the transformation of our perception of it: we are asked to discern, in all the minutia of the material and natural world, God's reflection, and to see every item as simultaneously a part of God and a dignified whole in its own right.

This enlightened perception might be understood as synecdoche transfigured, an altered understanding of the part for whole that the novel evinces from the very beginning when it presents itself as a biography of the youngest Karamazov with the explanation, in the author's preface, that "it sometimes happens that it is precisely a seemingly particular and isolated case ... who bears within himself the heart of the whole" (PV 3, PSS 14:5). In *Bleak House*, we recall, the metonymic principle of realist narration and synecdochic displacement (by which "one thing stands for another, is a sign for another, indicates another, can be understood only in terms of another, or named only by the name of another" [Miller, "*Bleak House*" 63]) creates all of the paradoxically inert activity that precludes forward movement; even the links of generational progression are figured as metonymic displacement by which human propagation becomes mass production and one Smallweed follows another like items on an assembly line or words in a run-on sentence. That is, in Dickens's novel all forms of human connectedness or kinship are debased (we're all interchangeable items in a meaningless sequence), and metaphor is reduced to metonymy. Even the mode of allegory, conventionally understood as a metaphorical expansion of meaning, is reimagined, in the pointing figure of Allegory on Tulkinhorn's ceiling, as a stern, reproofing, soul-crushing trope.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by contrast—in which every single thing manifests a higher presence and is thus both uniquely itself and sublimely not itself; in which all horizontal or lateral relations embrace a vertical component; and in which all materially contiguous parts of the universe are analogous in the eyes of God—metonymy is elevated by the force of metaphor. In Dostoevsky’s novel the part stands for the whole in the sense that the divine essence expresses itself equally in the microcosm and the macrocosm; it is this insight that allows us to see all of Holy Russia condensed in the figure of the novice Alyosha, or to experience the glory of the universe in every grain of sand, or to view every stone allegorically as the rock of the universal church. As Zosima says, “love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it” (PV 319, PSS 14:289). Jackson writes that in Dostoevsky “the ultimate test of verisimilitude of a fact, the test of ‘realism,’ . . . is not the identity of fact A to fact B to fact C and so forth; it is in the degree to which fact A, however isolated and exceptional, conducts us to the larger realities of society and the human spirit” (*Quest for Form* 84). Which is to say that Dostoevskian realism, or realism in a “higher sense,” leads to transcendence.

The metaphorical force of divine love seems to bear transcendent potential not only for individuals but also for the larger social mechanisms of civil regulation and control—the regulatory bodies that are so oppressive in *Bleak House*. In Dostoevsky’s novel, as in his Russia, these institutions were Western imports rather than indigenous elements, part of Alexander II’s wide-scale effort (the so-called Great Reforms) to rearrange Russian civil life according to Western European (and in the case of the court reforms, French and German) models.¹⁰ As Gary Rosenshield writes, the jury trial in

¹⁰ According to Rosenshield, “the new courts, primarily modeled after the French and German, replaced an antiquated, inefficient, inept, and most of all corrupt system based on closed hearings, written proceedings,

particular is portrayed in *The Brothers Karamazov* as “a corrupter of native Russian values” that transforms “human beings into legal agents, defined not by their relation to Christ but by their relation to law” (26, 6). In this sense the forms of temporal law and order that are a native and necessary evil in *Bleak House*—and that are even raised, in that novel’s vision, to the level of an existential condition, the inevitable result of communal living—are in Dostoevsky’s work both arbitrary and expendable: for if they have been imported then they can also, presumably, be replaced or transformed. As Rosenshield writes, *The Brothers Karamazov* differs from even Dostoevsky’s own previous works “in that it attempts to develop in some detail alternatives to the evil that it portrays,” specifically the evil of the contemporary court system. Though “the novel does not advocate a return to the pre-reform court...it champions a more ancient...ideal, in which church and state become one, or, more properly, where the state is subsumed by the church” (30). This model is suggested by Zosima, who imagines the “transfiguration” of society “into one universal and sovereign Church”—envisioned as an all-embracing and forgiving entity that, unlike the engines of civil law, would refuse to “reject” and “cut...off” the criminal, and that would instead, “like a mother, tender and loving, withhold...from active punishment” (PV 65-6, PSS 14:60).

We are reminded here, in Zosima’s prophesied collective, of the fledgling and unelaborated ethic of mercy—and specifically of mercy as an epiphenomenon of civil lawlessness—in *The Comely Cook*: a work that, in this context, appears to predict the outright championing of an inclusive and forgiving matriarchal culture in *The Brothers*

inquisitorial investigatory style, and a presumption of guilt” (19). Murav writes that “the legal reform of 1864 initiated by the government of Alexander II transformed the trial from a secret, written proceeding based on the ‘inquisitorial’ principle into an open, public, oral proceeding organized to a far greater degree by the adversarial principle” (*Legal Fictions* 55).

Karamazov. By the same token, perhaps *The Comely Cook* can be seen as partaking, in its presentation of Russian anarchy, in Dostoevsky's brand of national exceptionalism: for certainly in Dostoevsky's last novel, the imagined flowering of a merciful, maternal collective that would arise in place of efforts at civil order is a distinctly Russian phenomenon. As Rosenshield writes, in *The Brothers Karamazov* "Western law was standing in the way of Russian justice, not of course of a Russian justice already in place but one that could arise more organically from the needs and ideals of the Russian people" (32)—for, like other Slavophiles,¹¹ Dostoevsky understood the absence of indigenous legal forms in Russia "as a reflection of the most positive aspects of the Russian national character, to which formalism and the instrumental rationalism of the West were inherently alien" (63). It seems that in Dostoevsky's understanding, Russia's inherent resistance to law and order might allow for the overcoming of the patriarchal strictures that haunt the Western world and that also, we remember, dog the universes of *Bleak House* and *Moll Flanders* alike.

