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# The Spectral Body: Theology and Economy in Dostoevsky and Melville's Fiction

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Max Gordon

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## ABSTRACT

The Spectral Body: Theology and Economy in Dostoevsky and Melville's Fiction

This dissertation examines the intersections and tensions between religion and economy in Dostoevsky and Melville's fiction. I argue that Christian theology of the body—as the site of both salvation and economic production—is at the center of their concern. These two profoundly theological writers were, moreover, unaware of each other, and, moreover were immersed in two different religious traditions with very different attitudes toward capitalist development in the nineteenth century: American Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy. Despite this, there are uncanny parallels between them: comparing them reveals that, despite their ostensible differences, both wrestled with the same economic metaphorical underpinnings of Christianity, e.g. sin as debt, salvation as redemption, faith as credit. These economic metaphors are often, though not exclusively, centered on the body: the crucified body of Christ as a "ransom payment" for human sin is, as Saint Paul writes, a sort of debt transferred onto our own bodies, which are, therefore, not truly "ours." Both Dostoevsky and Melville have characters who perceive material, embodied existence itself as a sort of divine or cosmic debt.

One of the uncanny parallels between Melville and Dostoevsky is their concern with "spectral bodies" or "spectral flesh"—a paradoxical sense that material flesh encloses or coincides with its own ghost-like negation. My second and third chapters are largely devoted to this phenomenon. Both writers created characters who are caught somewhere between material flesh and ethereal ghostliness, or torn between longing for ecstatic bodily human contact and disembodied transcendence, or spectral precisely in their fleshy materiality. I situate both writers in their respective religious traditions to demonstrate that this phenomenon of spectral flesh is an extension of theological attitudes toward the body coming into contact with the capitalist

development in the nineteenth century. Both writers perceived that, under this emerging capitalist economy, flesh and bodies are always entangled in economic transactions which often reflect in unsettling ways the sacrificial dynamics and cosmic debt within Christian theology. They thus provide a way to think through and articulate the current tensions between capitalism and Christianity across nations and denominations.

Acknowledgements

Nearly two decades ago I plucked a tattered, yellowed paperback from my family's bookshelf, an old copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* belonging to my mother, Jane. I owe more than I can imagine to that encounter and to my mother's restless curiosity, which ignited and nurtured my own. I also owe my father, Bill, whose earnest faith has long inspired me even as I have struggled with it. After all, why does one write a dissertation on Dostoevsky and Melville?

I am also grateful to all those friends, professors, and intellectual mentors who have supported my work, helped me develop my thoughts, and separated the wheat from not a little chaff. This goes back to my undergraduate days, when my professor, Elena Prokhorova, encouraged me to do something that would never have entered my head otherwise: apply to graduate school. It would also include Tony Topoleski, a sounding board for many ideas, and Victoria Juharyan, who finally convinced me to publish my work for the first time. And it would include, of course, my committee members: Susan McReynolds, who believed in my project long before I did, and forced me to sharpen my arguments at every turn; Clare Cavanagh, with whom I could endlessly converse regarding the uncanny connections between American and Russian literature; and Betsy Erkkilä, whose incredible expertise and passion for American literature were crucial to me, a Slavist writing a comparative project on Melville.

Most of all, I wish to thank my brilliant partner, Eloisa Bressan, whose energy, patience, edits, suggestions, and faith in me have meant everything to me, have helped me write this, maintain sanity, and even find joy during this pandemic. I have gained so much from our conversations, your razor-sharp insights, and your unhesitating support. I hope I can do the same for you.

This dissertation is dedicated to Eloisa Bressan, my Laviza, my tesoro.

**CONTENTS**

# Introduction

Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoevsky have both been enshrined as the great nineteenth century literary prophets of their respective nations—not only in the historical-political sense, nor even in the philosophical, but also in the artistic sense; the twentieth century is incalculably indebted to their daring stylistic idiosyncrasies. They were almost exact contemporaries: Melville was born on August 1819 in New York; Dostoevsky in November 1821 in Moscow, some 4,700 miles to the East. They lived, wrote, and died not only never having had any form of contact—physical or literary—but in complete ignorance of each other. What, then, is the rationale for bringing the two together in this study?

In a sense, their mutual ignorance only makes certain parallels between them all the more strikingly uncanny, as when Newton and Leibniz discovered they had independently developed calculus. Only Newton and Leibniz had arrived at something timeless and universal (so far as we know), whereas the two writers in question were dealing with phenomena—some of them centuries in the making—that were far more subjective, fickle, and entangled with history: the great crises of faith and rationalism in the West; the rise of modern urbanism, industry, and an increasingly global market; the concomitant rise of nationalism; the fragmenting of traditional structures; a century of revolutions—many of them failed; and that modern sense of alienation that fascinated the Romantics, the socialists, the conservatives, the proto-existentialists, and perhaps everyone else. The list could go on indefinitely.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the twentieth-century "existentialists" (though Camus rejected the label), were perhaps the first to notice a kinship between them as writers of the absurd, grappling with the fear of a universe without God, or without absolute or transcendent meaning, especially with regard to suffering. For Camus in particular that led to a call for "metaphysical

rebellion" against meaninglessness, passivity, and despair, and indeed there is a panoply of metaphysical rebels in both Melville and Dostoevsky rarely found in other writers: particularly Ahab, Bartleby, the Underground Man, Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, and Ivan Karamazov.[1] The writers were not, however, the same in their conclusions: Dostoevsky constantly wished to reaffirm faith, even, at times, against his better judgement; Melville, despite his religious impulses and struggles with faith, was much less desperate to do so, often indulging in a humor or cynicism verging on blasphemy. Both, however, were explicitly theological writers, perhaps more than any other nineteenth century writers of fiction.

The affinities I explore in this dissertation are more specific than the general problem of the "absurd:" specifically, Melville's and Dostoevsky's shared concern with the intersections and tensions between religion and economy. I say "economy" rather than "economics" or "capitalism" because I do not deal with how either writer engaged with "economics" as an academic discipline, but rather—in the mawkish parlance of our times—the "lived experience" of economic forces and relations, some of which predated the rise of industrial capitalism, and, indeed, were formative to the development of Christian theology. The two were immersed in very different religious traditions with very different attitudes toward capitalist development in the nineteenth century: American Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy. Despite this considerable difference, both wrestled with the same economic metaphorical underpinnings of Christianity.

Much of Christian theology, including ethics and atonement theory, is centered around these economic metaphors—debt as sin, faith as credit, and redemption as salvation. And yet that

[1] See, for instance, Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, where he discusses Dostoevsky in the context of the absurd and metaphysical rebellion, or *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* in which he discusses Melville.

relationship is an uneasy one, and as capitalist development reached ever greater heights during the nineteenth century, Christian thinkers, including Dostoevsky, sought to recuperate Christianity from its more vulgar, simplistic economic or utilitarian ethical and soteriological frameworks; indeed, to see Christianity as the *transcendence* of these frameworks.[2] The reverse was also true: thinkers like Karl Marx—another contemporary, born 1818—saw in capitalism itself a religious, even sacramental quality, albeit of an often perverse or violent sort. I will address this in my third chapter on Melville, whom, I argue, had very similar insights into the tension between religion and capitalism.

I argue in particular that Christian theology of the body—as the site of both salvation and economic production—is at the center of Dostoevsky and Melville's shared concern, and that they explore it, in part, through a peculiar phenomenon, one of their uncanny parallels: spectral bodies, or spectral flesh, a paradoxical sense that material flesh encloses or coincides with its own ghost-like negation. Though they were hardly writers of proper supernatural ghost tales,[3] their fiction is haunted by spectral beings, like the subterranean Underground Man; or the living dead, like Goryanchikov in *Notes from Dead House*, or Pip in *Moby-Dick*; or like Ishmael and Ahab, who sense phantom presences; or the spectral white whale itself, often described as a "spirit" or "apparition."

At the same time, however, these specters or spectral presences are often distinctly embodied, fleshy, as though caught in some liminal place between material reality and transcendence. The ghost-like Underground Man, on the one hand, violently abuses people, and

[2] Melville is also concerned with this tension, though he cannot be called a "Christian thinker" in quite the same was as Dostoevsky, who had a much more explicit religious agenda.
[3] With the exception, perhaps, of Dostoevsky's "Bobok."

on the other, often feels himself reduced to a mere physical object. The traumatized Pip becomes an almost hollow body whose soul has "drowned" at sea. The phantom white whale devours limbs, smashes boats, and sinks ships with its massive corpus. These spectral bodies, or fleshy specters, serve as a way of thinking about the body as caught in a tension between material reality and transcendence—particularly transcendence beyond the realm of economic relations and entanglements. Both Dostoevsky and Melville, however, suspect that such transcendence—one might also say redemption—is premised on a dynamic of violent sacrifice within the material realm. They further suggest that there is a certain phantom quality woven into the fabric of modernity: a sensation of living death, or consciousness of some loss or absence that was not there previously, be that God, community, continuity, or immediate connection with the physical world.

One of the broader, contextual reasons for bringing Melville and Dostoevsky together is that they lived and wrote in two nations which, in many ways, saw and continue to each other as "Other." The Cold War has, of course, ended, but the twentieth century clash of communism and capitalism is in part only a secular, political-economic manifestation of a deeper perceived alterity: the clash between American individualism and Russian collectivism within culture and religious life. These are, of course, incredibly reductive terms, and the reality is far more complex, and both Melville and Dostoevsky perceived a dialectical relation, rather than a dichotomy, between them.

Americans have long been suspicious of Russian collectivism—and collectivism in general—as a force that swallows the individual whole, leaving behind a socially-directed automaton.[4] This suspicion has been directed, in the main, at the Soviet communist project in the

[4] Not to pick an intellectual straw man, but the late conservative spokesman and "cold warrior" William F. Buckley epitomizes this line of thinking: "I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level" (52).

twentieth century, as most Americans had previously had very little contact with Russian culture, and were probably hardly aware of Orthodox Christianity. Much of the American religious landscape in the nineteenth century was rooted in the concerns of the Protestant traditions: who has the authority to interpret scripture, how to gain true faith, how to know whether one has true faith, the nature of divine selection and predestination, and so on. Many of these questions can be framed from the first person: do *I* have true faith? am *I* predestined for salvation? These are the individualist anxieties Max Weber, among others, linked with the rise of capitalism, as my third chapter discusses. There certainly were highly communal Christian groups and movements, as well those who stridently opposed capitalist individualism.[5] However, many of them were reacting against a large-scale embrace of industry, financial speculation, slavery, and other features of nineteenth century American economic life.

By contrast, there is a major strain of collectivism across Russian intellectual traditions—religious, conservative, socialist, and nationalist. Educated Russians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were steeped in European culture; they were acquainted with Enlightenment rationalism, German idealism, Romanticism, and many had at least some knowledge of Catholic and Protestant theology, and this is partly what spurred Russian religious thinkers to articulate

[5] The Quaker schism of the 1820s, for instance, arose in large part over disagreements concerning capitalism, which my third chapter addresses. Moreover, Charles Grandison Finney, perhaps the dominant figure of the "Second Great Awakening"—and a Presbyterian to boot, like Melville and Ishmael—constantly railed not only against slavery, but against capitalism itself: "See that man of the world, His [sic] whole business career is a course of over-reaching. He slyly thrusts his hands into his neighbor's pockets and thus fills up his own. His rule is uniformly to sell for more than a thing is worth and buy for less. He knows how to monopolize and make high prices, and then sell out his accumulated stocks. His mind is forever on the stretch to manage and make good bargains. But this man at last must prepare to meet God. So he turns to his money to make it answer all things. He has a large gift for God. Perhaps he will build a church or send a missionary—something pretty handsome at least to buy a pardon for a life about which his conscience is not very easy. Yes, he has a splendid bribe for God. Ah, but will God take it? Never!" (26-7).

their own national, cultural, religious, and historical identity in contrast with the West. Many thought and continue to think of Russia as more communal, looking upon Western individualism with grave suspicion, even moral revulsion. The atheist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin—hardly a "Holy Russia" nationalist—scoffed at Western "bourgeois democracies" and the individual "freedoms" that they ostensibly held dear,[6] while deeply religious and traditionalist figures like the Slavophil theologian Alexei Khomiakov and Dostoevsky himself saw Western individualism as egoistic, a sort of economic atomization of society which choked a person off from meaningful human relations, leaving behind only those based on egoistic utilitarian calculation.[7] So, incidentally, did Melville.

The first chapter, "The Afterlife of *Notes from Underground* and Resurrection in Dostoevsky," argues for a reconsideration of Dostoevsky's religious thought during the early 1860s, a formative period of his career following his return to Saint Petersburg after his years of imprisonment and penal military service in Siberia. This is the period of *Notes from Dead House, Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,* and *Notes from Underground,* when Dostoevsky was far less reactionary than in his later career, when his nationalism, militarism, and antisemitism fully blossomed. His thinking was, in some ways, more nuanced and earnest; he was more skeptical of his own political and religious agendas, and even strikingly sympathetic, in hindsight, toward

[6] In his 1919 article, "Soviet Power and the Status of Women," Lenin wrote, "Bourgeois democracy is democracy of pompous phrases, solemn words, exuberant promises and the high-sounding slogans of freedom and equality. But, in fact, it screens the non-freedom and inferiority of women, the non-freedom and inferiority of the toilers and exploited" (*Pravda*). Lenin, of course, articulated this from an internationalist framework of class struggle, rather than a sense of "national spirit."

[7] I address Khomiakov and Dostoevsky at length in my first chapter.

socialism and political—though not economic—liberalism, though he did not hold back from critiquing them.[8]

Much of this chapter is devoted to resituating *Notes from Underground,* in many ways the culmination of this period, and the last major work he completed before moving onto his longer and more explicitly religious novels, beginning with *Crime and Punishment.* Furthermore, for the sheer breadth of scholarly, religious, philosophical, political, literary, and even cinematic works devoted to either analyzing or adapting it, *Notes* is one of the most influential works of the entire nineteenth century. I address the existentialist and anti-utopian readings and legacies of the novel, discuss what some of them miss, and propose a reading focused on the theology of the body, particularly the theology of resurrection.

To that end, the chapter outlines theological understandings of bodily resurrection originating in the letters of Saint Paul, the first Christian theologian, who, indeed, applies economic metaphors to the body. It traces the development of Dostoevsky's obsessive, often morbid desire to believe in bodily resurrection, drawing from *Dead House,* among other texts, and bringing Dostoevsky into dialogue with Khomiakov, the preeminent Orthodox theologian of the early nineteenth century. I argue that this desire stems in part from an Orthodox emphasis on the Church as the *communal body* of Christ, something Khomiakov articulated as an alternative to the perceived ultra-individualism of both Western Christianity and capitalism.[9]

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[8] Though these works are all aesthetically coherent, they have a certain mimetic incoherence insofar as they imitate "notes." This chosen form indicates a fragmented perspective or agenda, something perhaps seeking unity of purpose but simultaneously undermining it by drawing attention to its own ruptures. This is especially true of *Notes from Underground.*

[9] Khomiakov in some ways anticipated Weber in viewing Western Christianity as the spiritual predecessor of capitalist ethos and social atomization, though Weber's analysis is largely descriptive, whereas Khomiakov is extremely critical. Whereas Weber focused exclusively on

The second chapter, "The Abortive Resurrection in *Notes from Underground,*" is an extended reading of the text, and offers an analysis of the self-isolated, ghost-like Underground Man as a spectral body, caught between the physical world and his grave-like "underground," an immaterial, linguistic realm he has fashioned within his mind and through the act of writing. I analyze this realm as a perverse sacred space, or false transcendence, where he can exist as a spiteful, decrepit god, removed from the profane world and therefore not subject—so he wishes to believe—to its "laws of nature," a phrase he is fixated on. He nonetheless longs for ecstatic bodily embrace of others, but compulsively takes on debt each time he attempts to leave the isolation of his underground. I argue that he perceives this "embrace of humanity" in terms of grotesque bodily resurrection, which he fears is premised on a spiritual indebtedness toward others that mirrors both his own compulsive money-borrowing and the theology of Christ's death as debt-redemption for sin.

Part of this chapter brings Friedrich Nietzsche into dialogue with Dostoevsky, and makes the case that the latter almost certainly influenced the German philosopher's analysis of "debt/guilt" as a material basis of Christian ethics in *Genealogy of Morals*, which he composed shortly after he first read a French adaptation *Notes from Underground*. I connect this intertextual reading to current Christian and secular attitudes toward the explosion debt under finance capitalism and argue that Nietzsche and Dostoevsky foresaw aspects of modernity as a sort of living death, of being irredeemably "buried in debt." Nietzsche's analysis of "debt/guilt" is, as one might expect, highly critical of Christian ethics and theology. Dostoevsky, as previously

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Protestantism, Khomiakov excoriated both Protestantism and Catholicism, and sought to articulate modern Orthodox faith by contrast. I discuss this in greater depth in the chapter.

mentioned, wished to recuperate Christianity, and even to assert it as the means of transcending this economic framework. I argue, however, that in *Notes from Underground*, he subjects Christianity to a profound skepticism concerning the sacrificial dynamic at the core of redemption and resurrection.

The third chapter takes up many of the concepts and concerns developed in the previous two chapters and expands upon them with regard to Melville. If capitalism was still emerging in Dostoevsky's Russia, it was burning at full steam in Melville's United States, and *Moby-Dick* takes place at its cutting edge: the whaling industry. I discuss the religious context in which Melville wrote—the Quakers who dominated the whaling industry, his own Calvinism—with particular attention to their attitudes toward capitalism and the body. Weber's seminal *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argues that the many Protestant communities who so quickly moved to the fore of capitalist development in the United States and Western Europe viewed productive labor as a way to avoid "idolatry of the flesh." However, many of those communities—especially the Quakers—were split over the rise of industrial commerce and finance.

Melville was evidently aware of this ambivalence, and further strains it into a far deeper metaphysical and spiritual ambivalence toward the body—or to flesh in general—which is nonetheless enmeshed in capitalist production and exchange. The narrator, Ishmael, originally longs to leave his body behind for an ethereal, Platonic realm of the soul, but later sees the body as a site of sexual-religious ecstasy allowing one to transcend the ego in a wordless, loving, communal embrace of others that parallels Dostoevsky's representations of speechless, loving, bodily contact as a way of overcoming social atomization and spiritual isolation. This transcendent experience, however, occurs during the refinement of spermaceti, the violent commodification of flesh, which is depicted in a manner resembling ritual sacrifice. I bring Melville into dialogue with

Karl Marx, who discussed the conversion of physical goods into "exchange value" in sacramental terms, as "transubstantiation."

Captain Ahab also harbors intense suspicion toward flesh and embodiment. Like the Underground Man, he perceives incarnate existence as a sort of cosmic indebtedness and the world as a universal ledger of debts and balances. He, too, connects this indebtedness to a fear that his body—indeed, all bodies and all flesh—enclose a spectral alien presence.[10] Setting a gold coin as reward for the death of the phantasmic Moby Dick—whom he views as an incarnate godhead—Ahab establishes a sort of divine economy: the white whale's semiotic blankness—its capacity to signify anything—parallels money's infinite convertibility, its ethereal "value" without quality, detached from any object or process. This divine economy, in dialectical tension with the economy of whaling, neither negates nor transcends the violence associated with material commodification, but rather pushes it to its logical extreme with the same sacrificial dynamic of redemption which haunts Dostoevsky.

My hope in writing this dissertation is that reading Melville and Dostoevsky alongside each other helps to reveal and articulate from two angles the profound tensions between capitalism and Christianity, tensions which therefore cannot be reduced to a single culture, nation, or denomination. They provide a poetic vocabulary, a framework for illuminating the spectral aspects of life in our current world—self-isolation in the time of coronavirus, the ethereal realm of digital currency, the countless millions buried in debt, the disembodied communion of a remote online meeting—and for comprehending the spiritual experience, effects, and strivings of this life.

[10] This chapter draws on Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, which was crucial in helping me articulate this paradox, which is even more extreme in Melville than in Dostoevsky.

# Chapter 1

## The Afterlife of *Notes from Underground* and Resurrection in Dostoevsky

### I

### The afterlife of *Notes from Underground,* in brief

A recent retrospective in the *New Yorker,* entitled "Can Dostoevsky Still Kick You in the Gut?", begins, "Many people would say that Dostoevsky's short novel 'Notes from Underground' is the beginning of modernist movement in literature."[11] Hyperbolic claims to primacy notwithstanding, the work nearly convinces one that Dostoevsky was onto something unprecedented. While it clearly borrows from, imitates, and downright mocks the confessional mode, it far exceeds its models in its emotional and rhetorical intensity, particularly in the Underground Man's revelry in his own baseness and his relentless harangues against his presumed confessors—his readers (or, indeed, his own conscience). Saint Augustine equals the Underground Man in relentless examination of one's own mental processes, but the Bishop of Hippo never turned his own vice into a heroic weapon against the universe. Rousseau demonized civilization as strangling human nobility and freedom, but believed the individual subject should ultimately comply with and advance the General Will; the Underground Man not only refuses to subordinate himself to anything resembling a general will, but viciously demolishes it as a coherent philosophy.