This resistance to strict efforts of civil control is discernable, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, even within the regulatory systems that have already been imposed. The judicial system in Dostoevsky's novel bears little resemblance to the impersonal machinery of the Chancery court in *Bleak House* or the nascent system of law enforcement in *Moll Flanders*. The officials who track down and arrest Dmitry at Mokroye are all Dmitry's personal acquaintances, men whom he has met at social gatherings and around town; we are told that Dmitry, for a time, paid "most respectful visits" to the prosecutor's wife, and that, upon first arriving in town, he was "warmly

¹¹ Whether or not Dostoevsky could be termed a genuine Slavophile is debatable, although it is certainly true that much of his thinking resonates with Slavophile ideology. See Sara Hudspeth, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness: A New Perspective on Unity and Brotherhood*.

received” in the home of the police commissioner himself (PV 459, PSS 14:414). Dmitry even knows the members of the jury that ends up convicting him, many of whom he “had managed to insult...personally during his stay in our town”—his conviction resulting not from the indifferent workings of the law machinery but from personal animus, or at least engagement (PV 657, PSS 15:91). Even the minor officials involved in the investigation are described in some detail (their personal qualities, their family arrangements, their appearance); the prosecutor and defense attorney are presented as larger-than-life personalities; and the police commissioner himself is depicted above all in his private capacity as a “family man” and the host of various social events. As an individual who “knew how to bring society together,” “his house was never without guests,” and in fact on the night of the murder many of the officials who become involved in the investigation happen to be gathered in his home—from which, upon learning of the crime, they depart to Mokroye almost as though the criminal pursuit were an extension of the soiree. We even learn that “in his official capacity,” the police commissioner

was none too bright, but he did his job no worse than many others. To tell the truth, he was rather an uneducated man, and even a bit carefree with respect to a clear understanding of the limits of his administrative power. Not that he did not fully comprehend some of the reforms of the present reign, but he understood them with certain, sometimes quite conspicuous mistakes, and not at all because he was somehow especially incapable, but simply because of his carefree nature, because he never got around to looking into them. (PV 451-2, PSS 14:406-7)

Unlike the unseen Chancellor who haunts the world of *Bleak House* or the police machine that pursues Moll Flanders, law enforcement in *The Brothers Karamazov* is carried out haphazardly by a collection of private personalities, each with his own foibles and idiosyncrasies—certainly a reduction not only of the feeling of inexorable civic authority, but also of the sense of looming psychic force with which the police and

juridical establishments are imbued in the English novels. When Dmitry is convicted, the narrator reports the sentence as a commission to “such and such prison” [“в такой-то тюремный замок”] (PV 509, PSS 14:457), and though the diction here speaks perhaps most profoundly about the narrator’s propensity for imprecision and evasion (which will be discussed later), it also bears witness to the very different conception of the prison at work in the Russian novel. Unlike Newgate, whose name veritably defines Moll’s existence and is the inevitable endpoint of all her endeavors (and is domesticated in Dickens’s novel as Bleak House), the prison is a hazy, indistinct presence: a way station (in the sense that it is merely a holding cell for Dmitry before he is sent to Siberia) rather than a final destination or an element of doom.

In addition, though it is not quite the ordinary, private enclosure that barely manages to bind Martona, the prison is still a relatively informal establishment: the warden—who is an avid reader of the Apocryphal Gospels and feels “some sort of irresistible sympathy for Alyosha”—even allows the youngest Karamazov to enter the jail after visiting hours (PV 586, PSS 15:26). In fact, it seems that it is precisely the desultory qualities of the Russian police and prison system that allow for flashes of beneficence on the part of the authorities, many of whom feel compassion for the convict even though they are assured of his guilt. As the district attorney says to Dmitry, “all of us here...are prepared to recognize you as a young man who is noble in principle, though one, alas, carried away by certain passions” (PV 510, PSS 14:458); the police commissioner, while remaining “firmly convinced of Mitya’s crime, since the time of his imprisonment[,]...come[s] to look on him more and more leniently” and treats the convict with a certain amount of avuncular affection. We are told that some of the

officials bear a “warm, almost fatherly compassion” (PV 586, PSS 15:26) for the criminal, and one of them, apparently, even tucks him into bed: when Dmitry awakes from his dream of the “wee one,” during the preliminary investigation, he finds that a pillow has been placed under his head by some unidentified “good man,” “perhaps one of the witnesses, or even [the district attorney’s]...clerk,” who “had arranged that a pillow be put under his head, out of compassion” (PV 508, PSS 14:457). Dmitry feels, when he is questioned by the officials at Mokroye, as if he were “the equal of all these men, of all these previous acquaintances of his” (PV 459, PSS 14:414)—a rare privilege for a convict, and a sensation that is supported by a novel in which each individual, in his private heart, is as guilty as the next, including policemen and judges.

When Fetyukovich bemoans the state of “a Russia immersed in disorder and suffering from a lack of proper institutions” (PV 667, PSS 15:99), then, he is certainly making reference to the law enforcement system in which he himself participates—and over which, despite all attempts at imposing Western methods of organization and control, Russian proclivities toward irregularity and disarray maintain their hold. This persistence of Russian disorderliness within the structures of Western order may be distressing to the liberal Westernizers Fetyukovich and Ippolit Kirillovich, but in the novel as a whole it is presented, like so many other forms of derangement, as a site of salvific potential. Perhaps even the farcical nature of the trial scene, which in its frenzied unruliness is quite a spectacle—and in which the grandstanding defense attorney and prosecutor, who considers his speech to be “the *chef d’oeuvre* of his whole life, his swan song” (PV 693, PSS 15:123), steal the show—is an element of this sense of promise. The inhabitants of Skotoprigonievsk are playing at law and order, and they are pretenders to

authority for whom the role of judge, policeman, or jury member is merely a question of costume change: an implicit admission of the falsity of temporal authority, but also a testament to the inherent equality of all souls underneath the garments. As in Dmitry's formulation, the town of Skotoprigonievsk, with its group of schoolboys and its community of adults playing games of cops and robbers, is composed of "little children and big children." This is not to say that the crimes committed by both boys and the grown-ups alike are not serious transgressions within the novel's world. Rather, it is this understanding of our inherent equality, and our entitlement to forgiveness as children of God, that makes possible the brief glimpses of compassion on the part of distinctly unofficial officials: moments of human communion and merciful guardianship that are a fleeting vision of the transformation into matriarchy that Zosima imagines.

If *The Comely Cook* pictures the conspicuous absence of the law and police, then *The Brothers Karamazov* imagines their transfiguration; by the same token, if in Chulkov fulfillment is possible only in a radical form of communal anarchy, in Dostoevsky the ideal is a synthesis of order and disorder. It seems to be the very merging of Russian chaos and Western control—such that the Russian energies are housed within, yet not constricted by, Western structures, just as Western institutions are made more flexible by their location in the Russian context—that opens up the possibility for success in Dostoevsky's novel. Indeed, if the world of *The Brothers Karamazov* differs from that of *The Comely Cook* in its established police presence, then it also differs from the worlds of *Bleak House* and *Moll Flanders*, in which the police represent everything that necessarily impedes personal fulfillment. The jury trial in particular is far from a stultifying enactment within the novel: as the occasion of Dmitry's admission of guilt and

acceptance of punishment and also of Ivan's confession, it is the site of a certain amount of regeneration and correction for both brothers, not because of, but in spite of, its official and hard-headed efforts of Western-style civil correction—which are consistently undermined by more organically Russian principles.¹² The jury is a veritable cross-section of simple Russian society—boasting four petty officials, two merchants, a handful of tradesmen, and even several peasants—and it functions in direct contrast to the two effete Westernizers arguing the case. It is also their version of Russian justice, in the chapter entitled “Our Peasants Stood Up for Themselves,” that prevails. (The irony here is that the Russian jury rules for conviction: but rather than a failure of empathy, the decision represents not only the recognition of Dmitry's spiritual, if not his legal, guilt, but also the intuition that it is only through penance that Dmitry can achieve genuine regeneration.) In the Russian context, the court of law and the police are converted into purveyors of spiritual truth precisely in their failures as temporal authorities, and they usher in the achievement of *obraz* precisely by means of their own *bezobrazie*.

But by the same token, it is only, paradoxically, under the auspices of the court of law that such moral turnabouts can take place, for as Dmitry says “never, never would I

¹² Rosenshield points out that Dostoevsky's *Diary* entries betray ambivalence toward the judicial reforms rather than evincing total vitriol, and that he even at times speaks favorably about the jury trial. This may have been because the Russian jury trial had certain characteristics that Dostoevsky might have viewed positively. As Harriet Murav writes, though the post-reform Russian legal system was composed of Western borrowings, “the ultimate product was unique,” especially in the nature of its jury trials, which functioned under a more forgiving ethic than those of Western Europe (*Legal Fictions*). The Russian jury was free to rule that a suspect who was found guilty deserved forgiveness, and in general it was famous for its high rate of acquittals, even of defendants who confessed to the crime. In this way, “the link between crime and punishment, while not severed, could be and was imagined differently” (62). Even the official rhetoric surrounding the Russian courts was infused with the language of spirituality and compassion. Murav reminds us that Alexander II's manifesto introducing the jury trial to the Russian public began with a quotation from the New Testament—“Let justice and mercy reign in your courts”—and that the law outlining trial procedure instructed the jurors to vote according to their “inner conviction” (56). Murav even suggests that the adoption of the jury trial in Russia, insofar as it demonstrated an “orientation toward multiplicity and open-endedness,” enacted a Dostoevsky-like repudiation of singular, monologic authority (59). Some of the terms that Murav employs to describe the Russian jury trial—“heteroglossia” and “carnivalization”—are taken straight from Dostoevsky criticism.

have risen by myself!” (PV 509, PSS 14:458). The prison is similarly the prelude to a more thorough healing for Dmitry, since it is a portal—or gateway—to what will likely be his future salvation in Siberia: to Dostoevsky, as we know from *Crime and Punishment*, an airy expanse, a location of spiritual catharsis, and a paradoxical place of release that places it in direct opposition to all the forms of enclosure that end our English novels. Of course, we cannot be sure, at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, that Dmitry is heading to Siberia, since we are presented with the equally likely option of his escape to America—a shirking of responsibility and a refusal of punishment that readers often see as a misstep on his path to regeneration. But perhaps, as opposed to Moll’s trips to the New World—a designation that, for her, is genuinely paradoxical, since in Defoe’s novel America is a country in which renewal is ontologically out of the question—even Dmitry’s Westward escape would not, in his future life, rule out the possibility of his eventual recovery. In other words, the promise enshrined in this epithet might very well, in another turn of the screw, prove to be accurate, in whichever territory he might land. *Even America*, for Dmitry, could be a land of promise and a New World.

I would like now to return to questions of narrative composition in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Bleak House*. Scholars have long noted the peculiarities of the narrator of Dostoevsky’s last novel, as well as the various forms of irregularity and inconsistency embodied in the narrative perspective. One of the most conspicuous of the narrator’s idiosyncrasies is the apparently double perspective from which he operates. As Belknap points out, the narrator is, in some sense, an embodied personage in the world of the novel: “not a featureless medium” (*Structure* 78), but rather someone whose “physical

presence” (79) is periodically suggested during the narrated events and who, though “his traits attract little attention,” does bear certain known characteristics (for example, his sex is discernable from the endings of adjectives and past verbs). But at the same time, he also “stands aloof from the interwoven strands of relationship and interaction” (78) within the novel—indeed, “he is the unobserved observer” (80)—and he certainly performs narrative feats that any distinct, narrating self would be wildly ill-equipped to manage, such as the probing of characters’ thoughts and emotions. The narrator in this way is simultaneously an impersonal and an embodied teller, operating from an objective and a subjective standpoint at one and the same time—a deft straddling that is given narrative form by his practice of employing, at different times, either the first-person or third-person voice.¹³

Perhaps the fundamental structural difference between *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Bleak House*, then, is the extent to which the former unites into one persona the two narrative positions that are kept perfectly distinct and mutually isolated in the latter. This can be quite a confusing conflation; as Belknap writes, the narrator’s “leaps from one kind of awareness to another” violate the assumption, articulated by Wayne Booth and his predecessors, that narrative coherence relies on the narrator’s possessing a “point of

¹³ For a comprehensive and illuminating discussion of the narrator, see Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov* 69-77. See also Rosenshield, who treats the narrative modes as distinct narrators: an “impersonal, omniscient” narrator who recounts the conversations and thoughts of the characters, and an “observer-chronicler” who (much like the narrator, in one of his aspects, in *Demons*) is situated within the novel’s world. According to Rosenshield, at the beginning of the novel the observer-chronicler dominates until the second book; the objective narrator then takes over until the trial scene, “where a narrator similar to but not identical to the personalized narrator of the first two books dominates” (158); the omniscient narrator then resumes control in the epilogue. But, though it is certainly possible to see these narrative modes as the province of separate narrators, the novel itself, unlike *Bleak House*, draws no clear distinction, and no literary device is present to explain the divisions.