The nineteenth-century Russian iteration of "General Will" which the Underground Man contended with was "rational egoism," a variant of utilitarian philosophy, most famously articulated by Nikolai Chernyshevsky in his 1863 utopian novel, *What is To Be Done?,* perhaps

[11] Denby, David, *The New Yorker,* "Can Dostoevsky Still Kick You in the Gut?" June 11, 2012.

the single most influential book in Russia in the nineteenth century, considering it inspired nearly every Russian revolutionary.[12] *Notes from Underground,* published the following year, was Dostoevsky's direct attack on Chernyshevsky, and indeed explicitly parodies it at moments. Rational egoism essentially posits self-interest as the basis for a new morality focused on maximizing pleasure. Though this ethical system is strikingly similar to that of the deeply anti-socialist, anti-egalitarian Ayn Rand, Chernyshevsky and his followers were democratic socialist utopians, and believed a society could be created via pre-determined economic relations which allow self-interest to operate for the greatest good.[13]

The problem with this materialist view of human nature, the Underground Man tells us, is that if one always chooses what is to one's best advantage, or profit, it is not really choosing, but merely obeying the laws of nature. In such a world, the so-called "individual" is nothing more than a mega-matrix of equations, spitting out results—actions—for any given external input. If the right external inputs can be created—say, by creating a rationalized society—then human behavior and happiness can be controlled and improved. The Underground Man writes:

> [T]hen, you say, science itself will teach man (though, in my opinion, that's already a luxury) that in fact he possesses neither a will nor any whim of his own, that he never did, and that he himself is nothing more than a kind of piano key or an organ stop; that,

[12] Incredibly, the novel was written in prison and passed the warden's censor. Moreover, when the manuscript was left behind in a carriage, the tsarist police helped recover it.

[13] Lenin himself claimed Chernyshevsky as one of his greatest inspirations, on par with Marx, but one could make the case that Chernyshevsky's true philosophical heir was, ironically, Ayn Rand. Ayn Rand bashes the sort of collectivism Chernyshevsky would have espoused as a thing of the parasitic masses, but she does wind up espousing a sort of egoist collectivism of the wealthy and powerful. Both proceed from the idea that the pursuit of self-interest is always inherently good—they simply see it taking society in different directions, both of which are tautologically good because they derive from self-interest.

> moreover, there still exist laws of nature, so that everything he's done has been not in accordance with his own desire, but in and of itself, according to the laws of nature. (18)

His argument has gone far beyond mere rational egoism, but to the very notion of freedom and human nature. His conception of freedom can be summed up thus: the ability to act contrary to self-interest, according to one's caprice, and to defy not only human institutions, but even the laws of nature.[14]

The fact that the Underground Man declaims his universal discontent in mid-nineteenth century Russia, a country desperately struggling to modernize itself on European models, and in St. Petersburg, "the most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world" (5), has made him a one of modernism's most iconic characters, a defiant voice of alienation from the modern world. He plods through an artificial, alien urban landscape with the grace of a Chaplin tramp drunk with rage, until he retreats for good into his underground and becomes little more than that defiant voice, a mere shade. It is the first unmistakably Dostoevskian voice: no one else could have written him, though it has spawned myriad imitators. He embodies Dostoevsky's patent method of thinking through the problems of life, death, and everything in between and beyond by drawing them out to their most extreme, neurotic, and absurd states. The Underground Man can bring himself neither to act nor to become anything or anyone because something is metaphysically amiss in the universe. This, at least, is what he would like us to think, and he spends a hundred pages deadlocked in a struggle to convince us—or himself—that it is true, sometimes reaching

[14] On this last point he wavers considerably: though he rails against the laws of nature philosophically, he frequently invokes them to justify his inability to act: "I was a coward and a slave…Every decent man of our time is and must be a coward and a slave.… This is how he's made and what he's meant to be. And not only at the present time, as the result of some accidental circumstance, but in general at all times, a decent man must be a coward and a slave. This is a law of nature for all decent men on earth" (31).

such a point of desperation that the narration resembles a transcription of feverish speech, as Bakhtin noted. The voice is so quintessentially Dostoevskian that scholars, philosophers, and theologians continue to debate to what extent it coincides with Dostoevsky's own. Dostoevsky scholars have largely arrived at a consensus that the character's scathing critiques of determinism, utopianism, materialism, and modernity really are the author's, but that Dostoevsky rejected his character's totalistic refusal to take responsibility for acting.

But the consensus ends there, as the repercussions of Dostoevsky's critiques—both of his character and the many "-isms"—are far more complicated to work out. An extraordinary breadth of thinking has been crammed into its slim one hundred or so pages, which have, in turn, generated a disproportionately vast reception in both scholarship and the arts. Hardly a sign of artistic disunity or vagueness, the difficulty in pinning the work down arises from its relentless intricacy, its brutal skepticism, and its artistic restraint: Dostoevsky does not say outright that God or Russian messianic nationalism is the answer to the Underground Man's or modernity's sickness, as he would attempt to do in future works.[15] Perhaps it is precisely this artistic restraint that has given the book its persistent adaptability. In the United States alone, for instance, one hears its instantly recognizable echoes both in the unnamed oppressed black narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,*[16] and in the fantastical, distinctly white rage of the traumatized Vietnam veteran Travis Bickle, the anti-hero of Martin Scorsese's and Paul Schrader's film *Taxi Driver.*[17] The two

[15] Though, to be fair, it is partly an honesty forced on him externally: he confesses in a letter to his brother that the censors wouldn't let him talk of "the need for faith and for Christ" (*Letters* 191). I will discuss this letter in the following chapter.

[16] Which opens with a clear allusion to Dostoevsky: "I am an invisible man," and proceeds to narrate how he came to be underground, having been disillusioned with radical politics and hiding from lynching, though he now seeks to return to the world.

[17] Bickle's dialogue with his own image in the mirror, "You talkin' to me?," in which he imagines a hostile interlocutor who gives him a legitimate reason to shoot someone, profoundly resembles

characters stand on opposite sides of the barricades of racial tension, but both works see something in *Notes* that is indeniably there: the compulsion toward seclusion as necessary for shaping and articulating one's sense of self predominantly in resistance to external forces bent on determining one's life—but also the sneaking suspicion that that this cannot actually be accomplished through isolation.

This needling sense of the stakes of self-articulation is one of the most salient aspects of the text, and it has led to two almost diametrically opposed traditions of interpretation: those who exalt the Underground Man as an existentialist martyr of freedom, a metaphysical rebel *par excellence,* and those who view him as completely enslaved to his spiteful impulses. Some of the disagreement between these two traditions hinges on how they interpret the relation between the two halves of the book, which are strikingly different in format, though bound together by the narrator's frenetic bombast. Those who view him as existential martyr tend to emphasize the first part, "Underground," almost to the point of exclusivity. "Underground" largely consists of a philosophical diatribe against rational egoism, as well as utilitarianism in general. This school of interpretation is hardly a relic of the heydays of existentialism, or the days before feminist critique made it impossible not to cringe at the Underground Man's emotional torture of the prostitute Liza, the only person to show him any compassion. As one of my students has brought to my attention, the alternately beloved and reviled Jordan Peterson, the YouTube-famous Canadian professor of psychology, pushes an essentially similar reading in a video-lecture which, as I currently edit this chapter in June 2020, has well over one million views.[18] Even those who view the narrator as a

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what Bakhtin described as the Underground Man's total dependence on his own imagined hostile interlocutors to say or think anything.

[18] To be fair to Peterson, he concedes that the Underground Man shamelessly abuses Liza, but makes no effort to explain whether his abuse and worldview are intimately connected, or whether

slave to his own spite— René Girard being the primary example, though I would also include Bakhtin—often neglect the second half, "Apropos of Wet Snow," a series of pathetic encounters in which the Underground Man repeatedly humiliates himself and sabotages any potential relationship with others. I have encountered only one major thinker who emphasizes the primacy of Part II—Girard, whose theory of mimetic desire was heavily influenced by his reading of Dostoevsky. Even Girard, however, almost entirely neglects Liza.

A third, and in many ways middle-ground, interpretive school is the anti-utopian strain of reception, which, to vastly oversimplify, takes seriously the Underground Man's existential arguments for freedom and against the utilitarianism of the rational egoists, and view his irrational, self-destructive actions as evidence that utopianism is incompatible with human nature.[19] Though it tends to subordinate Part II to Part I as demonstrative proof, this direction of reading has had some staying power; after all, Part I is an explicitly anti-utopian diatribe. To a certain extent, however, the anti-utopian approach occasionally focuses too heavily on the novel's polemic against contemporary socialist ideologies—it was, after all, very prominent during the Cold War

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the former betrays the latter's incoherence and lack of liberating potential. *Notes from Underground* still factors into intellectual-political debates in the twenty-first century: Peterson also cited the novel in his now-infamous debate with the philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, who himself cited *The Brothers Karamazov.*

[19] Gary Saul Morson provides one of the best analyses the anti-utopian dimension of *Notes,* which he calls "is probably the most important single source of the modern dystopia" (130). For example: "The most striking example of anti-utopian anti-closure is to be found in *Notes from Underground.* The narrator of that work, it will be recalled, promises, but fails, to end his potentially endless series of self-referential paradoxes, and so the 'editor' arbitrarily ends the text, substituting an ellipsis for the 'missing'' section. The underground man's paradoxes of self-reference and infinite regress are closely related to one of his two key arguments against all-embracing explanatory systems: namely, that their starting points must be chosen arbitrarily and are consequently likely to appear, to someone not already committed to the system, as just what is most in need of justification…The underground man's second argument against all-embracing explanatory systems is that they fail to account for the complex facts of history and human behavior—facts which are, he suggests, essentially unamenable to systematization" (123).

years. While it is certainly a compelling approach, my own reading, which I put forth in the following chapter, examines what this focus leaves out: not the problems of the socialist utopian future, but rather the novel's engagement with the dehumanizing effects of emerging capitalism in the present, which are in full force in Part II.[20] After all, our dear narrator was psychologically and intellectually incubated not in a (dys-)utopian society, but in early nineteenth-century Petersburg, the bureaucratic capital of an autocratic, largely feudal empire in the early stages of capitalism. True, it was a place of intellectual ferment between Romanticism, Enlightenment philosophy, nineteenth-century rationalism, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, all of which lent impulse to idealistic, messianic dreams of a rationally planned future society. These dreams, however, were rooted in anxieties concerning the imperfect present.

I use this expression—the imperfect present—not only to refer to the flaws of contemporary Russian society, but also because it enfolds the past in a persistent continuum. Many of the troubling economic phenomena which *Notes* deals with are hardly new to modern capitalism—alienated labor, prostitution, and debt constitute seemingly "timeless" elements of capital. They nonetheless take on an increased intensity in the concentrated urban environment of Petersburg, where human relations are increasingly economic in nature, often explicitly monetized in one form or other. Even serfs, who essentially lived at the level of chattel slavery, had some form of social, even familial, community in the peasant *mir*. By contrast, every single one of the orphaned Underground Man's relationships—with Liza, his boss, his servants, his schoolmates, and even his distant relatives—is predicated on or permeated by some form of financial transaction. This pervasive economic thread is crucial to understanding a long-overlooked

[20] If the anti-utopian approach was heavily shaped by the Cold War, I happily admit that my own reading has been indelibly shaped by the current crises under finance capitalism and neoliberalism.

religious element in the novel—including the theology of the body—but I believe significant intellectual context is required in order to situate that thread, and that is the purpose of this chapter. That will entail, in part, reexamining Dostoevsky's relationship to both existentialism and Christian theology.

The three interpretive traditions mentioned above have recognized the work's extraordinary philosophical, psychological, and political depth, which itself either directly influenced or uncannily anticipated many of the intellectual developments of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries: existentialism, critique of Enlightenment rationalism, Nietzschean critique of morality, anti-utopianism, and Freudian psychoanalysis, just to name a few. Bakhtin's reading of the Underground Man's dialogic speech has taken on a life of its own as an entire school of literary theory with major implications for philosophy, linguistics, and psychology. The importance of this division—of both the text itself and the interpretative traditions it has spawned—will become clear over the course of this introduction.

## II

## Existential martyr

The greatest representative of the existential martyr tradition is perhaps Lev Shestov, a Russian philosopher and theologian who is often considered a sort of Christian existentialist along the lines of Kierkegaard.[21] Shestov's reading deserves some attention, in part because it allows me to lay out the parameters of contention, but also because of its lasting influence as both an

[21] Shestov (1866-1938), who was born into a Jewish family but converted to Christianity, is emblematic of the ambiguities of the existentialist label: he is a religious philosopher who in many ways blended Nietzschean thought with Jewish and Christian theology reminiscent of Kierkegaard. The term "existentialist" is applied to him anachronistically—as it is for Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Husserl, the last of whom he was friends with.

existentialist and a theological reading.[22] Though he is rarely read today, he in fact wielded considerable influence on thinkers as diverse as Edmund Husserl, Martin Buber, Albert Camus, and George Bataille, and thus played a major role in the development of both German and French thought, and particularly existentialism, in the interwar years—as well as, it might be speculated, the existentialist obsession with Russian literature. Shestov is also one of the first thinkers to thoroughly address *Notes from Underground,* which for a long time was eclipsed by Dostoevsky's subsequent behemoth novels, especially *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov.* Shestov in many ways appropriated *Notes from Underground,* one of Dostoevsky's least explicitly theological novels, as a base on which to form his own negative theology and anti-rationalist philosophy.

Considering the two camps essentially disagree over whether the Underground Man is a metaphysical rebel or a metaphorical slave, it is interesting that Shestov locates Dostoevsky's direct motive for writing *Notes* in the 1861 abolition of serfdom—literal slavery. Dostoevsky had once been a committed abolitionist; it was the reason for his involvement in the underground Petrashevsky circle, for which he was exiled to a Siberian prison camp for several years. Shestov views Dostoevsky's early writings as deeply idealistic and sentimental, suffused with a belief that

[22] His impact is still felt for instance, in Joseph Frank's reading of *Notes*. Frank applauds the narrator's degradation as a sign "spiritual health:" "He refuses to be consoled by the alibi that the laws of nature are to blame; and his dubious enjoyment translates the moral-emotive response of his *human nature* to the blank nullity of the *laws of nature.* Far from being a sign of psychic abnormality, this sensation is in reality—given the topsy-turvy world in which he lives—a proof of the underground man's spiritual health. For it indicates that, despite the convictions of his reason, he refuses to surrender his right to possess a conscience or an ability to feel outraged and insulted" (320). The narrator's "refusal to be consoled" as well as his "spiritual health" are far from clear.

"the loftiest purpose in life is to serve the 'humblest man'" (169).[23] Shestov argues that even as Dostoevsky witnessed his political ideals slowly being realized, he himself fell into despair, and created the Underground Man as a direct reflection of his tormented conscience over his apparent indifference to the well-being of others. Shestov quotes the Underground Man:

> "I say that the world can go to pot, so long as I can always get my tea." Who is speaking this way? Who took it into his head to put such monstrously cynical words into his hero's mouth? That same Dostoevsky, who a short time earlier had so fervently and sincerely said the words about the "humblest man"… (Ibid 168-9).

This is the beginning of a major problem in Shestov's interpretation, and one which has affected a great deal of subsequent scholarship: he almost entirely conflates the Underground Man with Dostoevsky himself, and takes this sentiment, "the world can go to pot," almost as a heroic resignation.

That resignation is a renunciation of "ideas"—those ideas essentially comprising the Western philosophical tradition, which, for Shestov, reaches its apogee in the Enlightenment rationalism of Kant. This is, incidentally, where Shestov sees a theological dimension in *Notes,* for he reads it as a modern exegesis of the Fall, in which humanity alienates itself from direct relationship with God by instead choosing Reason. His theological reading thus goes hand-in-hand with the anti-utopian readings which reject, as the Underground Man himself does, the rationally planned society of the utopian rational egoists. For Shestov, however, the matter is more fundamental: one must be allowed to rebel against Reason itself, as when the Underground Man

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[23] Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nietzsche*. This is perhaps true of Dostoevsy's first novel, *Poor Folk,* which the famous radical intellectual Belinsky hailed as one of the great social critiques of its day, but it becomes a little harder to justify when it comes to subsequent works like "The Double," a surreal, absurd, psychological thriller.

rails against the iron rigidity of "twice two is four," which, he states, "is not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death" (24). He wants to be allowed the caprice of defying laws of nature and reason, of saying, instead, "twice two is five." Shestov writes:

> Enthralled by the tempter's words *eritis scientes,*[24] Adam exchanged the freedom which determined his relationship to the Creator who hears and listens for a dependence on the indifferent and impersonal truths which do not hear and do not listen to anything and automatically actualise the power which they have seized. That is why it is incorrect to speak of the relationship of man to G-d as a relationship of dependence: the relationship of man to G-d is freedom. And it was precisely this that Dostoevsky had in mind when, face to face with "two times two makes four," with "the stone wall" and with other "impossibilities," he demanded that his "caprice" be guaranteed to him. (206)[25]

This is, if we are being generous, a highly creative reading of Genesis, particularly as the serpent promises not reason, but the knowledge of good and evil, which would seem to be the necessary basis for moral freedom. But good and evil are, for Shestov, barriers to the knowledge of God, and constraints to genuine human freedom, though Shestov defines this freedom rather poorly—perhaps precisely because he believes it to be unlimited and indefinable. In many ways Shestov begins with the more individualistic side of Nietzsche's philosophy, and recasts it in Judeo-Christian terms, terms that sometimes feel stretched to their breaking point.[26] If, to be reductive,

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[24] The words of the serpent are, in full, "Eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum." (Genesis 3:5, "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.")

[25] Shestov, *Athens & Jerusalem.*

[26] See the similarity in sentiment: Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morality,* "…with the help of the morality of custom and the social straitjacket, man was *made* truly predictable. Let us place ourselves, on the other hand, at the end of this immense process where the tree actually bears fruit, where society and its morality of custom finally reveal what they were simply *the means to:* we then find the sovereign individual as the ripest fruit on its tree, like only to itself, having freed

Nietzsche begins with "God is dead" and strives toward a mental and moral state that is beyond human, beyond good and evil, then Shestov instead believes that it is our relation with God that is dead, strangled by the philosophical tradition that apparently stretches back to the ancient Hebrews, and that we must strive to revive that relation which Adam had with God before the Fall, a relation which likewise was beyond good and evil, and thus wholly free.[27]

Shestov essentially praises the Underground Man as a hero of "caprice," which is to say a refusal to conform to any models of human predictability, in particular the notion that people always act in their best interest. Shestov adds a theological dimension to this which is almost Kierkegaardian: it subordinates all categories of human action, including the ethical impulse, to the religious impulse, as when Abraham submits to God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac.[28] Interestingly enough, this reading has traction among both atheist and religious critics. On the religious side, for instance, Konstantin Mochulsky, one of the most famous early-twentieth century Russian Dostoevsky scholars, writes of the Underground Man: "The force of the underground man's revolt stems not from indifference and doubt, but from a passionate, exalted faith. He contends so vehemently with falsehood because a new truth has been opened for him. He still cannot find a *word* for it and is forced to speak in hints and circumlocutions" (255).

On the other hand, even when God is removed from the equation, the Underground Man has been praised in atheistic, existentialist terms which border on religiosity. Walter Kaufmann

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itself from the morality of custom, an autonomous, supra-ethical individual (because 'autonomous' and 'ethical' are mutually exclusive)…" (36-7).

[27] Shestov himself was ambiguous on the question of good and evil. Though he evidently rejected good and evil as stultifying philosophical categories, he was not indifferent to ethical matters, and sharply criticized Dostoevsky's militarism and anti-semitism, as well as the violence and suffering of the first decades of the Soviet period in Russia.

[28] See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling.*

included Part I of *Notes* in his anthology, *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, which enshrined it as a classic existentialist text. Kaufmann famously described Part I as "the best overture for existentialism ever written" (14). Kaufmann considers Part One such a fitting overture because of its intense spirit of revolt. The Underground Man's explicitly philosophical diatribe viciously attacks rationalism, the law of self-interest, utopianism, and even the laws of nature and mathematics—anything that even slightly impinges on his sense of individual freedom, that highest of existentialist virtues. Moreover, he evidently lives up to his philosophical rebellion by acting against his own interest, exalting his petty depravity and general hostility as the apotheosis of freedom. As Kaufmann writes, "No, individuality is not retouched, idealized, or holy; it is wretched and revolting, and yet, for all its misery, the highest good" (12).

It becomes increasingly difficult to justify Shestov's and Kaufmann's readings when one considers Part II, which they almost entirely neglect.[29] Kaufmann's musical metaphor is revealing: an overture is a series of thematic expositions without the motivic development, deconstruction, and exploration which give such depth to, say, sonata form. Part I of *Notes* is not exactly mere exposition, but to exclude Part II, which traces the narrator's personal interactions and compulsive behavioral patterns, is to disembowel the work of its tremendous psychological depth, which is integral to its philosophical insight. To exclude the Underground Man's interactions with living, breathing humans—as opposed to the abstract "humanity" and stupid "men of action" to whom he imagines he is speaking—is also to shield us from the deeply problematic ethical dimension of his actions. Those who would claim that individuality is "the highest good," or that he is driven by an

[29] Kaufmann, for one, entirely excludes Part II from the anthology, explaining that it "does not greatly add to the thought content of Part One" (53).