view [that is]...stable enough to give him a continuous identity. If the author's purpose demands a changing viewpoint, he must use some device to explain the change" (Belknap 81)—thus the "device" of the dual narrative in *Bleak House*. Yet as we have seen, the orderliness of Dickens's novel is achieved at quite an expense. Perhaps, in this sense, the somewhat ragged and formally unmotivated melding of the two modes within one persona in *The Brothers Karamazov* can be considered a promising act of synthesis. While the alternations between the first- and third-person voices in Dickens's novel only accentuate the imperfections of both—with the objective narrator lacking Esther's warmth and Esther lacking the omniscient teller's information and perspective—the integration of these points of view in Dostoevsky's narrator both enlarges the scope and remediates the deficiencies of each. As readers, we keep both narrative modes in mind even as the narrator switches between them, benefitting from the farsightedness of third-person narration and the personal observations of first-person mode; in this sense, as Thompson says, "Dostoevsky creates a complementary narrative system wherein he compensates for the limitations of the one with the advantages of the other" (*Memory* 27). And if the rigid narrative split in *Bleak House* manifests the insurmountable division between the individual self and the larger world, then the fluid exchanges in *The Brothers Karamazov* represent their potentially harmonious coexistence. To be sure, the first-person perspective in *The Brother Karamazov* does not give us insights into the private realm the way Esther's narrative does. But to the extent that the private mode regards the textual universe from the perspective of human history, and the public mode views it under the aspect of eternity, their synthesis might even be taken as a formal embodiment of the proximity—or the periodic union—of this world and the next.

This is not to say that Dostoevsky's composite narrator presents a world that is coherent or empirically precise. In his personal voice he is strikingly frank about the gaps in his knowledge and the incomplete nature of the information he possesses (what Vetlovskaia calls his "characteristic 'I don't know'" [*Poetika* 21]), and we have already noticed the novel's various textual lacunae: the conspicuous omission of the murder scene in the chapter titled "In the Dark," as well as the more subtle demurral on the part of the narrator when it comes to Dmitry's discarding of the amulet, which he describes as occurring "somewhere in the square" and also "in the dark" (PV 497, PSS 14:447). (In fact, the entire sequence of events connected to the amulet—Dmitry's decision to save half of Katerina Ivanovna's money intact and on his person, his filching of his landlady's bonnet, and his conversion of the rag into the amulet for that purpose—is more or less shrouded in darkness, and it is only outlined for us, haphazardly and vaguely, by Dmitry himself during his testimony.) These obscurities certainly highlight the disparities between the narrative thrust of this novel and that of *Bleak House*, whose goal, in both its first- and its third-person modes, is the achievement of full revelation, integration, and enlightenment, and which strenuously attempts to conceal its own inevitable omissions. But in this sense as well the blatant fragmentation and lack of precision in *The Brothers Karamazov* are the sources of both metaphysical and textual potential. As Thompson writes, "these lapses have often to be interpreted as metaphysical loopholes through which mystery, indeterminacy and transcendence enter the novel's world," but they are also a source of "new and unexpected meanings" (*Memory* 47-8). It is in these moments of factual uncertainty that we are granted access to higher truths.

Indeed, it is in part the narrator's refusal to illuminate the two series of events that occur in the dark that allows the reader to experience, affectively, the novel's governing ethic of "all are guilty for all," with the equal amounts of blame and forgiveness that this principle allots to each member of the community. Our ultimate uncertainty regarding the identity of the murderer—or, at least, our lack of first-hand evidence—makes us unable to absolve Dmitry of his father's death with absolute assurance, just as it allows us to extend a measure of compassion to Smerdyakov. Perhaps all of these narrative faults might be considered versions of Dmitry's inability to say for certain where he procured the amulet or to assign a precise label to the material, an absentmindedness that lends the object a certain imaginative malleability and that reflects its inherent capacity for transfiguration. Or perhaps, more fittingly, they are versions of the narrator's own consigning of Dmitry to "such and such a prison": a vagueness that liberates the convict from the prison houses of determinism and fact just as the empirical accuracy and verisimilitude of Defoe's narrator contribute to the certainty of Moll's entrapment.

All of which is to say that the narrator's faults are much of what lends the novel its dynamism. Indeed, another peculiarity of the narrator, in his personalized mode, is the gap between the "I" that lived through and witnessed many of the events and the older, somewhat wiser "I" that composes the text from memory. As Thompson points out, while an omniscient narrator "has nothing to learn," a "remembering" narrator can "learn from the past" (*Memory* 49)—and surely a blatantly non-omniscient, imperfectly remembering narrator can learn from the past all the more. It is worth remembering here that the gap between the witnessing subject and the reflective speaker is the characteristic division of spiritual autobiography—though if this novel might be understood as the

narrator's conversion tale, it reflects an unfinished process, since the narrator never does correct his most significant moral flaw, which is the withholding of dignity and significance to Smerdyakov.

In this context, the subject of synecdochic vision comes in again as a narrative and ethical failing of which the narrator himself is guilty. One example in particular may help elucidate not only this point but also the mechanics of this constantly morphing text. When the narrator describes Grushenka's "hot lips and eyes" as Alyosha enters her drawing room during his visit with Rakitin, he betrays the synecdochic gaze of the realist (PV 346, PSS 14:313). His perspective here mirrors that of Alyosha himself (who is not, as we have seen, untouched by this father's sin of lechery) and it also constitutes a kind of visual rape—an objectification of the female that Nina Pelikan Straus calls "the ultimate masculinist crime" in Dostoevsky (5). But, as we have also seen, the worst lapses in the novel are frequently the opportunities for the greatest growth: Alyosha's meeting with Grushenka quickly turns into the communing of souls rather than bodies, and it is followed shortly thereafter by his experience in "Cana of Galilee." His altered vision of Grushenka after their moment of ecstatic union even brings about a kind of discomfiting flicker of self-knowledge in the reader, since we recognize with chagrin that her "hot lips and eyes" may have referred to her spiritual ardor all along, just as her posture—"lying as if in anguish and impatience," "as though she were expecting someone"—may be a description not of sexual arousal but of mystical expectancy (PV 346, PSS 14:313). In other words, Alyosha's altered perspective on Grushenka sets off a chain reaction of improvement that retrospectively corrects the reader's error. But it also, implicitly, corrects that of the narrator himself, since it is the narrator, after all, who is the

implicit witness of the scene and the conduit of everything we know about these characters. Admittedly, this conclusion is something of an epistemological conundrum, but it is one that is perhaps inherent in a narrative whose guiding consciousness does not, on the one hand, have a distinct personality or identity but does, on the other hand, demonstrate a shifting and correctable point of view. If this is a narrator and a narrative that continue to suffer from realism, in other words, then they are also constantly evolving, always moving toward realism in a higher sense.