"exalted faith," must reckon with his extraordinarily cruel humiliation of Liza in Part II, an exceedingly difficult task for any empathetic reader.[30]

Shestov generally fails to take any sort of relation with others into account. This failure grievously weakens his concept of freedom, leaving it largely amorphous, for any coherent philosophy of freedom—spiritual or political—cannot simply bracket off the question of the Other. The failure is rooted in a contradiction at the heart of Shestov's philosophy, a concept he names after a neologism the Underground Man coins: *"vsemstvo,"* or "omnitude."[31] *"Vsemstvo"* is something like the horrifying banality of evil of the faceless masses: as the Underground Man's laments: "'I'm alone…and they are *everyone*'" (31). This, at least, is how Shestov interprets the term, though he fails to consider that Dostoevsky uses the word much more ambiguously than does his narrator. If Shestov seeks to wrench the spiritual individual's freedom free from the lifeless omnitude of abstract philosophy and "common consciousness," the vocabulary he creates for doing so dehumanizes everyone but himself and a select few[32]—everyone else is abstracted into this moribund, monolithic *vsemstvo.* Shestov's omnitude, thus, is the obverse of Kaufmann's statement

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[30] Shestov conspicuously dismisses this problem altogether. In fact, he so conflates the Underground Man with Dostoevsky himself that he feels compelled to clarify that the Liza episode is not autobiographical, that the real Dostoevsky would not behave so shamefully (*DTN* 171).[30] This disclaimer is one of his only references to Part II, and though he states it as a mere aside, it seems to me to raise a crucial problem: to what degree is the Underground Man's abuse of Liza shaped by his worldview, his philosophical rebellion, his underground psychology? Do we have to accept his abusive personality as inextricable from his heroic rebellion?

[31] This is how Bernard Martin, Shestov's translator, translates Dostoevsky's original Russian *"vsemstvo."* The neologism appears in the final page of *Notes from Underground.* I will continue to use the transliterated Russian term, as no Dostoevsky translations use the word "omnitude," and, as far as I know all have avoided coining a corresponding English neologism to replace it. A better translation might be "all-ness," both because it sounds appropriately ridiculous, and because the original text, *"vashe vsemstvo,"* very clearly mocks in form the royal address *"vashe velichestvo" (*"your highness," or "your majesty".

[32] E.g. Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Pascal. Shestov elaborates in his essays, "On the Philosophy of the Middle Ages" and "On the Second Dimension of Thought," both in *Athens & Jerusalem.*

"individuality is the highest good:" *I* am always the individual; individuality rarely extends to the *vsemstvo*.

Despite his blind spots, however, Shestov offers something very valuable, namely, an attempt to give a theological reading of a crucial Dostoevsky text that resists overt theological readings.[33] *Notes* simply does not have the explicit, extended theological discussions that characterize Dostoevsky's later novels, like *Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, Demons,* and *The Brothers Karamazov.* I find it exceedingly difficult to justify the theological readings which Shestov and Mochulsky propound: the Underground Man simply never frames his rebellion in terms of faith. I agree with them, however, that *Notes* is an intensely theological work, but only arrived at this conclusion after approaching the work with an initial skepticism. Would readers find *Notes* to be theological, religious, or spiritual if they had no idea who Dostoevsky was, or what his religious sensibilities were?

Before turning to the text in earnest, I struggled to think of explicitly theological elements, and went so far as to visit Gutenberg.org to run a ctrl+f search on their html version of the text, entering words like "God," "Christ," "Jesus," "soul," "sacred," etc. I struck upon a few mentions of such words, all of them in Part II.[34] Most of these mentions could easily pass—and be passed over—as mere idiomatic statements, like "thank God," or, "selling one's soul." Some were more compelling, for example, "That happens, Liza, in those wretched families there's neither God nor love" (67). I considered these moments both in their immediate contexts and in the larger structure

[33] See my next chapter for a discussion of Dostoevsky's letter to his brother concerning censored passages of *Notes from Underground.*

[34] Recall that Dostoevsky's letter to his brother was written before Part II was published, and referred only to Part I.

of the work as a whole, and concluded that they do indeed take on a profound theological significance.

However, that significance is never direct, in the sense that it can never be understood as equivalent to what the Underground Man explicitly says—he is not Dostoevsky's mouthpiece. Rather, I think theology is implicitly and negatively present in the Underground Man's deepest anxieties, which are the wellspring of his cruelty. What this means is looking for theology not in his existential martyrdom, as do Shestov and others, but precisely in his psychological torments and his relations with others, Liza in particular. This means that I will be engaging much more heavily with the relatively underappreciated Part II, and that I hope to contribute to what might be called the existential slave interpretive tradition. This tradition includes such figures as Bakhtin and Girard, but above all Nietzsche, whom I will therefore weave into my reading, rather than address them separately, as I have done with Shestov.

I also bring Dostoevsky into dialogue with the Russian Orthodox theologian Alexei Khomiakov and, more importantly, Saint Paul, specifically with his First Epistle to the Corinthians. 1 Corinthians, like all of Paul's letters, touches on a great many matters, but in particular it addresses the nature of resurrection, which was one of Dostoevsky's central spiritual anxieties. This dialogue results in a very different theological reading from those of Shestov, Mochulsky, and Frank. Though resurrection has hardly been addressed with regards to *Notes from Underground;*[35] it is at the novel's spiritual core, and is, moreover, deeply connected to the economic anxieties I outlined above. Their point of connection is the body: for Dostoevsky,

[35] This is despite the title of Girard's monograph on Dostoevsky, *Resurrection from the Underground.* His earlier work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* which actually discusses *Notes from Underground* in much greater depth, also does not discuss resurrection as it features in the novel itself.

resurrection is always resurrection of the body. As the spectral, shade-like Underground Man seeks "resurrection" from his underground isolation, he becomes mired in debt. At many points he longs to break through the purely economic relations he has with others, a desire which is always revolves around the body, around touch.

## III

## Dostoevsky and resurrection

Rather than plunge headfirst into the wildly complex and, at times, infinitely bleak images of resurrection in *Notes from Underground*, I will provide some broader context for Dostoevsky's thinking about resurrection, as well as a basic outline of the theology behind it. Though doing so runs the risk of committing the same error of imputing to the text ideas which are external to it, I aim to avoid that risk in two ways. First, I do not wish to retroactively apply Dostoevsky's later ideas—especially his Russian nationalism—to *Notes*, but rather to examine, in brief, his approach to resurrection leading up to the work, notably in *Notes from Dead House*,[36] his major novel preceding *Notes from Underground*, and the famous diary entry known by scholars as "Masha is lying on the table." Examining these two texts can actually serve to correct the backward-projection of Dostoevsky's later Russian messianism. Second, I do not use *Dead House* and "Masha" as interpretive lenses to decode *Notes from Underground,* but rather to situate *Notes* in Dostoevsky broader thinking. Though I note a few similarities between the works, I am equally concerned with what makes *Notes from Underground* different.

[36] The version I cite from translates the title as *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, but *Notes from Dead* House is much closer to the original Russian title *(Zapiski iz mertvogo doma)*, which also conspicuously parallels *Notes from Underground.*

In Orthodox Christian belief, as in most Christian denominations, the resurrection, even more than the incarnation and the crucifixion, is the single most important moment in the life of Jesus, and thus the most important article of faith.[37] Even Jesus's birth and death are, to a degree, subordinate events: Christ was born and died *in order to be resurrected*. However, almost from its very inception, Christianity has gone through bitter disputes over the nature of resurrection, precisely because of its centrality to Christian faith.[38] Already before the rise of Christianity there were disagreements among Jews: the Pharisees affirmed resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees denied it. As the new religion spread outward from its homeland in the Roman imperial province of Judea, it collided with a Hellenic culture whose religious and philosophical worldviews could hardly have been more different, and not only along the monotheist-polytheist divide. As Gentiles, often of Hellenistic background, began to convert, the Christian promise of resurrection came into contact with Platonist philosophy, which insisted on a strictly dualist conception of the body and soul, with the soul given distinct hierarchical priority.[39] On the other hand, though Platonic influences are clearly evident even in the Gospels,[40] the New Testament has

[37] This is reflected in the fact that both Eastern and Western churches consider Easter, and not Christmas or Good Friday, to be the most sacred Christian liturgical feast.

[38] Many theologians still espouse the belief in physical resurrection to this day, and not only in fundamentalist or splinter sects, but even in the Catholic and Orthodox churches. But, perhaps because the concept of heaven has such widespread appeal, and perhaps because it is so difficult to imagine that such a place could be on earth, the belief in the soul's departure upon death seems to be much more common.

[39] The Platonist duality of body and soul has at times been used to de-emphasize the importance of the body and of life on earth. The most extreme instance is the early Gnostics, like Marcion, who taught that the body was a prison trapping the soul in an evil, physical world created by an evil Demiurge—the God of the Old Testament. Marcion's theology of the Demiurge never became Orthodox doctrine, and he was indeed excommunicated, but a less extreme belief in body-soul duality eventually became quite popular in mainstream Christianity.

[40] The Gospel of John is a clear example, discussing how the eternal Word, or *logos,* referring to Christ, became flesh.

a consistent bodily emphasis, including after Christ's rising from the dead, for instance, when Thomas puts his hand in Jesus' wounds and feels his flesh.

This meeting of Platonism and early Christian belief naturally produced profound theological questions which continue to influence religious thought and belief to this day. For instance, is resurrection literal or metaphorical? Does the soul flee the physical realm upon death, and can it exist independent of the body? Or can the body—subject as it is to temptation and suffering—be spiritually transformed and restored from death? Does this happen in heaven or on earth? And what does Jesus's resurrection mean for the resurrection of believers, or humanity in general? What are the conditions of their resurrection?

## IV

## Saint Paul

It was in this historical and theological context that the Apostle Paul, himself a former Pharisee, proclaimed resurrection as an integral article of Christian faith. He is likely the most influential theologian by far to offer a theology of the resurrection, both by dint of being the first known Christian writer and the only theologian as such to be canonized in the New Testament. Paul's writings—his epistles—were thus made readily available to all literate Orthodox believers since Christianity's nascent stage. They have therefore had an almost universal authority, as they were accepted in both the Eastern and Western traditions.[41] This means, for our purposes, that Dostoevsky would have been intimately familiar with Paul's writings not only because Paul's

[41] I use the term "Orthodox" in its pre-schismatic sense here to refer to the forms of Christianity which were eventually adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, as opposed to those which were branded heretical, such as Arianism, or the earlier Gnostic beliefs. In this sense, "Orthodox" Christianity was the forebear to both Western Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, and various of its major theologians eventually agreed on those books which were included in the New Testament or excluded as heretical.

thought permeates virtually every Christian tradition, but because the New Testament was one of very few things Dostoevsky was allowed to read during his prison years in Siberia.

Paul largely lays out his theology of resurrection in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. This is the first of two letters he wrote to the church he founded in the Greek city of Corinth, which included some Jewish Christians, but also, evidently, some Greeks, who evidently *denied* resurrection of the dead.[42] Paul broaches the subject by asking them: "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain" (1 Cor. 15:12-14). He makes it quite clear: to deny that the dead will arise is to deny that Christ rose from the dead; to deny this is to lack faith.

Though Paul's language was sufficiently ambiguous for the Gnostics to read as as *denying* physical resurrection, the Orthodox theologians interpreted Paul as asserting resurrection to be the literal, physical raising of the dead on earth—not the soul's survival and ascent to heaven.[43] The "natural body" (*soma psykhikon*) is transformed and restored to life, becoming what he calls a spiritual or pneumatic body (*soma pneumatikon)*. As for what the spiritual body looks, Paul does not make entirely clear—resurrection is, after all, a mystery of faith. He approaches the question somewhat indirectly, explaining the transformation metaphorically: "that which thou sowest, thou

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[42] Paul's epistles are essentially pastoral theology: he is directly engaging with Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world so as to teach them "true" faith. There were Jews among his converts in Corinth, but many were former pagans (see *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul,* 74). Corinth was, after all, a Greek city, and few of its inhabitants would have been familiar with many of the elements which Paul preserved from his Jewish Pharisaic faith, which included belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

[43] Paul does use different words for body and spirit, distinguishing them conceptually, but does not impute to them the strict Platonic dualism which was later incorporated into Christianity. Body and spirit are not exactly the same, but, for Paul, are inextricable from each other. One can in fact interpret physical resurrection as the greater integration of body and soul.

sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain" (1 Cor. 15:37). In other words, the natural body is a seed, the spiritual body a grown plant.[44] He distinguishes between different kinds of "flesh:" not only that of men, beasts, fish, and birds, but also of terrestrial and celestial bodies, the sun, moon, and stars. As these various bodies differ from one another, so too does the "resurrection body" differ from the "natural body."

These comparisons ring a little strange to modern ears, but Paul's concern with distinguishing between these various forms of "flesh" is to emphasize that the resurrection body is still bears some sort of material contour. This spiritual flesh, however, is no longer subject to the destructive forces of nature: "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:…It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:42-4). In yet another metaphor, Paul describes resurrection as something akin to clothing oneself in fine raiment, the body "putting on" its new nature: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). The body is transformed, but it remains, and not an untethered soul flying about the ether.

Dostoevsky took the Orthodox interpretation of this doctrine quite seriously, writing in a letter, for instance, "we here, that is, Solovyov and I, at least, believe in actual, literal, personal resurrection, and in the fact that it will take place on earth" (21).[45] The letter, dated March 26, 1878, was addressed to Nikolai Peterson, a follower of the then-anonymous Christian utopian

[44] This same metaphor is famously repeated in the Gospel of John, where Jesus, foretelling his death, says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24). This line was beloved of Dostoevsky, who used it as the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov.*

[45] Dostoevsky, *Complete Letters, Volume 5: 1878-81.* He refers to Vladimir Solovyov, a famous Russian theologian and philosopher with whom he was friends.

scientist Nikolai Fyodorov.[46] Dostoevsky was somewhat acquainted with Fyodorov's idea that humanity owes an obligation to resurrect its ancestors, and wanted to know whether Fyodorov meant this literally or allegorically. He clarifies,

> Of course not in bodies as they are now, since the fact alone that immortality will have arrived, that marriage and the birth of children will have ceased, testifies to the fact that the bodies in the first resurrection, which is ordained to take place on earth, will be different bodies, not like the ones now, that is, perhaps like Christ's body after his resurrection, before his ascension on Pentecost? (21)

## V

### *Notes from Dead House*

Though Dostoevsky wrote this letter toward the end of his life, resurrection had been a major concern throughout his career, albeit not always in a consistent light. As I have mentioned, resurrection appears in his fiction as early as *Notes from Dead House* (1860-2), and though it is an entirely symbolic approach to resurrection, it is still well-worth a brief examination, as it establishes major precedents for *Notes from Underground*. First, it holds out resurrection not as a distant concern for some future miracle, but as something to seek in one's own life, albeit

[46] Fyodorov was anonymous because he did not believe in personal property, including intellectual property, and therefore refused to publish books (translator's note). He was utterly idiosyncratic, and believed that humanity was destined to fulfill the Christian promise of resurrection, and that this would happen scientifically, not by miracle. He believed that humanity would progress scientifically to the point that it might attain both immortality and the ability to resurrect every person who had ever lived—and that this would be a moral obligation owed by the living to the dead. While Fyodorov's ideas are clearly far-fetched, they are, in fact, enjoying a certain afterlife in contemporary transhumanism. They even wielded some influence in the atheist Soviet Union, where Lenin's body was embalmed so as to one day be resurrected.

metaphorically. The main character, Alexander Petrovich Goryanchikov, seems to undergo a spiritual transformation while in prison in Siberia for murdering his wife out of jealousy. When his sentence is finished, his fellow prisoners remove his shackles, and he gazes at them in bewilderment, as though he cannot comprehend having been a prisoner now that he is free. He ends his story, "Yes, God was with us! Freedom, a new life, resurrection from the dead…what a glorious moment!" (361).[47]

These words—the final line in the novel—are highly evocative, but ambiguous. They may even suggest that Goryanchikov comes to equate freedom and resurrection. Though such a conflation has its problems, there is, in fact, a theological link between the two, though Dostoevsky seems to have been profoundly troubled by their complex relationship. That relationship hinges on the image of Christ as the "redeemer"—in Russian, *"iskupitel'"*. Susan McReynolds has made a major case for the significance of the economic root of this word—and the theology surrounding it—to Dostoevsky's spiritual insights. As she points out, the verb "to redeem" has two equivalents in Russian: "*vykupat'/-it"*" and *"iskupat'/-it'",* both of which share the root "*-kup"*"--that is, to buy. McReynolds writes that "Dostoevsky's novels, it could be argued, draw attention to this shared etymology and confront us with the implications of using intimately related words to speak about buying and selling in general and saving souls" (89).[48]

Though it is much more transparent in Russian, the English verb shares this economic origin; we continue to use the word "redeem" in the economic sphere—to redeem a voucher, for instance. But the economic significance of the word originally had to do with the "buying back"

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[47] *"Svoboda, novaia zhizn', voskresen'e iz mertvykh… ekaia slavnaia minuta!"*

[48] See McReynolds' article, "'You Can Buy the Whole World': The Problem of Redemption in *The Brothers Karamazov*."

of slaves; that is, manumission—hence the relation of "redemption" to freedom. In English, for example, God (as YHWH) uses the verb when giving the law to Moses, referring to the selling of one's daughter as a maidservant:[49] "If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed…" (Exodus 21:8).[50]

Of course, the prisoners in *Dead House* are not exactly slaves. Nevertheless, as prisoners, they wish to buy their freedom. As McReynolds again points out, they experience money as "simultaneously freedom itself—a means to transcendence and self-determination—and a treacherous phantom," that is, leading them to greed and violence (90). As Goryanchikov writes, "The whole idea of the word prisoner postulates a man without free will; but when he flings away money the prisoner is acting *of his own free will*" (95). Dostoevsky seems to draw a contrast between the temporary freedom of caprice which money purchases and the deeper, albeit negative, freedom which Goryanchikov finally attains at the end of the novel. That negative freedom, however—the loss of chains—is one of deep ambivalence for Dostoevsky.

Christian theologians have explored the implications of the economic metaphors of salvation since almost the very beginning. Origen, the patristic theologian, derived the so-called "ransom theory of atonement" from a passage in Mark, in which Jesus says he has come "to give his life [as] a ransom for many" (Mark 10:44).[51] ("Ransom" and "redemption" are both derived from the Latin "*redemptio*.") Origen's theory asserts that the crucifixion is the payment to the

[49] This passage actually bears some relevance to *Notes from Underground,* as Liza obliquely hints that her father had "sold" her in some manner.
[50] In Russian, "*pust' pozvolit vykupit' ee*" (*Sinodal'nyi perevod).*
[51] There are, in fact, several places in the Gospels in which Christ's death is described in economic terms.

Devil for the debt of human sin, that debt being tantamount to human enslavement to the Devil.[52] Jesus' death on the cross is thus the ransom, or cost of emancipation. The ransom theory was extremely influential in the West for centuries, before Anselm set forth the so-called "satisfaction" theory of atonement, in which Christ's death is not so much a ransom paid to the Devil (this would be an injustice), but rather the satisfaction of debt owed to God for our sins.

That is the connection between freedom and redemption; the relation of freedom to resurrection lies in the image of the risen Christ as the Redeemer. But if Goryanchikov's final words seem to conflate freedom and resurrection, Dostoevsky himself throws their relation into drastic uncertainty at the structural level. Earlier in the novel, Goryanchikov describes how this freedom-as-resurrection has sustained him and given him hope, and the book, indeed, seems to close on a high note. However, we know from the novel's frame that even his merely metaphorical resurrection is denied, for Goryanchikov finds no happiness in his "new life" —and this, too, is a precedent for *Notes from Underground.* The frame narrator, who finds and compiles Goryanchikov's eponymous "notes," narrates their meeting at the beginning of the novel, and describes him as "excessively pale and thin," skeletal, some thirty-five years old, evidently terrified of human interaction and unable to engage in any activity save obsessively writing his memoirs and giving the occasional lesson for money. Within a few months he is dead.

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[52] Origen writes in his *Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, "*So to whom did he give his soul a ransom on behalf of many? Certainly not to God, but what about to the evil one? For he had control over us, until the soul of Jesus was given to him as a ransom for our sakes. To him who quite clearly was deceived and imagined as though he was able to control [Jesus' soul] and who did not see that torture would not suffice to constrain it. Wherefore indeed "his death" which seemed to have mastered [him] "no longer masters [him]" (Rom 6.9) after he alone became "free among the dead" (Ps 87.5) and [became] mightier than the authority of death" (26). Justin Gohl has translated Book 16 of the *Commentaries* separately, as it had never been translated into English previously, despite the fact that it puts forth the crucial ransom theory, to which I have seen countless uncited references in English.

It is likely, therefore, that Goryanchikov would have written that line, "Resurrection from the dead!" even as he was dying, withdrawn in his lonely isolation, perhaps as though to comfort himself, or to recover the initial ecstasy of freedom that he felt upon being discharged. But, in his memoirs themselves, he expresses hesitation even as the end of his sentence nears. Now allowed to read various journals and catch up on contemporary events and discussions, he finds that the outside world has moved on without him: "[H]ow sad it was for me to recognize to what extent I was now indeed a stranger to this new life, cut off and isolated. I should have to get used to new things and learn to know a new generation" (357). The isolation and torment of prison have engendered an occasional camaraderie, but seem to have done him and his fellow prisoners permanent spiritual damage: "[H]ow much youth had *[been buried]* within those walls, what great powers had uselessly perished uselessly!" (359).[53] He never recovers from this: it cuts him off from the rest of humanity beyond the prison walls, and he withers away. It is not freedom itself, but the hope of freedom which had given him reason to live. Perhaps Dostoevsky suggests that this is the wrong sort of freedom—a negative freedom from external constraints, rather than one of inner spiritual charge—but there is also the more unsettling possibility that the author is expressing a skepticism, or even anxiety, concerning the actual fulfillment of religious hope. [54]

The very titles *Notes from Dead House* and *Notes from Underground* clearly mirror each other, not only with regard to genre ("notes," or memoirs), but also in their reference to the notes' sepulchral birth. Both novels close with an allusion to emergence from their respective locales:

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[53] Coulson's translation is "gone to waste," but the original Russian, *"pogrebeno"* (entombed or buried), drives the point home much more, and is more significant in the context of the final "resurrection."