In 1882, as Dostoevsky scholars know well, Nikolai Mikhailovsky published an article charging Dostoevsky with sadism and possession of a “cruel talent.” Other prominent readers, both Western and Russian, have followed suit with their criticisms. Maksim Gorky claimed that “all of Dostoevsky’s work is a generalization on the negative attributes and qualities of the Russian national character” (quoted in Jackson, *Dialogues* 126); D.H. Lawrence complained that with each successive reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* he found the novel increasingly depressing because it seemed, “alas,” more and more “drearily true to life” (99-100; quoted in Miller, *Worlds of the Novel* 8).¹⁴

It is no secret that Dostoevsky, at various times in his life, entertained some pretty repugnant ideas, and many readers are accordingly uncomfortable with certain aspects of his works. *The Brothers Karamazov* undoubtedly articulates a number of vicious prejudices, and this element sits awkwardly with the author’s appeal for universal compassion and all-inclusiveness. It is also a dark novel filled with suffering, despair,

¹⁴ Lawrence also claimed that the only Russian writer to offer a “real positive view of life” was Vasily Rozanov, whose views about healthy sexuality apparently appealed to him (quoted in Kaye, *Dostoevsky and English Modernism* 48).

and the ongoing troubles of the real world, and despite the promising synthesis of real and ideal that the text holds out, the novel presents no triumphant accomplishment. And so if the greater part of this exploration of *The Brothers Karamazov* has presented the argument for the pro, I would like in what follows to present, at least in outline, the brief for the contra.

One of the sad truths of the novel, despite the multivalent portrait of Grushenka that we examined above, is the exclusion of women from its vision of sublimity. The final scene pictures a conspicuously all-male fellowship, and though two of the novel's crucial female characters play an important role in Ilyusha's funeral—the flowers on the boy's coffin have been supplied by Lise and Katerina Ivanovna—they participate in this valedictory gesture of renewal only from a distance. In many ways women in the novel are sources of uplift without being the beneficiaries of it, with the book's mechanisms of inheritance testifying to this injustice. If the Karamazov brothers are extended the possibility of grace in part because they are not only their father's sons but also their mothers'—the heirs not only of paternal corruption but also of maternal bounty¹⁵—then these two women end their days having been veritably drained by their marriages to Fyodor Pavlovich. If much of the thrust of the novel is instruction in maternal qualities of mercy and compassion—such that the novel's “good” fathers are those who have best learned to act like mothers—then the mothers themselves, who are pictured mostly in positions of maternal suffering and who appear unable to improve their children's lot except (as in Alyosha's mother's case) from beyond the grave, seem to have been given

¹⁵ Alyosha's mother is a woman of “phenomenal humility and meekness” (PV 13, PSS 14:13), and the memory he retains of her love is perhaps the source of many of his better qualities; the monetary inheritance to which Mitya clings as a birthright comes from his mother, who was robbed of her riches by her husband.

more than their share of empathic grief. Even the novel's primary means of recovery and the achievement of peace—faith in God—is an unsuccessful curative for mothers, for as Knapp writes “faith...in Dostoevsky's book, does not permanently cure hysteria in suffering mothers” (“Mothers and Sons” 47). For mothers, piety does nothing to mitigate the fact of a sick or dead child, a truth that these women must constantly accept at the same time that they are trapped in a posture of perpetual revolt against a universe that allows such horrors.

Daughters in *The Brothers Karamazov* do not fare much better. Straus points out that all of the young women in the novel, especially Katerina Ivanovna and Grushenka, are not only the victims of sexual objectification, but they are also just as oppressed as the novel's sons are by patriarchal authority. In a sense, they are even implicated in the parricide, for as Straus writes, “each woman has a motive for wanting Fyodor Karamazov dead,” since “the ‘father’ symbolizes the order that frames and represses her” (138). The difference is that the women are not included in the novel's vision of how this conflict might be settled. And though the text may offer Lise the possibility of recovery, her embroilment with her mother remains similarly unresolved. Though the novel imagines the possibility of sons coming to terms with their fathers, then, it is not entirely clear on how mothers and daughters could solve the similar problem that, across the sea, Dickens and Defoe took to represent the human predicament. (It is also worth noting that while the scene of Alyosha's “rising” is pictured in the novel, Lise's literal rising from her chair is hearsay only—perhaps an indication of how much harder this was for the author to imagine, if we are to interpret this particular textual apophysis pessimistically.)

According to Straus the reader might well be left with the final impression that *The Brothers Karamazov* “has not one but two endings,” and that in the last two chapters (“The Lie Becomes Truth” and “Ilyushechka’s Funeral”) “polyphony explodes to tell differently gendered stories.” “While Alyosha’s life solution inscribed by the boy’s last ‘hurrah’ encourages a traditional ending in which parricidal impulses are resolved,” the “other” last chapter—in which we see Grushenka and Katerina Ivanovna for the last time, antagonists until the bitter end—“keeps alive the questions about patriarchy and its consequences” (133). If Dostoevsky’s last novel tells two stories—a primary one about fathers, sons, and brothers, as incarnated in the title, and a more quiet, subterranean tale about mothers, daughters, and sisters—there is certainly a discrepancy in the tenor of their finales. Even the unfinished nature of these two chronicles is conceived differently: if, in the story of the brothers Karamazov, unfinalizability is a source of hope, then for the story of the sisters Karamazov the lack of resolution is a signal of enduring problems—troubles that then, inevitably, infect our vision of the whole. Whatever sense of an ending that is conveyed by the “Ilyushechka’s Funeral” chapter is compromised by the erasure of women from the text since the boys, however elevated their emotional and spiritual state, can celebrate the bliss of communion only when the women are safely out of sight.

Perhaps part of the problem is the very persona of the male narrator, whose perspective governs the entire work and whose voice may overwhelm, or at least make somewhat muted, those of the female characters—almost in the same way, in fact, that the words of the omniscient narrator of *Bleak House* are louder than Esther’s complaints. This is not to say that women are unrepresented in *The Brothers Karamazov*, or that they

are weak characters. But though they might be a striking presence in the novel, they certainly are not granted equal amounts of narrative space. Even Dostoevskian polyphony, in other words, may not be “poly” enough. This deficiency may very well, counterintuitively, testify to the conceptual all-importance of the women within the work (in the sense that in an “apophatic” text what is left out is the most significant), but it is one that can ultimately do very little for the women themselves.