[54] The sort of skepticism expressed in Bob Dylan's jaded line, "Voices echo, 'This is what salvation must be like after a while.'"

*Dead House's* "Freedom!" and *Underground's* "But enough, I don't want to write any more 'from Underground'…." (91). We know, however, that both end in failure: Goryanchikov, again, cannot form any emotional bond to the world outside the prison and dies alone, while the Underground Man is ultimately unable to break free of his narcissistic graphomania and compulsively goes on writing in total isolation (115). Their total seclusion from the world is also theologically significant: in Russian, the various prefixes for redemption quite clearly imply emergence. *"Vy-"* and *"is-"* in *vykupit'* and *iskupit',* respectively, indicate an movement outward or away from, as in the words "*vykhod"* and "*iskhod*," both of which mean "exit." It operates as a lateral movement: one is redeemed out from one's state of slavery, debt, or sin. Given the economic nature of that lateral movement, it can be conceived as a transaction or transfer: the transfer of debt or punishment to Jesus, who, in the crucifixion, takes on the penance owed by sinners.

Resurrection, too, implies emergence—Jesus's emergence from the tomb. The earliest iconographic representations of the resurrection did not depict Christ at all, but only suggested him through the image of an empty tomb discovered by the myrrhbearers, the women who had helped to embalm and bury Jesus, and who had returned to mourn him.[55] But emptiness, even emergence, is not the focus of such icons. The empty tomb is one of those beautifully apophatic gestures characteristic of Eastern Christianity, and which are still present in Russian Orthodox thought and aesthetics. It hints at what is not directly depicted, namely, the mystery of the resurrected body of Christ. This is a key difference: though redemption and resurrection are intimately bound together in Christian theology, they are, metaphorically, quite different. Whereas redemption is a lateral

[55] Andreas Andreopoulos discusses this in depth in his work *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography.* See pp. 108 and 161-2.

movement, resurrection is upward; whereas redemption is a transaction, resurrection is a transformation of the flesh and spirit.[56]

Miracles aside, this factors into Dostoevsky's thinking in part because he is thematically concerned with the atomization of human life which modernity brought forth. Overcoming atomized existence through the Orthodox spiritual community was thus, in a sense, a sort of transformative resurrection, especially insofar as the Church is considered by its members to be the "body of Christ" on earth. As the Russian theologian Georges Florovsky explains: "The Church is *catholic*[57] because she is the Body of Christ, and in the unity of this Body the reciprocal co-growth of individual members takes place; mutual seclusion and isolation is overcome, and the true "community" or the "common life"—κοινωνία or κοινωβία—is realized" (38). Both *Dead House* and *Notes from Underground* are clearly structured in terms of spiritual death and denied resurrection, and that has much to do with their main characters' overwhelming isolation. Isolation starves transformation and causes the spirit to atrophy and rot. While I explore in the following chapter how Dostoevsky goes far beyond this symbolic understanding of resurrection in *Notes*

[56] Indeed, as Andreopoulos details, when icon painters began to depict the risen Christ directly, they specifically drew on descriptions in the Synoptic Gospels of the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, when Christ reveals his divine nature to his disciples Peter, James, and John: "And [Christ] was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). This broaches an important difference in Eastern and Western iconography: Roman Catholic iconography is dominated by the crucifixion. A crucifix is generally behind and above the altar of nearly every Catholic church. Orthodox iconography occasionally features the crucifixion, but the image of the dead Christ is far overshadowed by the prevalence of the divine, kingly Christ: Christ the Savior in Glory, Christ the Pantocrator, and the transfigured or resurrected Christ.

[57] Florovsky does not refer to Roman Catholicism, but to his understanding of the original meaning of "catholic," which he specifically qualifies as not meaning "universal" in the usual sense of the word—i.e. belonging to everybody—but rather something like "communal and unified." (37-8)

*from Underground*, I want to make clear that in *Dead House* Dostoevsky is primarily concerned with this metaphorical, communal dimension of resurrection.

Orthodox theology often distinguishes itself from the Roman Catholic Church—and from Western Christianity in general—by emphasizing the communal dimension of spirituality to a much greater extent.[58] Salvation is not a matter of personal faith or individual good works, but of spiritual communion with the church. There are debates as to whether this emphasis has been a constant stretching back to the Byzantine era, or whether it is, in part, an "invented tradition" dating from the Romantic era.[59] In either case, it has fully entered mainstream Orthodox theology under the term *sobornost,* a concept which was articulated in the first half of the nineteenth century by the Romantic Slavophile philosopher and Orthodox theologian Aleksei Khomiakov, and which had a formative influence on Dostoevsky.

## VI

### *Sobornost*

Though Dostoevsky never fully identified with the Slavophile political program, their theological concept of *sobornost* resonated deeply with him, and some discussion of its meaning is quite helpful in contextualizing his thought.[60] Though the term is often attributed to Khomiakov,

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[58] This is not to say that the Catholic Church, or Western Christianity in general, has no social or communal aspect—of course they do. It is simply that Eastern Orthodoxy, and Russian Orthodoxy in particular, distances itself from what it perceives as Western Christianity's greater individualism. See following section.

[59] See Robert Bird's introduction (pp. 7-25) to *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader* for elaboration.

[60] During the early 1860s, including when he was writing *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky became one of the leading members of a small group of intellectuals called "*pochvenniki"* who set themselves as a sort of middle path between the Slavophiles and Westernizers. He did not found the movement, but, along with his brother, Mikhail, and the famous literary critic Apollon Grigoryev, established two prominent literary journals. First, *Vremia* (Time), which was closed by the censors, and then *Epokha* (Epoch), in which *Notes from Underground* was published, and

one of the pivotal figures in modern Orthodox theology, he seems only to have used its adjectival form, *sobornyi,* which, in Russian, corresponds to the Greco-Latin "catholic," not referring to Roman Catholicism, but to Christian catholicity—that is, somewhere in between universality, unity, and communion. The term, however, conveys more in Russian: s*obornost* is a conception of the Church not as an authoritative body which establishes and dictates doctrine and ritual, but as the community of believers who freely come together and are bound by Christian love. In an early essay entitled "The Church is One," Khomiakov writes, "The unity of the Church follows necessarily from the unity of God, for the Church is not a multiplicity of persons in their personal separateness, but the unity of God's grace, living in the multitude of rational creatures who submit themselves to grace" (31). The word *sobornost* itself clearly calls to mind for any Russian speaker the word *sobor,* the Russian equivalent of a cathedral: both words are etymologically akin to congregation, a gathering together of the faithful.[61] One might translate it as "togetherness," and it evidently contrasts starkly with the faceless *vsemstvo* of Shestov and the Underground Man.

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which Dostoevsky had to shut down for want of money. The word "*pochvennik"* is derived from "*pochvennichestvo,"* which is often translated as "back-to-the-soil" (from the word "*pochva,"* "soil). This term is somewhat misleading, as they did not advocate a return to the peasant lifestyle, but rather to create a body of literature that was "organically" Russian, as Grigoryev rather vaguely advocated. They advocated artistic freedom from both state censorship and utilitarian ideological programmatic commitments in order to accomplish this. Their ultimate goal was to create art that would contribute morally to healing the enormous cultural and social rift between the impoverished and illiterate peasants and the Europeanized elites. They disagreed with what they saw as the Slavophiles' political antiquarianism, and did not seek to discard Peter I's European reforms entirely. They also disagreed with the Westernizers' program of imposing European political and social reforms onto Russian society. See Ellen Chances' article "Literary Criticism and the Ideology of Pochvennichestvo in Dostoevsky's Thick Journals *Vremia* and *Epokha*" for a summary of their activities.

[61] From the Russian roots *so-* (with or together) and *bor-* (to take or to gather). It is a calque of the Greek word *synagoge.*

Khomiakov understood *sobornost* as a project or universal ideal for the future, most nearly realized in the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, rather than an exacting description of the contemporary Church. He writes, "When the false doctrines disappear, the name of Orthodoxy will not be needed, for there will be no false Christianity. When the Church extends her domain or when the fullness of nations enters into her, all local nomenclatures will disappear, for the Church is not tied to any locality…"(Ibid 53).[62] While this grandiose vision of universal doctrinal harmony rather naively sidesteps the intractable political, economic, social, and denominational boundaries between peoples, there was an even more immediate—and, perhaps, far more tenacious—stumbling block to this "unanimity of soul and mind:" the divisions among and within the souls and minds of individual people.

Khomiakov was not unaware of this problem, but his explanation is grounded not so much in human psychology as in a decadent worldview—a view of Western Christian civilization as fallen from the early centuries of the Church. *Sobornost* may be a project for the future, but it

[62] The essay was likely written in the 1840s, but was not published until 1864, after his death. Though it is not my purpose in this chapter to describe the national debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers, I want to point out that one could easily read this as a religious expression of a paradoxically nationalist claim on universalism, though, to be sure, many theological works assert a particular belief's claim to universal truth. It very closely resembles Dostoevsky's later belief in the messianic nature of the Russian people to redeem Western civilization, as embodied in, for instance, his famous speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin statue in Moscow in 1880: "Indeed, the mission of the Russian is unquestionably pan-European and universal. To become a real Russian, to become completely Russian, perhaps, means just (in the final analysis—please bear that in mind to become a brother to all people, a panhuman, if you like. Oh, all our Slavophilism and Westernizing is no more than one great misunderstanding between us, although it was historically necessary. To a real Russian, Europe and the lot of all the great Aryan tribe are just as dear as is Russia herself, as is the lot of our own native land, because our lot is universality, achieved not through the sword but through the strength of brotherhood and our brotherly aspirations toward the unity of people" (*Writer's Diary* 504). This language about "Aryan universality" becomes all the more chilling when one takes Dostoevsky's antisemitism into account, as well as the fact that, in his *Writer's Diary,* he does, in fact, advocate winning Russia's destiny "by the sword."

envisioned the ideal future as one of restoration to a lost golden age of ecumenical harmony, an era which supposedly ended with the Great Schism of 1054. Though theological and cultural differences between the East and West had been growing for centuries before the Schism, he characterizes the first millennium after Christ as a time of "divine unity," in which doctrinal disagreement, including heresy, was resolved by those "august assemblies," the great Church councils. (57). According to Khomiakov, it was the Bishop of Rome's (Pope Leo IX at the time) claim to universal authority over Christendom which shattered this quasi-democratic unity, and established a Church based on hierarchic, legalistic, and utilitarian relations: "[T]he West had to replace the sublime doctrine of organic unity in Jesus Christ with a meager and absurd system of patronage and clientage, and put utilitarianism in the place of love and association in the place of brotherhood. Human beings were isolated within the narrow bounds of individuality; they turned out to be separated from their brothers and sisters" (86).[63]

The values Khomiakov imputed to this fragmentation and isolation are crucial: he believed that the sundering of the organic unity of the Church in the West produced a debased spiritual life that was intensely economic and atomistic; indeed, that the economic and atomistic aspects of Roman (and later Protestant) Christianity went hand in hand. As salvation was no longer characterized by "brotherly love" and "Christian unity," a new emphasis was placed on salvation by faith and good works, or, for Protestants, "by faith alone."[64] While it is all too easy today to see

[63] This is precisely Dostoevsky's critique of the West: he, too, saw the Roman Catholic claim to earthly authority as leading to spiritual bankruptcy and utilitarianism.

[64] Both these criteria, Khomiakov believed, wrongly assumed faith and good works as two separate things. He argued instead that "Faith is an essentially moral principle, but a moral principle that does not tend to manifest itself betrays its own impotence, or rather its nullity. Manifestation of faith is works, for a slight sigh of prayer at the bottom of a contrite heart is as much a work as martyrdom" (88). Dostoevsky eventually reverses this formula in *The Brothers Karamazov* in the

how nationalist strivings played into Khomiakov's rhetoric and vision of history, he is not entirely wide of the mark: as I discuss in my Melville chapter, there was no shortage of Western thinkers who largely agreed with his diagnosis of Roman and Protestant Christianity.[65] Khomiakov believed these emphases ignored the community of believers and focused instead on the individual's correct or incorrect faith and tally of good deeds, such that one might earn one's way into heaven. Any semblance of Christian unity was that of a spiritual joint enterprise. His sarcasm is blistering:

> Armed with a double-entry accounting book, where the sin is the debit and good works (supported, it is true, by the Savior's sacrifice) are the credit, humankind pleads against God and finds a favorable judge in the Roman casuist…Provided human beings are citizens of the ecclesiastical state and obedient servants of their chiefs, they will become shareholders in paradise for a relatively moderate contribution of good works and good thoughts. The surplus, if there is any, can be converted for them into a small liquid capital, which they can dispose of as the wish. And the deficit, if there is any, can be covered by borrowing from richer capitalists. As long as there is a balance, God won't mind." (86)[66]

To reiterate, there is a great deal of economic language in the New Testament itself, and theologians dating at least back to Origen have literalized the economic metaphors of Christian redemption through the crucifixion. Khomiakov, however, casts Western Christianity in distinctly

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character of Father Zosima, who preaches active love as a path to true faith; in other words, faith as the manifestation of works.

[65] My chapter on Melville discusses Max Weber and Walter Benjamin's analyses of Western Christianity.

[66] Khomiakov is not entirely clear on what he means. "Shareholders in paradise" could perhaps be his way of insinuating that the "Roman faith" was a joint enterprise only to the extent that individuals felt they benefitted from the community. "Small liquid capital" could be something like viewing "surplus" good works as a retainer to cancel out future sins.

modern capitalist terms—"liquid capital," "shareholders," etc.—a language which he sees as shaping a religious life characterized by mere calculation and spiritual death. He differs from early Christianity in that he sees the crucifixion as Christ taking on the sins and punishment of humanity in order to liberate people from the sort of atomistic isolation that produces the economic theology at which he hurls his vitriol. He writes,

> [J]ust as Christ the unique moral being took upon Himself, by virtue of His limitless love, the sins of human beings and their just punishment, so, by virtue of their faith and love for their Savior, human beings could renounce their own individuality—a guilty and evil individuality—and clothe themselves in the holiness and perfection of their Savior. Human beings thus united with Christ are no longer what they were—isolated individuals. They have become members of the Church, which is the body of Christ, and their lives have become integral parts of the superior life and freely submit to this superior life. (84)

Khomiakov almost explicitly applies Paul's language of resurrection to the "organic unity" of the Church, that is, to *sobornost*. Both use a sartorial metaphor: Paul speaks of "the corruptible putting on incorruption," Khomiakov of people "clothing themselves in holiness and perfection." Moreover, once the individual renounces his or her individuality, she is "resurrected," so to speak, into the Church, the visible body of Christ on earth. The individual retains her body, but if the Church is a body consisting of the communal spirit of love, then it constitutes, at the very least, part of the spiritual resurrection body of which Paul speaks.

Indeed, when Khomiakov says that the Church is the body of Christ, he uses a Pauline metaphor, one which also comes from First Corinthians. Paul is specifically addressing the question of the diversity of spiritual gifts, such as wisdom, knowledge, the ability to heal, work miracles, prophesy, speak in and understand diverse languages, and glossolalia, but clarifies that

"all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit" (12:8-11). It is only in the community bound together by the Holy Spirit that the diverse members form an integral, organic whole: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ" (12:12). The scriptural basis of *sobornost* can be found right here, for Paul enjoins, "That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (12:25-27).

If this is indeed the scriptural basis for Khomiakov's *sobornost,* he is right to see an anti-authoritarian bend, for there is an almost anarchistic spirit which flows through Paul's thought on the nature of the Christian community. Though he occasionally contradicts himself, Paul holds a general suspicion of the Law as that which defines and binds a community together.[67] Rather, the Holy Spirit is the dynamic, living force which unites the church: "for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (3:6).[68] In Second Corinthians, Paul asserts the truth of Jesus's "New Covenant" over the old covenant of Mosaic law: "But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail [sic, of blindness] is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is,* there *is* liberty. But we all,

[67] 1 Cor. 14:34 states, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law." This would be an obvious contradiction of Paul's anti-legalist tendencies elsewhere. However, there is in fact a growing scholarly consensus that these lines were not written by Paul, but inserted later; the basis for this consensus that "the appeal to the law…is completely unpauline" (*Cambridge Companion to St. Paul* 82).

[68] As I discuss in my Melville chapter, the Quakers pick up on this same anarchistic thread.

with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even* as by the Spirit of the Lord" (3:15-18).

Paul comes very close to equating the Holy Spirit with Charity (*caritas* or *agape*), which is not only God's love for humanity and humanity's love for God, but an all-encompassing, transcendent, compassionate love which animates and unites the diverse members of the Christian community into one body. The basis for both Khomiakov's and Dostoevsky's belief that freedom ultimately lies in Christian love can easily be seen in these lines. The major point I want to emphasize, however, is the extent to which Paul's language employs bodily metaphors: even the Spirit is not merely some incorporeal entity, but that which gives life to the body. As I have suggested, Khomiakov does seem to hint that the renunciation of individuality and entrance into the communal body of the church does constitute a bodily resurrection of sorts.

This resurrection is, of course, metaphorical to the non-believer, but for the believer it is not a metaphor to be taken lightly. After all, Christianity often challenges the distinction between the literal and the metaphoric or symbolic—that is the nature of mystery and miracle at the core of its theology. Though Protestant theologies were to later challenge the doctrine, both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches believe the sacramental bread and wine undergo literal—*not* metaphorical—transubstantiation during the Eucharist, becoming the true body and blood of Christ. In a sense, faith pushes the metaphorical into the actual. Indeed, Khomiakov sees the Church as the site in which believers literally participate in the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ through the Eucharist. Khomiakov in fact describes this participation explicitly as bodily union with the resurrected Christ:

> Not in spirit alone did it please Christ to unite with believers, but both in body and in blood, in order that the union be complete and not only spiritual, but also bodily... It is not without

the body that we shall be resurrected, and no spirit except God can be called fully bodiless. One who despises the body sins with a pride of spirit. (42)

Though Khomiakov is engaged in a polemical critique of atomistic individualism and a description of the ideal *sobornyi* Church, he gives little sense of what that disparity looks like from inside; that is, of the individual's psychological experience of either, and of the transition from the former to the latter. That broaches a few questions. How does one renounce one's "guilty and evil individuality"? If *sobornost* is desirable, why has a return to the Church not yet been accomplished? What would that even look like in the modern world? With regard to personal relationships? These are the questions that Dostoevsky, the writer-psychologist, takes up. He, too, connects the problem of bodily resurrection with what he calls the "law of individuality," and he does so with increased urgency beginning in 1864.

## VII

## "annihilate that *I*"

Though Dostoevsky's concern with resurrection in *Dead House* remains essentially symbolic, the Christian promise of literal, physical resurrection was a growing concern in both his life and fiction. Untimely death visited the Dostoevsky family twice in 1864: his first wife, Maria, died of tuberculosis in April, and his brother and close friend, Mikhail, died in July. Though it is impossible to know precisely what long-term impact their deaths made on his increased artistic concern with the problem of resurrection, his wife's death, at the very least, prompted what is for most readers today a profoundly weird and unsettling meditation on the nature of resurrection. That meditation was in the form of a diary entry, dated April 16th, which fell while he was writing

the second part of *Notes from Underground*. He wrote while holding vigil over her body, in keeping with Russian Orthodox custom. We do not know whether he wrote while sitting beside her, or perhaps had left the room to escape the sobs and shuffling of family and friends, but from the very first lines there is a deep emotional ambiguity, beginning with what could be a simple, matter-of-fact statement, and then the great unanswerable question: "Masha is lying on the table. Will I ever see Masha again?" (39). Death is a blunt certainty; everything else is a question.

Dostoevsky's first marriage was fraught with emotional strain; he had gone through a tawdry affair with the much younger Apollonia Suslova, struggled with gambling addiction, and lived somewhat estranged from his wife. It is impossible to know his state of mind as he wrote those two lines: numbness, guilt, relief, exhaustion, detachment, grief—any would be understandable. The entry is perhaps striking in its abrupt departure from Masha: Dostoevsky immediately jumps into more general spiritual and psychological reflections, Biblical allusions, and even polemics with "the antichrists" (he most likely refers to the nihilists or other atheists). There is only one additional reference to Masha in the entire text, but one might read any line, any question in the entry as proceeding from or directed toward a single focal point, perhaps all the more poignant for remaining unspoken: her lifeless body.

The entry is not merely concerned with whether the dead will be resurrected. Dostoevsky wonders, at least implicitly, how his relationship with Masha would be altered were they to meet again in Paradise. This is neither idle speculation nor mere self-consolation: he engages both in Biblical exegesis—albeit not very systematically—and with the question of what resurrection means for personal relations on earth. He alludes to a passage in the Gospels in which the Sadducees, who denied resurrection, try to trip Jesus up on a technicality: if a widow remarries,

which husband will be hers in the resurrection?[69] Jesus responds, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:29-30).

Dostoevsky, like many, takes this to mean that there is no sex—or at least no procreation—in heaven. More straightforward explanations might be that sexual desire has either vanished or been transformed, or that, now having gained immortality, humanity no longer needs to replenish its population. But Dostoevsky gives a somewhat stranger explanation, writing that it is no longer necessary for humanity "to develop, to attain a goal, by means of the change of generations,…."(40). He seems to suggest that this change of generations is a scientific, historical, and religious human evolution toward spiritual perfection—albeit a teleological, not a Darwinian, understanding of evolution.[70] Exactly how this evolution works is unclear—for instance, do later generations redeem earlier generations?—but he repeatedly emphasizes that both resurrection and the "change of generations" will happen "according to the laws of nature" (40).[71]

Dostoevsky believes this evolution is necessary because human nature as it currently is—which includes marrying for procreation—biologically precludes total *imitatio Christi.* The human ego, he explains, is at the core of this problem:

> "To love a person *as one's own self* according to the commandment of Christ is impossible. … The law of individuality on earth is the constraint, "I" is the stumbling block. Christ

[69] The passage comes from three of the Gospels: Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27, and Luke 20:27-40. The Sadducees approach Jesus to goad him into contradicting Moses, who commanded that if a man dies and leaves behind a wife, the man's brother should marry her.

[70] Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been published in 1859 and was translated into Russian in 1864. Russians intellectuals had long been acquainted with the evolutionary theory of Lamarck, however. Dostoevsky seems to have had some familiarity with evolutionary theory.

[71] That is a striking difference from the Underground Man's open hostility to the Laws of Nature, which he believes are soul-crushing and dehumanizing.

> alone was able to do this, but Christ was an eternal ideal toward which man strives and should by the laws of nature strive. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ, as the *idea of man incarnate,* it became as clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual…is to seemingly annihilate that *I,* to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness." (39)[72]

Dostoevsky does not define this "law of individuality," but he almost certainly had in mind something more than utilitarian self-interest. The Underground Man, after all, rejects utilitarianism but remains utterly vain, arrogant, and isolated, unable to transcend his own monadic existence. In the vaguest of terms, Dostoevsky means anything which draws one away from humanity, even in the slightest, and in his mind, that runs far deeper than the Schism of 1054. I would proffer that he meant attachment to the very idea of selfhood, that is, of even the most basic claim to be or to possess one's own self. This is an idea that I will flesh out in much greater detail in my analysis of *Notes from Underground.*[73]

Though both writers fail to articulate precisely what they mean, Dostoevsky's ideal of self-annihilation rhetorically resembles Khomiakov's injunction to renounce "guilty and evil individuality." That is because they are both thinking in the tradition of Christian *kenosis,* the "emptying" of the self,[74] which has two theological dimensions. First, it is a Christological concept referring to Jesus' renunciation of his divine nature to become fully human. The Passion and

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[72] One of the interesting things to note here is that, contrary to the Underground Man, who views the Laws of Nature as despotic and soul-crushing, Dostoevsky sees the Laws of Nature as playing an integral role in human evolution: both physical and spiritual development.

[73] Though I won't delve into them at the moment, these problems are, in fact, present in *Notes from Underground,* which casts the very ground of selfhood into extreme doubt.

[74] From ancient Greek, *kenóein,* "to empty," originally referring to Jesus's emptying himself of his own divinity to become human.

crucifixion are, thus, the culmination of this kenotic act, in which Jesus fully participates in human mortality. Second, kenosis refers to Jesus's renunciation of his own desires to become a vessel of God-the-Father's will. This renunciation is perhaps best exemplified in Jesus' words in Gethsemane, on the eve of his crucifixion, when he invokes the metaphor of the cup: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).[75] In Christian ethics, this foregoing of one's own will is translated into the obligation to one's neighbor, which ought to outweigh all considerations for one's own happiness and well-being.

Both Dostoevsky and Khomiakov locate the fundamental relation underlying Christian brotherhood in this ethical stance: it is the foundation of the love that binds the community of believers.[76] But there is a clear difference between them: where the latter speaks of mere renunciation, the former uses the much more violent metaphor of annihilation.[77] That may well be because Dostoevsky has a much keener sense of the immense difficulty of renouncing one's individuality; after all, he declares that Christ alone could do so. His thoughts, though too undeveloped in the diary entry to be called theology, are likewise more radical than those of

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[75] The cup refers to the eucharistic blood from the Last Supper, earlier that night: "This cup *is* the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20).

[76] In the original Russian of the diary entry, Dostoevsky does not use the exact term "brotherhood" (*"bratstvo"*), but rather "to treat each other as brothers" (*"delaetsia bratom drug drugu"*). It is clear that he is speaking of Christianity as brotherhood, however. It comes from the Greek *philia*, or "brotherly love," one of the four forms of love, the others being *storge* (familial), *eros* (erotic or romantic), and *agape* (divine). What is interesting about both Dostoevsky and Khomiakov is the extent to which they merge *agape* and *philia*. Both seem to suggest that they are not merely inextricable from each other, but perhaps even indistinguishable. On the other hand, Dostoevsky views *eros* and *storge* as temporarily necessary, but ultimately hostile, to *philia* and *agape*..

[77] In Russian, "*unichtozhit'*."

Khomiakov, for Dostoevsky sees the law of individuality persisting in relationships where Khomiakov does not.

For instance, Dostoevsky believed that not only the "I," but marriage itself is an egregious stumbling block to Christian love. This is in direct contrast with Khomiakov, who believed marriage could exist harmoniously within the state of *sobornost,* which sanctified it.[78] Dostoevsky, on the other hand, writes, "Marriage and the giving in marriage of a woman is as it were the greatest deviation from humanism, the complete isolation of the pair from everyone (little remains for everyone)" (40). This is perhaps an extreme view, and one may wonder at the character of Dostoevsky's own marriages, but he is, to a certain degree, putting forth a religious version of an anarchist critique of marriage. He evidently suggests that the exclusivity of marriage both reinforces egoist desire and, apparently, takes too much energy, focus, or devotion, which should be turned outward to humanity in what he calls "the merging of the whole *I,* that is, of knowledge and the synthesis '*with everyone.'"*

[78] Khomiakov believed that marriage had a spiritual basis in the creation of Adam and Eve. He writes, "Thus, marriage is not a contract; it is not a legal obligation, not legal servitude. Rather, it is a renewal of a type established by divine law; it is an organic and therefore mutual union. That has always been the meaning of marriage in the eyes of the Church, which has recognized it as a sacrament and mystery" (99). Marriage has long been accepted in Christianity; indeed, Christianity might not have survived without it. But early Christianity showed a deep ambivalence toward marriage. Paul accepted it, but mainly for those too weak-willed to resist the temptation to fornicate: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." (1 Cor. 7:1-2) There are moments in the Gospel in which Jesus is startlingly hostile to marriage and family: "If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

That does not mean that marriage and procreation are wholly bad. Far from it: they are necessary for the "changes of generations," and evidently wither away eschatologically when the resurrection takes place at the end of history:

> [Christian brotherhood] will be, but it will be after the attainment of the goal, when man is finally reborn according to the laws of nature into another form which neither marries nor is given in marriage, and secondly, Christ himself prophesied His teachings only as an ideal, Himself foretold that until the end of the world there would be struggle and development (the parable of the sword),[79] for this is the law of nature, because life here on earth is developing, but there, being is a full synthesis, externally taking pleasure and being fulfilled, and therefore, time will no longer exist." (40)

There is a certain paradox inherent in the logic of Christian kenotic self-sacrifice, and which may add another dimension to this question of marriage. If sacrifice is taken to the extreme, then, when the self is annihilated, there is no longer any self to give to others, and nothing remains that can experience the "greatest happiness." Contrary to appearances, *sobornost* may be the obverse of *vsemstvo*, after all. This may seem like a fatuous game of words, but its psychological implications are serious. As I have pointed out, Dostoevsky frames Christian love as a sort of violence—not merely self-renunciation, but self-annihilation. When one annihilates all one's desires for oneself, and completely empties oneself to the needs of others, what is left of the self to choose, to act? Dostoevsky's spiritual hopes, in other words, seem to obviate the question of sexual and romantic

[79] The "parable of the sword" refers to Matthew 10, in which Jesus commands his disciples to go out "as sheep among wolves" to proselytize, acknowledging that Christianity will sow conflict even within families: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matthew 10:34-6)

desire. If we are to "melt away with complete indifference," can we isolate our indifference toward ourselves (of which Dostoevsky speaks) from our relation toward others? Or does indifference slowly bleed through the diaphanous mental membranes which partition consciousness, and gradually take hold of the whole conscious subject?[80] I will explore this problem in *Notes from Underground*, as I believe one of the Underground Man's crippling problems is his inability to sincerely desire anything.

There is a parallel between the "change of generations" of which Dostoevsky writes in the diary entry and the "new life" of which Goryanchikov speaks in *Dead House*, especially given his despair at how a "new generation" has cropped up since his isolation from the world. If spiritual development is a social phenomenon, it is understandable that Goryanchikov experiences his expulsion or isolation from it as spiritual atrophy, or even death. Dostoevsky often approaches spiritual and theological matters with greater skepticism in his novels than he does in his other writings. Dostoevsky is usually considered as an anti-utopian writer,[81] but the Christian messianism of this diary entry is not so far from secular utopian yearnings, albeit with "synthesis" and *caritas* instead of free love, and eternal life instead of lemonade oceans.[82]

Indeed, roughly a year earlier, Dostoevsky had published *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, in which he frames this "synthesis" in utopian political, rather than strictly religious, terms.[83] He speaks of a hypothetical "brotherhood" of mutual self-renunciation:

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[80] Though this goes beyond the scope of my dissertation, I would claim that it is a major psychological problem for several of Dostoevsky's characters, in particular Prince Myshkin and Stavrogin.

[81] Especially with regards to *Notes from Underground* and *Demons.*

[82] Indeed, that is partly because secular utopianism is profoundly influenced by the Judeo-Christian messianic conception of time and history.

[83] *Winter Notes* was published in February 1863, and consists of Dostoevsky's reflections on his travels throughout Western Europe during the Summer of 1862. The passage I am drawing from

> "This is my highest happiness: to sacrifice everything to you and to do you no harm in doing so. I shall annihilate myself, I shall melt away with complete indifference, if only your brotherhood will flourish and endure." The brotherhood, on the other hand, must say, "You offer us too much. We have no right not to accept what you offer us…Take everything that is ours too." … Now there is Utopia indeed, gentlemen! Everything is grounded in feeling, in nature, not in reason. (50)

This social contract of self-renunciation is, perhaps, rhetorical posturing, for it is every bit as naïve as anything envisioned by Fourier or Proudhon. But it makes clear the very genuine reason Dostoevsky distances himself from socialist and anarchist utopians of brotherhood: the problem of self-interest. He writes that "there is one hair here, a very fine hair, which, if it falls into the mechanism, will at once crack and destroy everything. Namely: the misfortune to have here even the slightest calculation for one's own advantage" (49). This "calculation for one's own advantage" roughly corresponds with the stumbling block, "I," when Dostoevsky frames the problem in religious terms.[84] There is a distinction to be made, however, which will be crucial to understanding *Notes from Underground:* the Underground Man demolishes the notion that people will tend to act toward their own advantage. Nevertheless, he, willfully acting *against* his own interest, manifests convincingly and vehemently the paradox of self-loathing egoism. This adds another, perhaps more troubling hurdle to overcoming the "I."

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is an explicit engagement with what he believed to be the empty reality of the first two thirds of the French revolutionary motto, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité.* Seeing in France only a sham of Liberty and Equality, which ultimately mask exploitation of the vulnerable, he asks, "What remains of the formula? Brotherhood" (48). It is the socialists, especially Fourier, who take up the project of brotherhood.

[84] Recall from my introductory section that pursuit of one's self-interest is the philosophical basis of Chernyshevsky's "rational egoism," against which the Underground Man polemicizes in Part I of *Notes from Underground.*

In short, one of the main differences between Dostoevsky and the secular utopians at this point is that the latter tend to emphasize the evolution or reorganization of civilization as bringing social relations into harmony with human nature,[85] while Dostoevsky sees the evolution of human nature as bringing about the "synthesis" of I with everyone, which occurs at the resurrection. But as much as he expressed hope in synthesis and annihilation of the self, his creative process did not allow him to rest easy on their promise. Though a Christian writer, he refused to merely write for the eschaton, to fall back onto the *deus ex machina* of resurrection. His obsession with resurrection, on the contrary, treats it as a problem; not an assuring article of faith, but an often unsettling promise which haunts his texts with ghastly images, from Holbein's painting, *The Dead Christ Entombed*, which Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Ippolit discuss in *The Idiot*, to *Notes from Underground's* undead prostitute in her cold, muddy grave, which forms the center of my analysis in the following chapter.

Dostoevsky fictions, furthermore relentlessly ground the problems of synthesis and kenosis in the maelstroms of human psychology. There is a more extreme form of Christian kenotic ethics which poses a major psychological challenge: the almost superhuman command, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). This injunction is the main thrust of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus says, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have *thy* cloke also" (Matthew 5:38-40). The appeal of such an ethics, however radical, is clear, at least until one finds one's own cheek smitten: it transcends ethics as mere economic exchange. In

[85] Both Fourier and Chernyshevsky believed this would be accomplished by people pursuing their self-interest.

"an eye for an eye," the value of the punishment must equal the value of the crime for which it atones—crime as debt, punishment as repayment. Likewise, if one does good merely for the sake of reward, morality remains transactional. How are people to overcome the spiritual utilitarianism and atomization of individuals if even morality is reduced to a matter of exchange?

I would argue that it is one of the primary concerns of *Notes from Underground.* The problem is inherent even in the Underground Man's manner of thinking, which again, as Bakhtin points out, is dependent upon imagining hostile interlocuters to retaliate against. His psychology, furthermore, is utterly pervaded by a sense of eternal and inextricable indebtedness—both financial and moral. It is, in fact, deeply similar to the psychology of debt-morality which Friedrich Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morals,* and the following chapter makes the case that Nietzsche's concept is, in fact, indebted to his reading of Dostoevsky. Liza's embrace of the Underground Man at the end of the novel, on the other hand, is precisely the sort of non-retaliatory act of love that might transcend morality-as-transaction. It ultimately does not redeem him, however, for he experiences this act of compassion as yet another unpayable debt. The Underground Man's refusal of his own redemption, I argue, is at the center of the novel's second part: if the first half relentlessly scrutinizes utopian ideology's compatibility with human psychology, the second subjects the Christian theology of salvation to the same ruthless skepticism.

# Chapter 2

## The Abortive Resurrection in *Notes from Underground*

### I

### The challenge for religious readings

To read *Notes from Underground* is to be trapped in a dark, damp cellar with a man who refuses to shut up. One likely wouldn't remember his countenance or physical frame so much as his incessant voice, which takes on a viscerally physical presence. It fills the dank air, it practically suffocates the reader. Indeed, an overwhelming body of scholarship has been devoted to this voice, to what the Underground Man says and how he speaks. The most famous and influential analysis is probably Bakhtin's study of the Underground Man's verbal loopholes, his antagonistic incorporation of others' (usually imagined) speech about him.[86] In the century since Bakhtin, there have followed many analyses of his various rhetorical and generic modes: philosophical diatribe, ideological polemic, parody (Frank), lamentation (Meerson), confession (Apollonio), even the melancholic ramblings of a psychoanalysis patient (Murav).

However, amid all the commotion about his voice, we often forget that it proceeds from a body. True, the Underground Man himself speaks about his bodily self-consciousness as part of his "sickness," and many scholars address this self-consciousness, for instance, when the officer in the tavern moves him aside like an object, or when he glances in the mirror and takes a malicious satisfaction at his repulsive, disheveled appearance before striding up to the astounded Liza at the brothel. But there is another level in which the Underground Man's anxieties about the material

[86] *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* Ch. 5 section II.: "The hero's monologic discourse and narrational discourse in Dostoevsky's short novels"

conditions of bodily existence has spiritual, theological significance beyond his hyper-self-consciousness. My purpose is to trace how these anxieties are ultimately connected with the Christian promise of resurrection, which, for Dostoevsky, as we have seen, means resurrection of the body.

As I have suggested, *Notes from Underground,* in contrast to the later novels, resists direct theological interpretation. This is partly a peculiar misfortune of history, as Dostoevsky had, in fact, wanted to give Part I a religious dimension, but was thwarted by apparently inept censors. He explains this in an 1864 letter to his brother, dated March 26th: "The censors are a bunch of pigs—those places where I mocked everything and occasionally employed blasphemy *for the sake of form* they allowed to stand; but when, from all that, I deduced the need for faith and for Christ, they took it out" (*Selected Letters* 191). The tsarist censors, tasked with upholding the official morality of Russian Orthodoxy, allowed only the message of rebellion to stand.[87]

The letter presents a methodological and even ethical dilemma: should we bow to the censors' arbitrary redactions, or attempt to fill in the holes left by the censors with what Dostoevsky said and thought elsewhere? Knowing Dostoevsky's grievance, it seems reasonable to search *Notes* for concealed theology, but certain previous attempts have fallen into the trap of projecting into this work ideas that are quite external to it. That would include ideas which are not really Dostoevsky's, such as Shestov's quasi-Nietzschean Christian existentialist reading, with its problematic conflation of the author and his character.

In more ambiguous cases, other readers have projected onto *Notes* ideas which are clearly Dostoevsky's, but not so clearly present in the text. Joseph Frank, for instance, asserts: "It may be

[87] Perhaps they thought it even more dangerous for the rebellious Underground Man to be given the veneer of religious righteousness.

inferred, then, that the only hope is to reject all these bookish, foreign, artificial Western ideologies, and to return to the Russian 'soil' with its spontaneous incorporation of the Christian ideal of unselfish love" (345-6).[88] Konstantin Mochulsky, one of the first major Russian scholars to help establish the field of Dostoevsky studies in the West in the early twentieth century, makes a similar argument: "The force of the underground man's revolt stems not from indifference and doubt, but from a passionate, exalted faith" which cannot emerge because of the tension between his moral instinct and his evil European education" (255). Though Dostoevsky was at this time one of the leading *pochvenniki,* and would later become a rabidly militaristic nationalist, the text of *Notes* never articulates the "Russian-ness" presupposed by Frank's argument. Such a message would also potentially exclude non-Russian readers from the ostensible moral, and especially those readers from the Western nations which birthed these bookish ideologies.

Other scholars have done much to show that Dostoevsky does, in fact, offer a much subtler religious "message" within the text of *Notes* itself. Carol Apollonio, for instance, notes that he chose not to restore the censored passages when he had the opportunity, evidently because he deemed it either artistically sloppy or unnecessary for conveying a Christian message. She offers instead an extremely insightful religious reading based on confessional language within the text itself, arguing that the Underground Man remains beyond salvation because he fails to orient his confession toward God, and rather engages in a sort of exhibitionist self-consolation (519). Olga Meerson has also offered a religious reading that grounds the Underground Man's language—particularly his biblical allusions—in the Old Testament tradition of lamentation, arguing that the

[88] Inferred, that is, from the Underground Man's tendency to blame his acts of cruelty and his prideful nature on books.

novel expresses, “apophatically, the idea of longing for a personal or symbolic Jerusalem,” i.e. the Kindgom of God over and against the Babel of the Crystal Palace (318).

These are, of course, two examples of the critical attention given to how the Underground Man talks. In some sense, any reading has to begin there, for, with the exception of the author’s note at the beginning and the fictional editor’s note at the end, our only source of information is the Underground Man himself. Indeed, though he never explicitly articulates “the need for faith and Christ,” the work is teeming with religiously suggestive language, though it can be highly allusive and difficult to discern. With Meerson and Apollonio’s method in mind, I examine the religious implications of his language about the body and material existence alongside Pauline theology of resurrection. Far from offering a “cure” to the Underground Man’s sickness, I believe that Part II explores the manner in which bodily existence profoundly complicates Christian theology, and the promise of resurrection in particular.

One of the Underground Man’s many paradoxes is that he is simultaneously intensely visceral on one hand, and, on the other, ethereal, almost shade-like character. There is perhaps no more withdrawn, detached character in all of literature, for the Underground Man has isolated himself so thoroughly that little seems to remain of his existence but his disembodied voice. Apollonio, in a fascinating article, “I gotta be мы,” makes the case that he is, in fact, a disembodied pronoun: his desire to be fully autonomous, an “I” with no “thou,” produces an incomplete, highly unstable “self,” which turns him into a ghost-like presence, “*somehow less than fully real*” (29, her italics). Likewise, when the Underground Man speaks of concrete matters, like people around him, he often speaks of them in abstract, depersonalized categories, often committing the same

sort of generalizing, essentializing, deterministic manner of thinking which he so resents, and which is the target of his ideological polemic.[89]

There is, however, a certain paradox about the Underground Man's ghostliness: despite his spectral quality, he often is often reduced to a merely physical presence. To the officer in the tavern, he is a moveable object (or a bump in the street). His first encounter with Liza is, at first, almost entirely physical—lying in the dark, he can only feel the form of her body, hardly sees her face and eyes, and struggles to break through to her verbally and emotionally. This is, in part, due to the economic nature of their encounter: Liza sells her body to be "consumed" by the narrator's. I would argue that the Underground Man inhabits a sort of "spectral body"—neither fully material nor fully incorporeal. Far from cancelling itself out, this split (or coexistence, which is, in this case, essentially the same) between the bodily and ghostly makes either half all the more palpable and troubling. It is akin to being buried alive, which is how the Underground Man describes his self-imposed isolation:

> [I]t's precisely in that cold, abominable state of half-despair and half-belief, in that conscious burial of [one]self alive in the underground for over forty years because of its pain, in that powerfully created, yet partly dubious hopelessness of its own predicament, in all that venom of unfulfilled desire turned inward[…], herein precisely lies the essence of that strange enjoyment I was talking about earlier. (9)

For all the withdrawn and abstract rebellion of his current state, the Underground Man also speaks with a wealth of vivid images and encounters: the Crystal Palace, the chicken coop, the piano key, the bump in the street, his hideous face—all laden with psychological and poetic meaning that is

[89] For example, "men of action," "decent men," "cultivated men," "the Russian romantic."

anything but abstract. I propose one of these poetic images—a rather overlooked one—as a lens through which to re-read *Notes from Underground*: the abortive resurrection.