As in Dickens, then, Dostoevsky’s vision of a bright future may be founded on lasting problems, and one is left with the troubling notion that the enduring distress has something to do with the perennial woes of women. Nevertheless, unlike Esther, the women in this novel—Katerina Ivanovna, Grushenka, and Lise—are at least provided with some glimmer of hope. Though they certainly are lagging behind the men on the path to grace, they are not ontologically precluded from getting there eventually. Perhaps in this sense we would do well to approach *The Brothers Karamazov* with the understanding that though fulfillment, self-realization, and happiness may be open possibilities for one and all, some of us have a very long time to wait indeed.¹⁶ By the same token, perhaps *Bleak House*’s inability to support even these tempered hopes makes its austerity all the more striking.

Other distressing features of the novel, however, are harder to reconcile because, unlike the “woman question,” they reveal a troubling lack of sympathy on the part of the author. Readers are often appalled by the anti-Semitism evident in the novel, hints of which are perceptible even in the context of its ethic of all-inclusive love. As Susan

¹⁶ For a discussion of the question of just “how long... we [should] be willing to wait for grace to descend” (156) in Dostoevsky’s novel, see Caryl Emerson, “Zosima’s ‘Mysterious Visitor’: Again Bakhtin on Dostoevsky, and Dostoevsky on Heaven and Hell” in *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*.

McReynolds writes, this prejudice became part of a complex ideology by which, conveniently, Dostoevsky managed to fuse his inborn hostility toward the Jews with his doubts about Christianity: his discomfort with the Crucifixion as the means to salvation and specifically his “heretical perception of the Crucifixion as a child sacrifice” (8). According to this point of view, whatever emotional and spiritual deliverance Dostoevsky found in Russian Orthodoxy, and whatever liberatory function its precepts play in his last novel, he could only understand the Christian story as based on the sacrifice of a son by his father, a vision of God’s “willingness to trade in the suffering of children or other innocents” that was unendurable. The neat solution, therefore, was to “transfer...this guilt to the Jews” (8-9)—a displacement that led to the caricature, in Dostoevsky’s later works, of the mercenary merchant Jew that is frankly embarrassing in its banality. Freud, for one, found Dostoevsky’s small-mindedness—his “submission both to the temporal and the spiritual authorities,” his “veneration for the Tsar and the God of the Christians,” and his “narrow Russian nationalism”—to be “position[s] which lesser minds have reached with less effort.” In this manner, says Freud, Dostoevsky “threw away the chance of becoming a...liberator of humanity; instead, he appointed himself its gaoler” (4).¹⁷

Perhaps, then, the basic fault of *The Brothers Karamazov* is that its final vision of transcendence, and the founding of the exalted fellowship, is based on the death of a child—in this case, Ilyusha. And the notion of a child dying at the behest of the father, a situation that is the reverse of parricide, was to Dostoevsky both inherent in the Christ story and too appalling to embrace: hence the scapegoating of child-torturing Jews as the

¹⁷ Freud did not stop here, concluding that Dostoevsky’s failures were rooted in his own unresolved parricidal complex. Freud, incidentally, was not immune to chauvinistic essentializing of his own, calling this neurosis “a primitive psychic legacy closer to consciousness in the Russian people than elsewhere,” which made Dostoevsky “the typical Russian” (quoted in Rice 11).

perpetrators whose crimes are too evil to be forgiven. The defeat is also, more fancifully, manifested in the sad irony that, despite Dostoevsky's hope that Russia's promise lay in its unpoliced disarray, the condition toward which the country was in fact moving was for all intents and purposes a police state.¹⁸

This is not to say that Dostoevsky did not envision that inevitability as well, and indeed his prophetic gift has more often than not been associated with his warnings about the ruinous consequences of Russian radicalism. At all times, Dostoevsky was able to imagine both uplift and degradation, and he was committed to the idea that the possibility of the former should never blind us to the reality of the latter. In one *Diary* entry—written in connection with the contemporary Kroneberg case, in which the defense attorney maintained that the child victim had not been tortured, as alleged, because she did not retain any markings of abuse—Dostoevsky made a striking argument. “In Siberia, in the convicts' wards in the hospital,” he wrote indignantly,

I chanced to see the backs of prison inmates immediately after they had been subjected to flogging...after five hundred, one thousand and two thousand blows at a time...And here is a fact: these punished men got discharged from the hospital on the sixth...day after the punishment, because during that period *the back would almost completely heal up*, save for some minor—comparatively speaking—remnants; however, after ten days, for example, everything would have disappeared without leaving any traces.... I will ask you this question: even though the...sticks [used to beat the victim in the Kroneberg case] did not threaten her life and caused her not the slightest injury, isn't such a punishment cruel and doesn't it constitute torture?” (PSS 22:64-5; quoted in Rosenshield 38-9)

As Rosenshield writes, for Dostoevsky, in this instance, “the absence of permanent harm or nasty scars in no way proves the absence of torture” (39-40)—a sobering notion for any reader (as I admittedly am) who wants to see the absence of scarring in *The Brothers*

¹⁸ I would like to thank Liza Knapp for this idea.

Karamazov (unlike the irremediable damage to Esther's face) as a sign of hope. Even the miracle of future bodily recovery that is held out for Dostoevsky's characters in no way negates the suffering of their present (nor does it negate the possibility—or even the probability—of future pain). As Nancy Ruttenburg has remarked, to say that “nothing is foreclosed” is merely another way of saying that “everything is permitted.”¹⁹ But this is only to acknowledge that healing, integration, and transcendence in Dostoevsky are, like everything else, “палка о двух концах,” a stick with two ends.

¹⁹ Response to an earlier version of this paper, presented at the ASEEEES 2010 national conference in Los Angeles.

Conclusion

A Glance Forward

I would like to conclude with some final remarks about the project of this dissertation and some thoughts about how it might be continued.

If *The Brothers Karamazov*, as I have been conceiving of it, is the apotheosis of Russian realism, then we very well may ask: where is the great triumph? What is the special offering of a realistic vision that ends, as we have seen, with some suppressed failure? The answer, I would argue, lies in even the tiny, “wee” [“с малым”] bit of non-failure that the novel offers, the small seed [“семя, зерно”] of hope, however that seed is manifested in the Russian realist canon as a whole—as sideshadowing, unfinalizability, metaphoric realism “in the higher sense,” or other formulations of how Russian novels offer alternatives that extend beyond the text itself—and however we understand the object of that hope: as the renewal and healing of bodies and of souls; as the integration of a harmonious collective; as the achievement of narrative cohesion and form. Another example is Robin Feuer Miller’s conception of the “zigzag” shape of *The Idiot*, by which fortunes continuously plummet and soar, but a fall never precludes a future rise—a narrative shape that might properly be said to apply to *The Comely Cook* as well. As Martona tells us in a proclamation whose clauses could easily multiply and zigzag without end, “man is born into the world to behold glory, honor, and wealth, to taste of joy and pleasure, to experience woe, grief, and sorrow” (28)—and to behold glory, honor, and wealth again, perhaps in this world, and certainly in the next. For it may be said of both of the Russian novels explored here that it is their faith (whether it is explicit, as in Dostoevsky, or submerged, as in Chulkov) in the eventuality of a spiritual homecoming,

coupled with their culturally distinctive notions about the capaciousness of material reality, that makes possible glimpses of sublimity in the here and now. Especially in comparison to the world-views of Dickens and Defoe as I have construed them—and their novels in which the reality principle ensures a predetermined ending, characters are denied significant change or growth, and plots cycle stagnantly around their own beginnings—the zigzagging course of the Russian realist vision, whether it is one of Dostoevskian transcendence or just Chulkovian anarchy, provides us with grounds for hope even in the faulty world we are born into, however slight they may be and however momentary and reversible the achievement is.

Nevertheless, there is no question that, as an analysis of the Russian and English realist traditions as they developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the foregoing exploration has been far from comprehensive, and it has been carried out more in the spirit of inquiry and experimentation than conclusiveness. An examination of this sort inevitably has limitations, especially because of its focus on two specific Russian-English pairings. I have also concentrated primarily on the close readings of the novels themselves, rather than elaborating on the framing argument presented in the Introduction. (To use the vocabulary applied to the realist novel itself, I have been more attentive to and interested in the “life” of the project as opposed to the “pattern.”) And though I have tried to indicate how other nineteenth-century Russian texts and authors (Tolstoy, Gogol) might fit in to the conversation, two other names whose works are particularly relevant to the discussion have not appeared here. Especially in the context of a thesis that presents Russian realism as a literary tradition that is anti-empiricist and formally anarchic, Chekhov and Turgenev stand out as possible counterexamples.

Chekhov, for one, has both been criticized for “registering phenomena with the mindless impersonality of a camera or a tape recorder” (Hagan 409) and hailed as “the ego-ideal of Russian literature” (Finke 1).¹ Turgenev, similarly, became an object of scorn to Dostoevsky, but was praised by Henry James for his “sharp outlines[,] ...concision,” and “impartiality” (“Ivan Turgenieff” 243, 216) and by Eugene de Vogüé for his “intellectual discipline[,]...clarity...[and] precision” (qualities, he added, that were “rare among prose writers of his country”) (*Le Roman russe* 197; quoted in Belknap, “Novelistic Technique” 233), and he was called the “genius of measure” by D.S. Merezhkovsky (quoted in Bialyi 5).

Often the debates about these authors have focused on the quality of Russian “maximalism” that is so often attributed to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and others,² as opposed to Chekhov’s and Turgenev’s admirable (or irritating) self-restraint. Though all of these characterizations run the risk of being considered essentialist and reductive, these questions have become a staple of Slavacist literary criticism. And so, with the acknowledged risk of endorsing cultural essentialism, I would like to suggest that if there is indeed something endemically “maximalist” about Russian realism, then these other writers can also be examined profitably through this lens—and that their works can also be sifted for the kinds of seeds that generate the hopes of their more perfervid countrymen.

Fanger, for example, writes that “Chekhov, too, makes maximalist demands on art in the service of something beyond it, though he expressed this maximalism

¹ Chekhov, of course, was not a novelist. But his stories have often been seen as successors to the great nineteenth-century Russian novels, and he himself as the continuer of the Russian realist project if only, as Fanger writes, “through his rejections” (“Russianness 51).

² See e.g., Jackson, “The Turgenev Question,” 303; “The Root and the Flower” 228.

paradoxically, by choosing the...short story—and then shortening it even further” (“Russianness” 51-2). Perhaps one can take Fanger’s observation even further and suggest that Chekhov’s pronouncement that “once a story is written, one should cross out its beginning and end,” since “that is where we writers of fiction falsify most of all” (quoted in Fanger 51), speaks to the quintessentially Russian search for formal freedom as much as it does to his own commitment to brevity and reserve. Some of Chekhov’s most elliptical and economic works are also the ones that struggle most palpably with their own forms of enclosure. “The Man in the Case,” for instance, a ten-page tale, is a “strikingly well-balanced” narrative and perhaps even “a model short story” with symmetrical opening and closing scenes (Conrad 400); the hero, Belikov, the eponymous encased man, is intent on behaving as a “thorough gentleman,” stops up his ears with cotton wool, and equips himself in all weather with galoshes and an umbrella. But he also, notably, is thoroughly content only when he is lying in his coffin—where, as the narrator tells us, he had finally “achieved his ideal” (PSS 10:52)—certainly a suggestion of some ambivalence enshrined in the story regarding matters of composure and form. Similarly Chekhov, a physician for whom literature, according to his own protestations, was only a pastime, often portrayed doctors—those purveyors of empiricism and proponents of “an objective view of things” (“Pripadok” PSS 7:209)—as cold monsters. Admittedly moments of uninhibited bliss, joy, sorrow, or empathetic pain are rare in his works. But there is one sublime example in the scene of conversion, fellowship, and watery catharsis in “Rothschild’s Fiddle,” in which the anti-Semite Yakov Ivanov, on his deathbed, bequeaths his fiddle to the Jew Rothschild, and they weep tears that are passed on ad infinitum to every person who hears Rothschild’s fiddle from then on. That this

tale in particular, with its explosive Russian energies, has frequently been read alongside *The Brothers Karamazov* (and that it has even been seen as gesturing toward a remediation of the anti-Semitism that marks Dostoevsky's novel) should perhaps come as no surprise.

Such undisciplined passion might be more difficult to find in Turgenev, the writer whose “perfect proportion[.]...vigilant but never theoretic intelligence[.]...[and] austere art of omission” inspired T.S. Eliot to identify his art as the kind that “in the end proves most satisfying to the civilized mind” (“Turgenev” 167). Certainly, *Fathers and Sons* presents an extremely polite version of the primal struggle announced in the title, with the various battles between biological parent and child, Nikolai and Arkady, courteously displaced onto other figures. (The incest-inflected theme of competition is rather squeamishly transferred from Arkady to his friend Bazarov—who at one point kisses Fenichka, Nikolai's young mistress—and the resulting duel between members of the older and younger generation is doubly displaced, enacted by Bazarov and Pavel Petrovich, Nikolai's brother). Instead of parricide, we are given a lovely conclusion with a kind of double marriage—Nikolai to Fenichka, and Arkady to Katya, who is, respectably, an outsider to the family muddle—that might have made Jane Austen proud. The four figures end the tale harmoniously settled on Nikolai's estate, the management of which has been smoothly transferred to the now-compliant Arkady.