## II

### The abortive resurrection

As the Underground Man lies next to Liza at the brothel, squirming under the unbearable post-coital silence, he clumsily attempts to make conversation, but stalls and sputters until he suddenly recalls something he had witnessed the previous day: "'Today some people were carrying a coffin and nearly dropped it,' I suddenly said aloud, having no desire whatever to begin a conversation, but just so, almost accidentally" (62). The people, evidently two gravediggers, had been carrying the coffin out of the basement of a "house of ill repute" (63). It evidently contained the body of a prostitute who had died of consumption while in debt to her madam. So, at least, the Underground Man tells Liza, though he confesses to the reader—not to her—that "I invented a great deal of this" (63).

He proceeds to invent a great deal more, weaving together a sort of brutal sermon to torment Liza under the guise of concern for her soul. He refers to this as "a game" [*igra*], explaining to his readers that "It was the sport [*igra*] that attracted me most of all," and, indeed, he gets quite carried away trying to dazzle her with his rhetorical acrobatics (65). I argue, however, that something deeper is at hand, for the conversation hardly begins as a game, but rather, as we have seen, lurches into the subject of death quite unexpectedly. Though he later explicitly holds up this dead prostitute as an image of Liza's future, the fact that he blurts out this memory quite *involuntarily* suggests a psychoanalytic displacement: that he is projecting his own fear about death

and the corruption of flesh. The Underground Man's speech throughout the entire novel is so tightly controlled, so minutely calculated to achieve its various manipulative effects, that every breakdown of control is laden with meaning—something, perhaps, which he cannot express directly. The possibility that this particular breakdown of control is a projection of his own fear is reinforced when he then incredulously asks the defiantly stoical Liza, "It really makes no difference to you, dying?"[90]

He evidently takes her indifference as a challenge: can he break her? As his brutal sermon mounts, he weaves in two more horrific visions, freely embellishing with the most lurid details. In one, a drunken prostitute sits in a doorway after being locked out in the frigid cold as a cruel joke. Soldiers and cabmen taunt her as she wails and beats a salted fish against the steps; her face is a grotesque smear of makeup, tears, blood, and bruises after being beaten by a cabman. The Underground Man imagines, "perhaps eight or ten years ago this same girl…arrived here from somewhere or other, all fresh like a little cherub, innocent, and pure; she knew no evil and blushed at every word" (71).[91] Corruption of the soul follows corruption of the flesh.

The "game" climaxes in a final nightmare vision. The gravediggers carry the dead prostitute—now clearly merged with Liza—out to a cemetery and unceremoniously dump her into a cold, watery grave, and crudely joke:

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[90] My translation. The original Russian: «Неужели тебе все равно, умирать-то?» (*SS* 519). Katz translates this as "Doesn't it matter to you if you die? (63). I believe this shifts the emphasis to whether Liza dies as a prostitute, rather than the general, existential fact of death which the Underground Man seems to be getting at.

[91] Apollonio points out that "the fish, a traditional symbol of Christ, is pickled and dead, powerless, and the prostitute, denied its power of salvation (unlike her biblical predecessor), can only beat it against the steps and face her own grim death" (521). We might also note that the fish is salted to keep it from rotting—that is, to protect it from literal corruption—thus adding yet another symbolic layer to the debased religious imagery.

> "It's her fate to go down with her legs up, that's the sort of girl she was…See, it's lying on its side. Was she a human being or not? Oh, never mind, cover it up." They won't want to spend much time arguing over you. They'll cover your coffin quickly with wet, blue clay and then go off to the tavern….That'll be the end of your memory on earth; for other women, children will visit their graves, fathers, husbands—but for you—no tears, no sighs, no remembrances. No one, absolutely no one in the whole world, will ever come to visit you; your name will disappear from the face of the earth, just as if you'd never been born and had never existed. Mud and filth, no matter how you pound on the lid of your coffin at night when other corpses arise: "Let me out, kind people, let me live on earth…let me live in the world once again!" (72)

At this point he successfully reduces Liza to tears, "but," he realizes, "it wasn't only the sport…" (72). This is one of many pregnant ellipses that appear when he cannot quite articulate what he is feeling, yet another psychoanalytically pregnant breakdown of verbal control. So, I will attempt to articulate it for him: in short, this is a ghastly image of what I will call abortive resurrection, and it is a projection of his own spiritual anxieties. Life and death are bound together in perverse marriage: some spark of life has returned to the prostitute's body, but things have gone drastically wrong, for she remains isolated, trapped in her coffin, unable to rejoin the living. Her body, her life, have not undergone the spiritual transformation of the flesh, but remain trapped in filth and corruption. In 1 Corinthians, Paul taunts, "O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory?" (15:55). The Underground Man seems to point to the prostitute lying in her grave as though to answer, "here."

This image is not merely some grotesque nightmare of the undead; it has deep theological implications, for the prostitute is pleading to live again in the world, that is, to share in the Christian

promise of resurrection on earth, as Dostoevsky understood it. Furthermore, when the Underground Man later mocks himself for fantasizing about saving Liza from this fate, he sardonically refers to himself as "*voskresitel'*" ["resurrector"] (544, my translation).[92] I would suggest, in fact, that it is the single most crucial image for understanding the Underground Man's spiritual anxieties. It has, however, been almost entirely overlooked. Shestov, who over the span of hundreds of pages and multiple books practically constructed a theology from *Notes from Underground*, never once mentions this image. Frank folds it into the Underground Man's abusive tirade as a whole, thus passing over its extraordinary complexity. He writes, "Mingling horrible details of degradation with images of felicity, whose banality makes them all the more poignant…, the underground man succeeds in bringing to the surface Liza's true feelings of shame about herself and precipitating her complete emotional breakdown" (Frank 342).[93]

Even scholars who explicitly mention resurrection in *Notes from Underground* have neglected the image. For instance, René Girard, whose monograph on Dostoevsky is even entitled *Resurrection from the Underground*, never mentions it.[94] A particularly representative example is Mochulsky, who, along with Shestov, is one of the early scholars to see the religious dimension of

[92] Apollonio also notes the use of this term, "resurrector," to signify the Underground Man's blasphemous "Man-Godhood," his "desired usurpation of God" (518). I fully concur with her analysis, but I am stressing not his sacrilege, but rather his anxiety about the promise of resurrection.

[93] I disagree with Frank regarding these "images of felicity," which I find to be deceptively violent and disturbing, a vision of emotional isolation and abuse disguised as family bliss, which I will discuss later.

[94] Girard actually discusses *Notes from Underground* very little in *Resurrection from the Underground.* This, however, is because he discusses *Notes* at length in his brilliant earlier work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* in which he analyzes the Underground Man as the epitome of his theory of mimetic desire. This is a highly insightful reading, especially considering its refutation of the existentialist readings which were predominant at the time of its publication (1961 in French). Its major drawback, however, is its complete failure to mention not only the image of the prostitute, but also the entire encounter with Liza.

*Notes,* which he believed is ultimately concerned with resurrection. It is the only force that can heal the Underground Man's fractured consciousness: "No, evil is not overcome by education, but by a miracle. What is impossible to man, is possible to God. Not reeducation, but *resurrection"* (257). But Mochulsky, too, fails to address the severe doubt which this image of the grave casts on the hope of eternal life, nor does he examine the often oblique language and images concerning resurrection that are in the actual text. Perhaps any religious reading of any text must ultimately rely upon a *deus ex machina,* but Mochulsky's intervenes too quickly, as though no one would contest that this "miracle" could dissolve the real-world entanglements and conditions of resurrection which the Underground Man presents. On the other hand, it is precisely by engaging with and working through such entanglements that we might see the novel's concern with resurrection as meaningful not only to Christian readers, but also to readers who do not accept a Christian message *prima facie.*

The only scholar I have encountered who explicitly addresses the image—and the despair, rather than the hope, which it instills—is Michael Katz, the translator, who notes its Gogolian resonances in a footnote to the text.[95] However, while there certainly is a comical Gogolian thread running through the entire text—particularly in the office scenes, and the purchase of the overcoat for the grand bump—the horrific, macabre image of the prostitute crying in her grave is utterly stripped of humor. It does, however, find echoes in Dostoevsky's own subsequent work, most famously in *The Idiot,* in which Ippolit Terentyev, the precocious (if histrionic) teenager, muses on the reproduction of the Holbein painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,* which

[95] Katz writes: "This unhappy alternative to memory characterizes the hero's death in Gogol's short story "The Overcoat" (1842), where, a day later, Petersburg carries on as if Akaky Akakievich had never existed" (72).

hangs in Rogozhin's home. As he reflects in his "Explanation," the suicide letter he reads aloud to Myshkin et al., "It is strange to look on this dreadful picture of the mangled corpse of the Saviour, and to put this question to oneself: 'But, strange to say, as one looks at this corpse of a tortured man, a peculiar and curious question arises; if just such a corpse (and it must have been just like that) was seen by all His disciples, by those who were to become His chief apostles, by the women that followed Him and stood by the cross, by all who believed in Him and worshipped Him, how could they believe that that martyr would rise again? The question instinctively arises: if death is so awful and the laws of nature so mighty, how can they be overcome?" (388-9).[96]

The painting can be unsettling even to non-believers: it depicts a pallid, bloodless corpse with eyes rolled back and mouth slightly open, as though so exhausted from suffering that, though its agony persists beyond death, it cannot muster the strength to wince or groan in pain. To Ippolit, the painting represents Nature "in the shape of an immense, merciless, dumb beast, or more correctly…though it sounds strange, in the form of a huge machine of the most modern construction which, dull and insensible, has aimlessly clutched, crushed, and swallowed up a great priceless Being [*bestsennoe sushchestvo*]…" (389). This conception of Nature is very close to the

[96] Prince Myshkin reacts very similarly to the painting earlier in the novel, when he visits Rogozhin's home: "Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith," to which Rogozhin mysteriously replies, perhaps referring to Ippolit, "That's what it is doing" (206). Dostoevsky had seen this painting himself in Dresden, and it captivated him, causing him deep spiritual despair. The painting's dimensions are very unusual: it is much longer than it is high, as though it were a coffin itself, trapping Christ within. The emaciated body with its painfully bony almost rheumatically contorted hands lies emphatically horizontal, as though the vertical motion of resurrection and ascension were inconceivable. The painting takes on a heightened emotional effect through the perspective of the fatally consumptive Ippolit, the precocious teenager, whose imminent death pushes him into urgent confrontation between his nihilist convictions and his longing for some sort of spiritual meaning.

mathematical indifference the Underground Man imputes to it, and crushes anything which to stand beyond calculation and valuation (priceless Being).

The short story "Bobok" has even more similarities to *Notes from Underground*: the hallucinating, perhaps schizophrenic main character, visits a cemetery after attending the funeral of a distant relative. The setting is virtually identical to that in *Notes:* "Cold, too; but it's October, after all. I took a walk around the graves….I took a look in these wretched graves, and it was dreadful: water, and what water! It was quite green and…but why go on about it?" (173) After assisting the pallbearers in taking a coffin to its grave, he falls asleep on a grave and awakes to the voices of recently-buried corpses, who are prone to an "inertia of consciousness" which remains for some time after death. They begin bickering from their graves when they believe no one is around, and about the same petty things as when they were alive, notably, who owes money to whom: "'How can we overcharge you when you haven't paid a thing on your account since January? You've a tidy little bill in the shop.' 'That's ridiculous. In my opinion it is utterly ridiculous to try to collect debts here! Go up above. Ask my niece; she inherited it all.'" (175).

Debt, calculation, isolation, the mucky autumn water seeping into the grave like the formless chill of death, admixing organic and inorganic matter—Dostoevsky was fixated on a very idiosyncratic, nightmare vision of the resurrection, and the first time it appears is in this image of the un-dead prostitute in *Notes.* Because this image of abortive resurrection is one of such extreme doubt and despair, it is worthwhile to address exactly how the theology of resurrection might yet be meaningful, and thus illuminate something meaningful in *Notes* beyond *sobornost,* which I discussed in the previous chapter, for Dostoevsky's concern evolves beyond understanding the body and resurrection metaphorically. As I mentioned, Christian belief has long had a complicated relationship with Platonist body-soul dualism. When integrated into Christian theology, this

dualism has often been used to either scorn or de-emphasize the importance of the body and of earthly existence. On the other hand, the insistence on resurrection of the flesh is one way of asserting, in a Western world permeated by the Christian tradition, the spiritual dignity and integrity of the body and of life on earth. Perhaps more importantly, it orients theology around an ontology rooted in the body.

Alain Badiou's recent book on the Apostle Paul addresses this theological orientation quite well, and is quite fitting for our purposes, as he is an atheist who is nonetheless essentially concerned with the event of bodily resurrection.[97] Badiou's purpose differs drastically from mine, but his understanding of Christian faith as participation in the event of resurrection resonates with Dostoevsky's. Badiou writes:

> To understand [death's] function, it is necessary to forget the Platonic apparatus of the soul and the body, of the soul's survival, or its immortality. Paul ignores these parameters completely. The death about which Paul tells us, which is ours as much as Christ's, has nothing biological about it, no more so for that matter than life. Death and life are thoughts, interwoven dimensions of the global subject, wherein "body" and "soul" are indiscernible, (which is why, for Paul, the Resurrection is necessarily the resurrection of the body—that is to say, of the divided subject *in its entirety*). (68)

"Participation" in Christ's resurrection is a spiritual reorientation toward life over death, in which the body's relation to the world becomes a site of spiritual regeneration. This is profoundly significant for *Notes*, considering its overarching narrative form. In the work's frame, a fictional

[97] Badiou's book is quite interesting, but has a clear agenda: to appropriate Paul as a new sort of revolutionary figure who can defy and transcend both Jewish Law (The "old covenant," as Paul refers to it) and the Greek philosophical—especially Platonic—worldview.

"editor" stumbles across a nameless author's "notes" or "memoirs." He never encounters that author, the Underground Man, who has either died or vanished, remaining secluded in his Underground. We, the readers, encounter only his "voice," and not even its physical sound. The process of writing his notes is one of establishing himself as a metaphysical rebel against the universe—the laws of nature, self-interest, rationalism, etc. But, as he has withdrawn so entirely from that universe, it has also been an act of disembodiment, an attempt at transformation into pure intellect.

As I have suggested, the significance of the prostitute trapped in her coffin lies not only in recognizing it as an image of the Underground Man himself. The description of the undead prostitute buried in cold, wet snow and mud resembles nothing so much as the Underground Man's earlier description of himself: "in that cold, abominable state of half-despair and half-belief, in that conscious burial of [one]self alive in the underground." In fact, there is a vast web of connections between them, which I will sort into four overarching similarities:

1) Divided space, physical isolation. The dead prostitute is carried from a cellar and dumped in a grave—from one Underground to another, mirroring the Underground Man's cycles of emergence and ultimately final withdrawal to his underground refuge, a metaphorical grave where, sixteen years later, having severed all human relations but that with his servant, he narrates his encounter with Liza to an imaginary reader. The prostitute with the salted fish, on the other hand, is locked *out,* kept at the threshold in the cold wet snow. The position is reversed, but it nonetheless fits the Underground Man's image of himself as existing outside and isolated from humanity, though this is also his conflicted

desire as much as a source of pain—recall his fantasy of being thrown out of the tavern and onto the street.

2) Physical contact. Note the Underground Man's anxiety about the body *beyond death*, the humiliation of being dropped headfirst into the grave and carelessly left on her side, the chill of mud enveloping her. The gravedigger's perfunctory "Was she a human being or not?" only emphasizes that they handle her as an undignified thing. The Underground Man's disgust recalls his rage at being plucked up and set down like an object by the officer in the first episode of Part II—even the physical action is nearly the same. The human is reduced to a movable object.

3) Supplication. The prostitute's cries to be let out mirror one of the Underground Man's crucial motivations for writing: the desire to leave the Underground, as he admits toward the end of Part I: "…I know myself as surely as two times two, that it isn't really the underground that's better, but something different, altogether different, something that I long for, but I'll never be able to find!" (27). Note, however, the crucial difference: the prostitute tells us that she wants to live in the world, while the Underground Man cannot articulate what he thirsts for. The prostitute thus conveys what the Underground Man can't express directly: a plea for salvation, which goes unheard, just as his "notes" ostensibly remain unread, for both characters dwell in a state of isolation from all human relationships except those which are economic in nature. If *Notes* constitutes a warped, stifled cry for salvation from the Underground, then the prostitute in her

coffin is in ways a hyper-compressed version of the novel itself, condensed into a single image.

4) Debt. Recall that he tells Liza that the dead prostitute had died in debt to her madam—it is the only relation she has which persists beyond the grave. He then asks Liza, "aren't *you* already in debt to your madam? …There's your chain! You will never *buy yourself out*. That's the way it's done. It's just like selling our soul to the devil…" (65, my emphases). The great irony in the Underground Man terrorizing Liza with the specter of debt is that, throughout the novel, he takes on debt after debt after debt. His debts, moreover, correlate with his impulses to leave the Underground, to enter "real life." In other words, debt is the condition under which he thinks he can physically exist in the world of the living, which means, in part, establishing physical contact with others. It is also, in a very real sense, the material condition which allows the "plot" to move forward, as I will demonstrate.[98]

There are, furthermore, telling ways in which the Underground Man reverses agency in these images, and these inversions are all linked with his warped sense of victimhood. The prostitute with the fish, for instance, has just been beaten by a cabman, whereas he has just beaten

[98] The importance of this image is as a sort of condensed version of the entire text is even greater considering the title of Part II: Apropos of Wet Snow. Though of course it is a snowy night to begin with, the Underground Man repeatedly emphasizes the wet snow in the grave: "A nasty day to be buried!" I began, simply to avoid being silent…'Snow, slush…'" (63). And several pages later: "There'll be slush, filth, and wet snow in your grave—why bother for the likes of you?" (72). It is connected with thoughts of death, it seeps into the underground, it is the inescapable cold, indefinite matter of a universe that promises no redemption beyond death. "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" also contains an image of a muddy grave and frigid water seeping into one's coffin.

a cabman himself some two hours earlier. She is taunted and viciously humiliated by the soldiers and cabmen, whereas he taunts others and humiliates himself. She is kicked out of brothel after brothel and left friendless and alone, whereas he wants to be thrown out of establishments and spits on anyone's tentative offer of friendship. Both suffer deeply from their extreme isolation, but his, in many ways, is self-imposed, a result of his pride. In other words, the Underground Man inverts and reconstitutes himself in the image of the prostitute as victim of actions he has committed. He does not arrive at this psychological insight, however; the image remains just beyond recognition.[99] But it is precisely because he cannot make these connections that it is necessary to unveil and draw out their deeper significance. Though the categories I have proposed are themselves clearly interconnected, and thus cannot be neatly and separately addressed, I will begin with what the Underground as a metaphorical space means in the context of resurrection.

## III

## The Underground as Metaphoric Space[100]

As the Underground Man dashes off to the brothel in pursuit of Zverkov and his former classmates, he heatedly whispers to himself, "[H]ere it is at last, a confrontation with reality" (57). What he means in the most immediate sense is that he is about to realize his violent literary fantasies by challenging Zverkov to a duel *à la* Lermontov and Pushkin's Silvio. Naturally, things do not go as planned because it is, after all, real life, and not a swashbuckling romance. The

[99] This is one example in which Bakhtin may have been wrong to claim that we can say nothing about the Underground Man that he himself does not know already.

[100] To my knowledge, scholars tend to address the Underground primarily as a psychological condition, rather than as a conceptual space. Even Bakhtin, who explored Dostoevsky's "chronotopes" so insightfully, actually says very little about the spatial characteristics of the Underground.

Underground Man constantly contrasts his Underground, including his fantastical, literary dreams and delusions, with what he variously refers to as "real life" [*deistvitel'naia zhizn'*], "reality" [*deistvitel'nost'*] or "living life" [*zhivaia zhizn'*].[101] The episodes of Part II, if plotted as position over time, form a sort of sine curve of emerging from the Underground up into "living life" before once again retreating below, where he ultimately remains, becoming the disembodied voice we know so well. If the world above is "living life," the Underground is a place of death.

The Underground immediately calls to mind two religious images: hell and the grave. Hell, in addition to apocalyptic descriptions of a subterranean lake of fire, is often characterized as a place where the damned are cut off from the presence of God. This seems to describe the underground quite well.[102] So, too, does the grave, as the Underground Man is occasionally aware—we have seen how he acknowledges "that conscious burial of [one]self alive in the underground…" In the final line of the novel, he wearily confides, "But enough; I don't want to write any more 'from Underground'…." (91). Though the fictional editor tells us that the narrator is ultimately unable to stop writing, this admission recalls that thirst for "something different," and hints, perhaps, at a potential exit from the Underground, a resurrection from the grave, especially if we consider it to be a desire to overcome his isolation and "embrace" the world along the lines of *sobornost.* While this schema certainly provides much of the metaphysical structure and

[101] Almost every venture into "reality" or "living life" is motivated by a desire for physical human contact: to be thrown out of a window, to be embraced by the officer, to bump into the officer, to "embrace humanity," to slap Zverkov and pull Olympia's hair. Sometimes the contact is not initially desired, but unforeseen, as in Liza's embrace.

[102] In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Father Zosima comes characterizes hell as "the suffering of being unable to love" (360)**.** This, too, characterizes the Underground Man, but alters the definition of hell from God's absence to the inability to experience his presence.

emotional force driving the plot of *Notes*, I aim to show that it is far more complex than one might imagine.

Though hell and the grave are clearly integral aspects of the Underground, neither quite adequately explains what it means to the Underground Man himself. He attempts to convince us, his readers, that his subterranean existence is not a spiritual death after all, at least when compared to our own unconscious lives: "What concerns me in particular, is that in my life I've only taken to an extreme that which you haven't even dared to take halfway; what's more, you've mistaken your cowardice for good sense; and, in so deceiving yourself, you've consoled yourself. So, in fact, I may even be *'more alive'* than you are" (91, my emphasis). (Of course, he, too, is only consoling himself). Moreover, the Underground as an image of hell does not account for its primary function as a sanctuary. Following every clash with "living life," the Underground Man takes refuge in his underground headspace, where he licks his wounds, indulges in his delirious fantasies, and erects an almost impregnable citadel of speech, within which he exercises nearly total control. It is an artificial space which seems to exist apart from the world because he has cordoned it off from "living life."

I would argue that, on a very profound psychological level, the Underground constitutes a sort of negative, inverted realm of the sacred, a place of stasis beyond the flux and chaos of profane material reality, whether that be the iron Laws of Nature, the suffocating rationalism of 2+2=4 or the insipid bourgeois emptiness of the Zverkovs of the world. It is a place where twice two can be five and a person can be "spontaneous" in spite of the law of self-interest—in other words, a place where miracles can occur, though they be the paltry miracles of a decrepit god—that is, the Underground Man himself. In many ways these characteristics approximate—albeit in debased form—those of sacred space, such as a temple. The Latin word *templum* originally referred to a

space that was "cut off" from the world. Mary Beard, the historian of ancient Rome, explains that Roman augurs demarcated boundaries for sacred grounds, which they then declared "*effatum et liberatum,*"—defined and freed (22).[103] This is essentially what the Underground Man does: he defines a space and ostensibly liberates it from the Laws of Nature, History, materialist determinism, and the ego of the Other, thereby inaugurating the Underground.

What lies beyond (or above) is the banality of the material world—or, we might say, the profane. Both the concept and the word "profane" emerged from the Latin "*pro fano,"* literally, *before* (as in outside) the *fanum*, another word for a defined sacred ground. It is the world outside the boundaries of the sacred, therefore undefined and chaotic. This distinction presents an apparent contradiction, however, for the Underground Man views the outer world simultaneously as *too* defined—for example, by the Laws of Nature and rational self-interest—and too undefined. His attempts to enter real life never succeed, for life defies the various narratives he seeks to impose on it. Likewise, the Underground can appear undefined, capable of behaving irrationally, as with 2+2=5. The paradox is only apparent, however, for the issue is not whether the real world and the Underground are defined, but *who* defines them. The Underground Man defines twice two as five in the Underground, but has no such power in the world above.

One of the first major thinkers to theorize about the relation of the sacred to the profane was the French sociologist, Émile Durkheim. Though he almost certainly would have been familiar with Dostoevsky's fiction, as he was an intellectual in *fin-de-siecle* Paris, Durkheim, a positivist, had little to do with the religious Dostoevsky in terms of worldview. Nevertheless, they did share many concerns, and the French sociologist's analysis of the sacred and the profane helps illuminate

[103] Beard *et al.* note that the nature of this "freedom" was likely left very nebulous (ibid).

that relation in *Notes from Underground.* In his groundbreaking work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim posits that the key relation between the sacred and profane is not one of hierarchy—quite the contrary, sometimes people treat sacred objects with marked lack of reverence, and this does not necessarily constitute sacrilege.[104] The primary relationship, rather, is—according to Durkheim—absolute otherness:

> [T]he sacred and profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common. The energies at play in one are not merely those encountered in the other, but raised to a higher degree; they are different in kind. This opposition has been conceived differently in different religions. Here, localizing the two kinds of things in different regions of the physical universe has appeared sufficient to separate them; there, the sacred is thrown into an ideal and transcendent milieu, while the residuum is abandoned as the property of the material world. But while the forms of the contrast are variable, the fact of it is universal. (36)

In the context of *Notes from Underground,* these "energies" can be conceived of as, among other things, the laws of nature (causality, determinism, mathematics, history) and self-interest in the profane world, and, in the Underground, the possibilities and limits of purely linguistic existence, pure potentiality, 2+2=5; the conditions of spiritual redemption or salvation straddle the two realms uncomfortably, as will be made clear. Indeed, the Underground Man's thirst for that "something different, altogether different" [*sovsem drugoe*] seems to rely on a distinction similar to that of Durkheim's emphasis on the absolute otherness of sacred and profane energies. However, the

[104] Durkheim gives the example of a worshipper who "beats [his] fetish when he is displeased, only to be reconciled with it again if, in the end, it becomes more amenable to the wishes of its worshipper" (36). An obvious example from literature would be the casual manner in which *Moby-Dick's* Queequeg pockets his idol, Yojo, after he concludes his own worship.

Underground Man enacts the distinction in a perverse way: his shade-like existence is a sort of spiritually empty abandonment of the material world for the supreme isolation of the "false" sacred. In fact, this "false" sacred may be part and parcel of the sacred itself: as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes in his essay, "In Praise of Profanation," "[There] is an ambiguity that seems inherent in the vocabulary of the sacred as such: the adjective *sacer* means both 'august, consecrated to the gods,' and (as Freud noted) 'cursed, excluded from the community.'" I argue that the Underground Man's apparently perverse delineation of space is not incidental, not solely attributable to his personal corruption, but is in fact rooted in a complex tension, which the text makes eminently palpable, between the sacred and profane, whose relation is more ambiguous and muddled than Durkheim supposed.

Though I have not encountered any direct references to Durkheim's sacred-profane dichotomy in Dostoevsky scholarship, the theologian Rowan Williams,[105] employs a similar distinction in his recent and highly insightful work, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction,* and particularly its first chapter, "Christ against the Truth?" The chapter draws its name from one of the most famous letters in all of Russian literary history, written by Dostoevsky to Natalia Fonvizina shortly following his release from prison in Siberia in 1854 (though he was not yet allowed to return from exile). Dostoevsky writes, "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ, rather than with the truth."[106] Williams picks up on the spatial dimension of this credo, posing the question, "If Christ and 'the truth' are outside each other's realm (and the territorial resonance of Dostoevsky's choice of the word 'outside,' *vne,* is important), [can there] be no

[105] Williams is also the former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002-12).
[106] Quoted in Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859,* 160.

ground for thinking that Christ can make a difference in the world of specific historical interaction?" (26).

This argument hinges on a definition of "truth" as "the ensemble of sustainable propositions about the world" (25), which, though somewhat vague, might be understood as the laws of nature, of cause and effect, or anything else that is empirically, rationally, psychologically, or even culturally demonstrable. This is where we can detect the sacred/profane dichotomy, for if Christ is "outside" such a truth, then he represents or embodies an existence that is wholly other in its laws and dynamics. Williams asserts that "Christ's place 'outside the truth' becomes in effect Christ's place in or with or as the reality of a freedom beyond the systems of the world" (31). Manifestations of faith in Dostoevsky thus stem from a divine "irruption" of gratuitous compassion or joy into this world of systems. Williams cites, among others, the example of Alyosha Karamazov's "plagiarism," when he silently kisses his tormented but arrogant brother, Ivan, in imitation of Christ's kissing the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan's "poem." Through the prototype of Christ's own freely given, wordless gesture of compassion, "human freedom is enabled to respond as it needs to in order to be itself when this nonworldly freedom becomes apparent" (31). In *Notes from Underground*, a similar "irruption" comes through Liza, who, in response to the Underground Man's rage and abuse, offers him compassion in the similarly silent gesture of an embrace.[107]

[107] Williams' argument is perhaps even closer to Mircea Eliade's notion of *hierophany*, the appearance or manifestation of the sacred, which acts as a sort of rupture (or irruption) into the profane world, such that a different sort of "absolute reality" (Christ, in Dostoevsky's credo) is revealed, recasting the space around it ("truth") as somehow unreal: "When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world" (Eliade 21). Eliade, too, suggests that Christ is a hierophany: "From the most elementary hierophany—e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree-to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are

In such readings, the Underground Man fails to transcend the Underground and "real life" for any truly "other" way of being, and receives only an *ersatz* "redemption" when a distant relation dies and leaves him six thousand rubles, allowing him to permanently withdraw into his shadow world.[108] There is, however, a problem for Williams' argument that stems from his definition of "truth." Dostoevsky uses the word "*istina*," as opposed to the word "*pravda.*"[109] Though *pravda* originally signified a higher register of truth—it is related to concepts like righteousness (*pravednost'*), Christ refers to *himself* as *istina,* in Dostoevsky's beloved Gospel of John: *"Ia esm' put', istina, i zhizn'"* [I am the way, the truth, and the life] (John 14:6).

Regardless of whether Dostoevsky had Jesus' proclamation in mind when he wrote his letter, it does complicate the division of realms in Williams' argument (and in the Christian worldview in general). True, the concept of divine transcendence is hardly alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, the emphasis on the *absolute* otherness of the divine and sacred which we find in, say, Platonism, is not so cut and dry in Christianity, in which the divine Word

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confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (11).

[108] That is, "redemption" in the sense I mentioned in the previous chapter—of manumission, or, in this case, for the Underground Man's "freedom" from the real world. I have not seen anyone address this matter of his inheritance, but I touch on it later in this chapter.

[109] Many Russian speakers will note that *istina* generally connotes a higher, metaphysical, religious sort of truth, and *pravda* a more everyday sort. That, however, is not the problem, for it is a relatively recent reversal of their semantic registers. As Vladimir Dal' writes in his authoritative dictionary, "*Istina ot zemli, dostoianie razuma cheloveka, a pravda s nebes, dar blagostyni*" (*Istina* is from the earth, the domain of human reason; *pravda* is from the heavens, a gift of blessing.) (http://slovardalja.net/word.php?wordid=12193, my translation.) This is derived from the 85th Psalm (though the 84th in Russian): "*Istina vozniknet iz zemli, I pravda priniknet s nebes* [Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven]. (*Psaltir':* 84:12; Psalms: 85:11). https://bible.by/syn/19/84/#12

becomes flesh and the sacred and profane comingle.[110] Agamben explains the implications of this comingling:

> [T]he idea of the simultaneous presence of two natures in a single person or victim was an effort to cope with confusion between the divine and human that threatened to paralyze the sacrificial machine of Christianity. The doctrine of incarnation guaranteed that divine and human nature were both present without ambiguity in the same person…Nevertheless, in Christianity, with the entrance of God as the victim of sacrifice and with the strong presence of messianic tendencies that put the distinction between sacred and profane into crisis, the religious machine seems to reach a limit point or zone of undecidability, where the divine sphere is always in the process of collapsing into the human sphere and man always already passes over into the divine. (79)

Though I am not primarily concerned here with Christology—the theology of the divine and human natures of Christ—this mingling has consequences for the Christian promise of resurrection of the dead, which is made possible through Jesus' own death and resurrection, and is therefore premised on his incarnation. Perhaps Dostoevsky, who is so attuned to the problems of divided space, suggests that, like the Underground Man demarcating his Underground, perhaps we employ such spatial metaphors at our peril. As in so many of his works, there are both a hopeful and an apprehensive theological message. On one level, the Underground Man clearly chooses the *wrong* redemption—not the compassion offered by Liza (and, potentially, by God), but the six-thousand ruble ransom for his freedom from the world. I want to suggest, however, that on another level,

[110] There is, of course, a Platonist strand in much of Christianity, especially in the Eastern tradition, where the Platonic concept of the One (from the Parmenides dialogue) was integrated with the Judeo-Christian conception of God in apophatic, or negative, theology.

this false redemption profoundly disturbs the division of sacred and profane, and has consequences for the promise of resurrection.

## IV

### "Bodies and blood *of our very own*"

Resurrection, as discussed in my first chapter, entails transformation from the natural to the spiritual body. As per Paul's distinction between so many forms of flesh—bird, beast, human, even celestial flesh—one might even say that they are "different in kind" in a manner similar to Durkheim's distinction. Paul also emphasizes over and over the importance of what we do with the natural body during life:

> Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body. And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power. Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? Know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without[111] the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are

[111] As in, "outside" the body.

> not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." (6:13-20)[112]

This "price" of which Paul speaks refers to Christ's death, the "ransom" for human salvation, as I discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, we (and our bodies) are not our own, but are rather set aside for the Lord as a sort of debt. For Paul, this relationship of debt crucially extends the realm of the sacred to the body itself, as both the temple of the Holy Spirit and the site of resurrection. Much like the word "temple," "sacred" means "set aside" or "set apart."[113] In Christianity, unlike in pagan religions, the body does not merely move in and out of demarcated sacred spaces, like a forest glade or pagan temple, even if one experiences or displays a certain reverence upon entering a church. In a Christian framework, then, the body itself is to set aside for God.

But beyond foregoing fornication, how does one set the body apart in a world of infinitely involved and entwined relations, material and otherwise? The body always seems entangled in the profane, and drags it into thought, language, self—those things which the Underground Man so desperately tries to set apart from the world. This anxiety pervades his final words:

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[112] This is a deeply problematic part of the epistle for several reasons. Paul claims, "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9-11). The "effeminate" has long been taken to mean homosexuals. The New International Version translates it as "men who have sex with men." Moreover, though Paul places responsibility for fornication on both the prostitute and the john, he implies that the harlot is more a temptation than a person of equal concern, subject to sin and temptation as any other, much less potentially a victim of circumstance.

[113] Agamben emphasizes the economic aspect of this removal from the profane world: "Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude" (73).

> Why, we don't even know where this "real life" lives nowadays, what it really is, and what it's called. Leave us alone without books and we'll get confused and lose our way at once—we won't know what to join, what to hold on to, what to love or what to hate, what to respect or what to despise. We're even oppressed by being men—men with real bodies and blood *of our very own.* We're ashamed of it; we consider it a disgrace and we strive to become some kind of impossible "general-human-beings." We're stillborn; for some time now we haven't been conceived by living fathers; we like it more and more. We're developing a taste for it. Soon we'll conceive of a way to be born from ideas. (91, Dostoevsky's emphasis)

This is a profoundly ambivalent lament: the world of flesh is oppressive, but to be born from an idea is to drift toward a death-like state of spiritually empty abstraction—the grave. There is a strong possibility that *Notes from Underground* is in dialogue with 1 Corinthians—if not the epistle directly, then certainly with the theological matters with which it was concerned. The eucharistic undertone of the Underground Man's words, "body and blood," already suggests a theological ground, but it is all the more peculiar that he italicizes the "*our very own*" [*sobstvennoe telo i krov'*] (91; 550).

Not only does the narrator show a deep ambivalence toward the Pauline problem of whether our bodies actually belong to us; Dostoevsky and his character subject the very idea of self-ownership to ruthless scrutiny over the course of the novel. The Underground Man never knows whether his desires, actions, and negativity arise from self-assertion, from an extraordinary illusion of the laws of nature, or out of various books. In a line anticipating Stiva Oblonsky, he tells us, "The main thing is, no matter how you cast it, it nonetheless turns out that I'm always most to blame, and what's most humiliating is that I'm to blame through no fault of my own, but,

so to speak, by the laws of nature" (my translation).[114] Elsewhere he says, "All my fastidiousness would suddenly disappear for no good reason at all. Who knows? Perhaps I never really had any, and it was all affected, borrowed from books" (31). His paranoia regarding books is far more ambivalent, for, while he is happy to "rebel" against nature or use it as an alibi as he sees fit, his identity is much more bound up with literature, with being a "literary man" and seeing the world through the lens of literature. It also threatens, in a sense, the originality and autonomy of his literary Underground, that purely linguistic space which is so crucial to his identity. His uncertainty with regard to where he ends and the world begins extends to the sense that he inhabits a body that he cannot call his own, and causes him grievous spiritual anxiety, as I will demonstrate.

There is another obvious (and crucial) link with Paul: the image of the prostitute within the context of resurrection. The Underground Man's encounter with a harlot, Liza, forms the novel's spiritual focal point. Moreover, as we have seen, he lays out his fears regarding resurrection through the image of the undead prostitute, and Paul's language, imagery, and concerns find echoes in the Underground Man's own words to Liza. His fixation on the prostitute in her grave, as well as on Liza, allows him to approach the spiritual anxiety of the body and its economic status—in particular, the question of self-possession and, more specifically, of debt. The theological significance of their shared debt—at least in the narrator's imagination—may be, at first glance, somewhat unclear. However, if debt is the material condition under which the narrator emerges from the Underground and enters the world of the living, then it not only has, at the very

[114] I translated directly from the Russian, as Katz's translation does not quite capture the paradoxical language of the original: *"Glavnoe zhe, kak ni raskidivai, a vse-taki vykhodit, chto vsegda ia pervyi vo vsem vinovat vykhozhu i, chto vsego obidnee, bez viny vinovat i, tak skazat', po zakonam prirody"* (457). Even his fault is not really his. There are many other passages to similar effect.

least, a symbolic and subconscious connection to the desire for resurrection, but in fact drives the entire plot of Part II.

As I have mentioned, the Underground Man's debts correlate with his impulses to establish *physical* contact with others, and this bears summarizing, as the sheer quantity of borrowing is nearly always overlooked. This impulse first arises following the night in the tavern, when the un-named officer moves him aside as though he were an object. The Underground Man broods in fury, but simultaneously nurses a longing for the officer, "admiring" him on Nevsky Prospect, fantasizing that "if the officer had possessed even the smallest understanding of the 'beautiful and sublime,' he would have come running, thrown his arms around my neck, and offered me his friendship" (36). The Underground Man borrows from his boss, Anton Antonovich Syetochkin, to purchase a fur collar and black gloves for the famous bump, which, though he frames it as a duel, also functions as a sort of sublimated courtship ritual designed to attract the officer's attention—especially given the lemon-colored gloves he had originally wished to purchase.

Following the bump, he retreats to his Underground where he dreams feverishly for three months, harboring romantic delusions until he can no longer stand his isolation. The longing for the officer's embrace is then echoed in the narrator's overwhelming "urge to embrace all humanity" at the end of this period, at which point he visits his erstwhile friend, Simonov, to whom, we discover, he is in debt (40). Upon learning that Simonov and some other former classmates, Trudoliubov and Ferfichkin, are planning a farewell dinner for their friend Zverkov, the Underground Man shamelessly invites himself along. He again visits his boss to borrow money for the occasion. When the former classmates comment on his shabby dress and poor salary, he heatedly tells them, "I'm dining in this 'café-restaurant' at my own expense, my own, not anyone else's" (52)—triply emphasizing that he is paying his own way. Money, he evidently understands,

purchases his right to physically enter and exist in this space, but he owes this right to the kindness of others.

After dinner, the Underground Man begs six rubles off Simonov in order to pursue Zverkov to the brothel. As he hops into a sledge, he feels the consciousness of this debt again reduce him to an undignified, lifeless object: "the recollection of how Simonov had just given me six rubles hit me with such force that I tumbled into the sledge like a sack" (57). He then says, "No! There's a lot I have to do to [*redeem* myself] for that!" (*Net! Nado mnogo sdelat', chtob vse eto* vykupit'!) (57; 512, my emphasis).[115] The narrator clearly casts his debts in metaphysical, quasi-religious terms; this is, furthermore, reflected on the metanarrative level, for, crucially, he pays for Liza's services with Simonov's money. Thus, the novel's essential moral and spiritual encounter is entirely premised on debt—or, more precisely, one debt upon another upon another. The next day he hurries to repay Simonov, but does so by borrowing once again from his boss and withholding his servant's wages—two more debts, a sort of ever-receding credit line which he must endlessly chase.

There is a great deal of metaphysical significance to the Underground Man's endless cycle of borrowing, and because it runs parallel to his attempts to "embrace humanity" and rejoin "living life," there is reason to think it has theological significance as well. Recall, for instance, the fact that his underground apotheosis (or anti-apotheosis)—i.e. his complete withdrawal into the subterranean realm where he can re-cast himself as an existential martyr—is premised on the inheritance left him by a distant relative, a sort of debt-relief from on high. This is deeply problematic for a man so obsessed with articulating his own unique identity and asserting his

[115] Again, I've altered Katz's translation, which is "make up for that." I've substituted "redeem" to more accurately reflect the religious connotation of the original Russian *"vykupit'."*

independence from all others. While an inheritance is not debt *per se,* as it does not demand repayment, the Underground Man nonetheless owes his underground-ness—the very core of his identity—to someone else. As I have also mentioned, the narrator's withdrawal to the Underground evidently functions as a sort of anti-redemption. Considering that the central spiritual yearning in the novel—the desire for resurrection—is also premised on debt (the price Paul speaks of), what are we to make of this problem?