But surely, the vision of a son and a father marrying simultaneously is a disturbing proposition (Austen's form of double marriage—the simultaneous wedding of two sisters—is a much more masked statement of ambivalence), just as the transgression of class boundaries enacted in the union of Nikolai to his former servant Fenichka is

significantly more radical than anything in an Austen novel. By the same token, the price that must be paid for domestic settlement and national reconciliation (the literal ejection of Pavel and Bazarov from the family scene and from Russia through, respectively, immigration and death) is a heightened version of the necessary exclusion of dangerous energies that accompanies the achievement domestic bliss and civil order in Austen (at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia, at least, gets to stay in England). Turgenev, in other words, may be the most civilized and “European” of the nineteenth-century Russian realists; but even his tightly wrapped novels burst their own seams rather conspicuously, at least in comparison to a more subdued and resigned English counterpart.

Numerous images that are strewn throughout Turgenev’s works might be taken as evidence of the intensity of the conflict. The straightjacket that binds the vicious criminal Tropmann in the late essay “The Execution of Tropmann,” for example, is a variant of Pavel Petrovich’s well-tailored costume in *Fathers and Sons*, both of them surely objective correlatives of their works’ various struggles with the constraints of form (the extremity of the former image perhaps a reaction to the increased demands of verisimilitude imposed by the essay genre). The scene of the sexually abstinent Madame Odintsova dramatically hurling open a window in *Fathers and Sons*—letting the air rush in to her meticulously ordered abode, as it were—betrays the fantasy of allowing the seams to burst, whether or not these transgressions are ever genuinely enacted within the text (or indeed by the author himself, whose decades-long love triangle with an opera singer and her husband was famously platonic, at least on the part of Turgenev). Perhaps the closest Turgenev comes to allowing these fantasies free range is his late novella “First Love,” in which the young narrator, sixteen years old and deep in the process of

acculturation (his tutor is a Frenchman and he has recently acquired his very own necktie and tailcoat), finds himself a player in a seedy set of sexually charged enactments going on in the house next door—surely a School of Love of its own, though the tone is sinister rather than ebullient, and even these potentially riotous adult games are laden with rules, regulations, and even a master of ceremonies. In the end, whatever the anarchic energies and whatever the longings we uncover in his works—for freedom from restraint, for communion and consummation—Turgenev could only go so far.

It may be with Chekhov and Turgenev, then, that the Russian realist tradition comes closest to meeting up with the English, though both authors, I would maintain, remain firmly planted on their native soil. In the twentieth century, though, we see a surprising chiasmus in the English and Russian novel, with the locus of worldly encumbrance and of spiritual transcendence virtually trading places—at least as the two traditions are viewed through the lens of two authors whose works, I believe, make them a natural addition to this project. The novels of Virginia Woolf and Andrei Platonov are indisputably modernist continuations of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, even as they express their legacy via subversion, or even inversion. Platonov has been seen as turning his forebears' assumptions on their head in extremely specific ways, from what Olga Meerson has called his device of *neostranenie* (the reversal, as she says, of Tolstoy's *ostranenie*, or “estrangement”³); to the mood of insouciance and even boredom that pervades his texts (a total lack of surprise at the world's absurd offerings that stands in opposition to all the shock and scandal we find in Dostoevsky); to the uncompromising literalism and materialism that govern his works

³ See her *Svobodnaia veshch'*: *poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova*.

(the extent to which in Platonov abstract concepts—spirit, time, thought, emotion—are tangible substances, an inversion of the conception of matter, on the part of his realist predecessors, as infused with ideation). Surely, all these reversals are connected to the grand inversion imposed by Socialist materialism, and they reflect (with considerable pessimism) the underpinnings of a Soviet revolution that converted metaphysical yearnings into explicit political goals and promised the realization of utopia through communal human labor. Bereft of the divine spark that permeated material substances for his Orthodox forebears, matter for Platonov becomes precisely what it was in Dickens: inert, mechanical, and too set in its ways to be transfigured by human endeavor. The physical labor recorded in *Kotlovan* exacts a heavy toll: it wears out the very human bodies whose integrity it aspires to safeguard, as the House for all Proletariat whose foundation the workers are building proves to be a vortex of entropy and resistance that drains them of energy and life. The quest in *Chevengur*—the literal discovery of a utopian home through travel on horseback—ends in a similar failure, as the novel moves from picaresque, episodic time, to static circling once its heroes locate Chevengur, and then back to fragmented picaresque at the end.

Woolf also reached for an artistic vision to counter that of her predecessors, though hers was based in the materialism and the “orderly solidity” of the Victorian and Edwardian novel (quoted in Whitworth 113)—and her success in doing so, though certainly the mark of her own genius, was indisputably aided by her readings in and passion for the Russians. In this sense, if the comparison of Woolf and Platonov figures them both as successors of the nineteenth-century Russian realists (and perhaps especially of Dostoevsky), then the most faithful embodiment of that legacy was

produced, interestingly enough, across the sea. Indeed, *To the Lighthouse* inscribes a triumphant overcoming. It may take ten years for James to get to the lighthouse, but the arrival does not occur too late, for despite the deaths of his mother and siblings, it is still a grand accomplishment. By the same token Lily Briscoe's eventual completion of her painting and her expression of an unconventional, abstract vision counters the various prohibitions placed on her, just as the satisfaction that the child James experiences while cutting out pictures of kitchen appliances from the Army and Navy catalogue provides an aesthetic alternative to the world's various burdens: to capitalist materialism, to material entropy (of the kind that will overtake the house during "Time Passes," confounding even the housekeeper Mrs. McNab; or the kind that will overtake his brother, Andrew, who dies during his own Army encounter), and even to the heady, overbearing philosophizing of his father, itself a paradoxical version of material entropy (for when the abandoned house falls into disarray, it is surely an enactment of "a kitchen table...when you're not there" [17]). That these moments of transcendence are modest, and that they are enacted with a classically English lack of fanfare, testifies to the ways in which Woolf can be seen as having merged Russian aspirations with the British temperament. But, to end in the spirit of Dostoevsky himself, these are all matters for another novel.

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