## V

## "Debt/guilt"

One of the most important thinkers to perceive the powerful connection between the material debtor-creditor relationship and the moral-theological apparatus of Christianity is Friedrich Nietzsche. Moreover, Nietzsche undertook to flesh out this connection in his 1887 masterpiece, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which he wrote mere months after discovering Dostoevsky and fervently immersing himself in the Russian writer's fiction. The two thinkers were almost diametrically opposed in their attitudes and conclusions regarding Christianity: Dostoevsky, however skeptical—or even critical—he may have been, always sought to reassert Christianity in the face of modern secularism, while Nietzsche, his deep admiration for Dostoevsky notwithstanding, developed an explicitly anti-Christian philosophy over the course of his career. Though Dostoevsky was unaware of the younger Nietzsche's work, the spirit of Nietzsche's philosophy might be said to have been "in the air" even before he published his first major works in the early 1870s. Dostoevsky constantly explored and repudiated the sort of rebellious male youths with ambitions to transcend morality and become "extraordinary men"—the sort of figure

Nietzsche would later exalt as the *Übermensch.*[116] Both men were nonetheless profoundly attuned to the economic element of Christian ethics and theology. Moreover, they were highly sensitive toward a certain psychological profile which it might produce: Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Nietzsche's "cellar people," both of them full of spite—or, in Nietzsche's terms, *ressentiment.* I have not encountered any scholarship on whether Nietzsche's thoughts on debt were directly influenced by his reading of Dostoevsky, but I believe there is a powerful case to be made that they likely were. At the very least, they help clarify the deeper significance of debt in *Notes from Underground.*

We know from his personal correspondence that Nietzsche first encountered Dostoevsky's work in a bookstore in Nice, France, by February 1887 at the very latest—mere months before he wrote *On the Genealogy of Morality*.[117] The first work he read was a bastardized French adaptation which combined two of Dostoevsky's works, *Notes from Underground* (1864) and the much earlier novella, *The Landlady* (1847), into a single work, *L'Esprit souterrain* [The Underground Spirit, or Mind] (1886).[118] He immediately felt he had discovered in Dostoevsky a true "kinsman," and describes the second half of *L'Esprit souterrain,* "Liza," as "a real stroke of genius in

[116] The most famous example being *Crime and Punishment's* Raskolnikov, or the figure of Napoleon as he is discussed in that novel; Nikolai Stavrogin, Peter Verkhovensky, and perhaps Kirillov in *Demons* are also relevant. Most Slavicist scholarship on the Nietzsche-Dostoevsky connection focuses on this overlap.

[117] He mentions Dostoevsky in a letter to Peter Gast in February 1887.

[118] *L'Esprit souterrain* is divided in two, and includes an abridged version of *Notes* as a diary entry of one of "The Landlady's" main characters. It comprises the second part of *L'Esprit souterrain*, entitled "Liza," which includes much of the Underground Man's encounter with Liza, in addition to bits of Part I, in which he articulates his philosophical rebellion. "Liza" begins with a slightly altered version of the famous opening declaration of *Notes*: "Je suis malade… Je suis méchant, très-désagréable" (156), which loses some of the concise punch of "I am a sick man…I am a wicked man."

psychology—a terrible and cruel piece of mockery levelled at γνῶθι σαυτόν,[119] but done with such a light and daring hand, and with so much of the rapture of superior strength, that I was almost intoxicated with joy." (*Selected Letters* 191-2).[120]

In late 1888, Nietzsche's friend Georg Brandes wrote to him, "[Dostoevsky] is a true and great poet, but a vile creature, absolutely Christian in his way of thinking and living, and at the same time quite *sadique.* His morals are wholly what you have christened 'Slave Morality'" (Selected Letters 357). Nietzsche, in his responding letter, entirely agreed with both the praise of artistry and the charge of slave morality. While it is very likely that it was over Dostoevsky's public conservatism and Christianity that Nietzsche agreed with Brandes' charge, it is possible that he thought of Dostoevsky as the great psychologist of slave morality, and that the Underground Man in particular is an extraordinary portrait of *ressentiment*—spite, after all, is ushered in from the very first sentence as one of the main psychological forces driving the Underground Man's actions (and inaction). Above all, Nietzsche valued Dostoevsky as an extraordinarily profound and imaginative psychologist.

As Edith Clowes notes in her essay, "Mapping the Unconscious in *Notes from Underground* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*," it is difficult to establish the extent to which Nietzsche's *Genealogy* was influenced by his reading of *L'Esprit souterrain*, as Nietzsche "had developed his own underground metaphors" before encountering Dostoevsky's work (128). There are, however, extraordinary parallels between the two. Dostoevsky, for instance, has his spiteful, mouse-like Underground Man, and Nietzsche has his "cellar rats full of revenge and hatred…men of *ressentiment*" (28). Clowes specifically points out that, in contrast to earlier writers like Plato,

[119] The Delphic motto, "Know thyself" [*gnothi sauton*].
[120] At this point he had read at least *L'Esprit souterrain* and *The Insulted and the Injured.*

whose cave is a natural space, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche employ metaphors of "human-made, 'un-natural' space" (cellars, basements), which "are inhabited by subliminal drives, aggressive and malicious in the extreme" (126).[121] She argues that, as artificial spaces, these undergrounds represent subconscious, subliminal drives as the emphatically "nondivine" roots of moral consciousness—or, rather, what she calls the "moral unconscious" (Ibid).

I would add to Clowes' insight that the affinity of these spatial metaphors is buttressed by the affinity of economic metaphors, and specifically debt, which also function as artificial, nondivine, roots of morality. The fourth section of the *Genealogy's* second essay is concerned with locating the material origins of "bad conscience," which, for him, consists essentially in being mired in guilt:

> How, then, did that other 'dismal thing', the consciousness of guilt, the whole 'bad conscience', come into the world? – And with this we return to our genealogists of morality. I'll say it again – or maybe I haven't said it yet? – they are no good. No more than five spans of their own, merely 'modern' experience; no knowledge and no will to know the past; still less an instinct for history, a 'second sight' so necessary at this point – and yet they go in for the history of morality: of course, this must logically end in results that have a more than brittle relationship to the truth. Have these genealogists of morality up to now ever remotely dreamt that, for example, the main moral concept '*Schuld*' ('guilt') descends from the very material concept of '*Schulden*' ('debts')? (39)[122]

[121] See Clowes' essay in *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: Philosophy, Morality, Tragedy*.
[122] This etymology is not unique to German, but is in the bloodstream of both the Indo-European languages and Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as other religions.

The combative, insulting tone he adopts toward the so-called "genealogists" is strikingly similar to the attitude the Underground Man displays toward his various opponents and interlocutors: the "men of action," the "Russian romantic," and, of course, his readers. Though Nietzsche would have absolutely rejected the Underground Man's grave-like retreat from life and his all-consuming spite (though he may have unconsciously shared in this spite), what the two hold in common is a view of philosophy not merely as argument, but as high-stakes combat in which the reader is intimately, dialectically involved—even if they are "excluded" or constantly preempted, as in the case of *Notes from Underground*.

Beyond sharing this peculiar amalgam of polemical and conversational style, Nietzsche turns the Underground Man's anxieties about debt on their head, recasting them as a scathing critique: he essentially argues that the entire Christian moral-spiritual apparatus was erected on this material foundation of the creditor-debtor relationship, in which indebtedness becomes a state of guilt, referred to in English as "debt/guilt." He states that Christianity "has brought about the appearance of the greatest feeling of indebtedness on earth," a looming horror of "the impossibility of paying back the debt, […] the impossibility of discharging the penance, the idea that it cannot be paid off ('*eternal* punishment')"(62, 63).[123] Nietzsche paints this intuition that the material creditor-debtor relation has profound ethical and psychological consequences in an image that could have easily been plucked from Dostoevsky:

> The debtor, in order to inspire confidence that the promise of repayment will be honoured, in order to give a guarantee of the solemnity and sanctity of his promise, and in order to etch the duty and obligation of repayment into his conscience, pawns something to the

[123] Nietzsche's conversational style, replete with rhetorical questions, asides, and parenthetic remarks, can make quoting him a somewhat clumsy enterprise.

> creditor by means of the contract in case he does not pay, something that he still 'possesses' and controls, for example, his body, or his wife, or his freedom, or his life (or, in certain religious circumstances, even his after-life, the salvation of his soul, finally, even his peace in the grave: as in Egypt, where the corpse of a debtor found no peace from the creditor even in the grave…) (40)

Does this image not bear striking resemblance to that of the indebted prostitute lying anguished in her grave? Or, indeed, with the Underground Man himself, lying in his own living grave, haunted by the faceless specter of debt—a debt that seems to be owed to no one in particular? The image is even more resonant when we consider the extent to which the narrator frets over his desire to possess or control his body, Liza,[124] his freedom, his life, and it seems that he is at the very least subconsciously tormented by the implications that his various debts carry for this desire.

Nietzsche argues that the "iron impossibility" of climbing out of this state of debt/guilt becomes so thoroughly entrenched in the person of bad conscience that it first devours him spiritually, but ultimately turns against the "creditor," which he articulates thus:

> [H]ere we should think of the *causa prima* of man, the beginning of the human race, of his ancestor who is now burdened with a curse ('Adam', 'original sin', 'the will in bondage'), or of nature, from whose womb man originated and to whom the principle of evil is imputed (diabolization of nature), or of existence in general, which is left standing as *inherently*

[124] Who is, indeed, sarcastically framed as his fantasy wife through his mocking use of Nikolai Nekrasov's sentimentalist poem, "When from the darkness of delusion," which serves as the epigraph to "Apropos of Wet Snow," and which the narrator returns to when he fantasizes about "saving" Liza from prostitution by marrying her: "And enter my house bold and free / To become its full mistress!" (78). (The Russian word "*khoziaika"* does not imply "mistress" in the illicit sense in this context.)

> *worthless* (a nihilistic turning-away from existence, the desire for nothingness or desire for the 'antithesis', to be other, Buddhism and such like)… (63)[125]

Nietzsche's wildly fragmented syntax weaves together an image of what is known in anthropology as "primordial debt:" that is, the sense that the very act of existing is a sort of metaphysical debt, something which many ancient religions were keenly aware of.[126] The "creditor" of whom the philosopher writes is a sort of chimera—in the sense of disparate but conjoined parts—of Nature, causality, original sin, Being, and, as he soon makes explicit, God. He is very close to the Underground Man here, even if these connections are not articulated quite the same in *Notes from Underground.* Nietzsche, for instance, relates debt to Nature as the sort of monstrous, deterministic causality against which the Underground Man rails in Part I (Ippolit also comes to mind); indeed, we can see in Nietzsche a connection between Part I's rebellion against determinism with Part II's anxiety about debt, and this connection is already implicit in *Notes from Underground.* The Underground Man's endless chain of debts is the material, financial literalization of his fear that he cannot act or "become anything" because he can find no underlying ground for action or being—in Nietzsche's term, *causa prima*, a term which directly reflects the Underground Man's language:

> [I]n order to begin to act, you know, one must first be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever. Well, how can I, for example, ever feel at ease? Where are the primary causes I can rely upon, where's the foundation? Where shall I to find it? I exercise myself

[125] I believe that what Nietzsche means by "Buddhism" is the fact that Buddhism posits desire as the origin of all suffering, and that the only appropriate desire is the cessation of desire, which will lead to the end of suffering. The Underground Man would make an ideal case-study for Buddhist psychologists, for he constantly speaks of the *desire to suffer.*

[126] See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, for an analysis of primordial debt theory in his second chapter. In fact, he views Nietzsche as a proto-primordial debt theorist (pg. 78).

> in thinking, and consequently, with me every primary cause drags in another, an even more primary one, and so on to infinity. (13)

The manner in which each primary cause gives way directly mirrors the manner in which the narrator pays off one debt only by taking on another—on and on, back in time to the ultimate primary cause, if the reader will pardon the oxymoron. His fear of groundlessness applies not only to the materialist determinism he rejects (albeit inconsistently), but even to his attempts at self-creation, his painstaking efforts to shape his identity as a literary, cultivated man. His literary fantasies are all borrowed or stolen, and he confesses more than once that his actions and bitter disposition are "taken from books."[127] In other words, existence within the world is an infinite chain of either literal or metaphorical debt and dependence on others, and determination by external forces. The narrator's inability to accept this, and his concomitant inability to act ("will in bondage"), directly lead to his retreat to the Underground ("a nihilistic turning-away from existence"), his desire either to do *nothing* ("the desire for nothingness") or to seethe in polemics, resentment, and rebellion ("desire for the 'antithesis'").

This, for Nietzsche, is Christian psychology, inseparable from "slave morality." He is not entirely original in his insight that the Christian salvation narrative draws much of its metaphoric power from the economic cycle of debt and redemption. After all, we have already seen this language in Paul and the Gospels, and theologians from Origen to Anselm and onward have explicitly addressed some of the problems that debt and ransom pose as metaphors for atonement. What is original about Nietzsche is, first, that he views the debtor-creditor relationship as the genealogical progenitor of God and religion, and second, that he takes this up as cause to indict

[127] Michael Holquist analyzes the Underground Man's relationship with literature and narrative in detail in his chapter, "The Search for a Story."

God—or, rather, the Judeo-Christian tradition. For Nietzsche, it is not so much the debtor (humanity, and especially the bad conscience embodied by people like the Underground Man) who is "in the wrong,"[128] but the creditor (God), who functions as a projection of human guilt. Nietzsche describes Christianity's greatest innovation thus:

> [W]e confront the paradoxical and horrifying expedient through which a martyred humanity has sought temporary relief, *Christianity's* stroke of genius: none other than God sacrificing himself for man's debt, none other than God paying him back, God as the only one able to redeem man from what, to himself, has become irredeemable—the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, out of love (would you credit it? —), out of *love* for his debtor!..." (63)

What Nietzsche describes is, of course, the very same "price" of which Paul speaks, the "ransom" of Jesus' death. It is in the impossibility of repaying this debt that Christianity expresses what he calls the "slave revolt in morality," the elevation of powerlessness, suffering, and self-abnegation to virtues.

Nietzsche saw a potential exit from this "slave morality" and its edifice of debt/guilt in a courageous atheism:

> Assuming that we have now started in the *reverse* direction, we should be justified in deducing, with no little probability, that from the unstoppable decline in faith in the Christian God there is, even now, a considerable decline in the consciousness of human debt; indeed, the possibility cannot be rejected out of hand that the complete and definitive

[128] I put this in quotes because Nietzsche is, of course, critiquing the very basis of moral evaluation, though I do not believe he does away with it entirely, as do many. Rather, what is "wrong" is wrong insofar as it acts like a sickness, undermining the emotional and spiritual health of both the individual and culture at large.

> victory of atheism might release humanity from this whole feeling of being indebted towards its beginnings, its *causa prima*. Atheism and a sort of *second innocence* belong together. (62)

Even Nietzsche, it seems, was guilty of the occasional bit of religious naivete, for this placing of hope in a "second innocence," a new debt-free, godless Eden, is every bit as religious in nature as any utopian dream. My initial thought upon citing the above passage was that Nietzsche clearly could not have been more wrong. The wholly capitalist modern world is radiant with triumphant secularism. Militant atheism has never been more widespread and publicly accepted; even the continuing vitality we attribute to contemporary religious life must be tempered by the fact that religion today constantly frames itself against that very secularism. And yet modern capitalist secularism is rife with debt that has exploded beyond all sense of proportion. So, too, has debt/guilt in the psychological sense: who has not heard the ubiquitous, telling description of the isolation and despair one feels at being "*buried* in debt?" Entire continents are desperately beggared by international creditors. High finance in particular accumulates more and more wealth from expanding debt and harvesting the interest, often treating it as though it were mere numbers floating in cyberspace, divorced from physical bodies, objects, and labor. Whatever the true mechanisms and dynamics behind wealth-production may be, the emotional, spiritual experience of finance capital at its most intense is something akin to being a ghost: buried alive in a state of debt peonage, and therefore not really "possessing" a body, for every moment not spent putting one's body to work generating wealth generates guilt instead. And yet, slave-morality notwithstanding, many theologians and religious leaders are at the fore of critiquing and working

against this pervasive debt, often in odd alliance with socialists (and sometimes Christian socialists).[129]

On the other hand, there is a strong case to be made that, though Nietzsche's hopes were clearly dashed, his insight about the relation of Christian theology to debt is essentially correct. In the United States—and, to a lesser extent, around the world—conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Christians are often the most vocal supporters of finance capitalism. Many thinkers, perhaps most notably Max Weber, have argued quite persuasively that modern capitalism is deeply rooted in Christian theology. Others, like Walter Benjamin and Agamben, have gone even further to suggest that Christianity has evolved into—and essentially been supplanted by—a capitalism whose salient characteristic is overwhelming and ubiquitous debt. While I will address these three thinkers in my subsequent chapter, my point in this section is that the debate over the relation between Christianity and debt is extremely contentious, and often varies according to what one sees as the "essence" of Christian theology.

Contrary to Nietzsche, Dostoevsky saw (or at least *wanted* to see) Christianity not as the *cause*, but as the *way out* of this live-burial of debt/guilt, and for the same reason Nietzsche condemned it: that, in the person of Jesus, "none other than God sacrifice[ed] himself for man's debt…the creditor sacrificing himself…out of *love* for his debtor!" However, I wish neither to prove or disprove Dostoevsky against Nietzsche, but simply to draw out some of the perhaps irresolvable tensions in *Notes*, for this "way out" brings us back to the problem of spatial

[129] In my experience those theologians tend to be Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian, including Pope Francis, whose encyclical, *Laudato si'*, deals at length with social, ecological, and international debt. Another notable figure is Rowan Williams, the same Archbishop of Canterbury I have cited in this chapter, who has called for canceling international debts.

metaphors, and the way that debt complicates the all-too-easy division of the realms of the sacred and the profane.

## VI

### "You will never buy yourself out …"

The Underground Man's manifold debts constitute a profane chain of entanglements, a perverse reflection of Paul's pronouncement that "ye are not your own" because a great price was paid for you. Indeed, the religious dimension of the Underground Man's fears becomes more apparent if we turn back to what he says to Liza regarding her supposed debt-bondage: "You will never buy yourself out.…" The Russian word is *"otkupit'sia"*—to bribe one's way out of a situation, or to pay a ransom. Given the tension between sacred and profane language coursing through this section, the word conspicuously recalls *"vykupit'"* and "*iskupit'"*—to redeem, as in *"Khristos Iskupitel'"* [Christ the Redeemer]. As noted, these words originally referred to the manumission of slaves, particularly from debt bondage. They also combine the spatial and economic dimensions: the prefixes *ot-*, *is-*, and *vy-* imply movement out of or away from something—debt, bondage, evil, the profane. It is in this sense that the Underground Man's inheritance constitutes a mock redemption, for it allows him to pay off his debts (as far as we know) and largely disentangle himself from the material world, though only to inhabit squalid, perverse immateriality.

The narrator's words are all the more religiously suggestive given that he tells Liza, "It's just like selling your soul to the devil…" (65). He later clarifies, "Why, you're enslaving your soul, something you don't really own, together with your body!" (70). Though the Underground Man does not speak of the body and soul as identical, he does presuppose their interconnection, and he

does so in economic, legalistic terms of ownership that again link back to Paul ("ye are not your own"). A prostitute's body and soul, according to him, are transformed into objects of economic exchange, and thus surrendered to the fickle nature of the marketplace. Liza's "slavery" here is clearly linked to that debt-bondage [*tsep'*—chain] to her madam, who is thus implicitly linked with the devil. Dostoevsky seems to be suggesting a troubling parallel between the "energies," to use Durkheim's term, of the sacred and profane realms: "redemption" in *Notes from Underground* is not merely concerned with the state of one's soul on some supernatural plane, but with those real-world, often economic or financial entanglements to which I have been referring.

Incidentally, the word "redeem" appears very early in the Old Testament when God gives Moses those laws pertaining to the sale, purchase, and emancipation of slaves. God declares that "if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do.[130] If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed" (Exodus 21:7-8).[131] While *Notes* may not directly allude to this passage, it does take on a heightened pathos when it turns to the particular economic exploitation of women. During his moralizing sermon, the Underground Man indulges in sentimental fantasies of familial love, in which a father, though miserly in his dealings, showers affection and expensive gifts upon his daughter, protecting her jealously, but allowing her to marry whom she loves.[132] Liza sardonically replies, "'Some are glad to sell their daughters[…]'" (67), strongly hinting that she was somehow "sold" by her father.[133]

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[130] That is, she shall not be freed as are the male slaves, but must be purchased back.
[131] In Russian, "*pust' pozvolit vykupit' ee*" (*Sinodal'nyi perevod).*
[132] As Holquist points out, this is yet another borrowed fantasy, taken from the plot of Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (Holquist 69).
[133] The nature of this "sale" is left unclear, but Dostoevsky's subsequent novel, *Crime and Punishment,* offers a couple likely scenarios. Perhaps Liza was forced to become engaged at a very

Whether or not Liza has actually been "sold," the Underground Man clearly believes she was, and that this is the source of her reticence regarding her family. He responds, "That happens, Liza, only in those wretched families where there is neither God nor love" (67). This rather off-handed comment perhaps unintentionally invites the question, exactly how has this "great price" redeemed anyone? Considering its thematic context—the problematic relationship between redemption and the transaction of souls—it presages Ivan Karamazov's indictment of God for a world where children are tormented. Liza is clearly framed as a violated child; if she was "sold" by her unloving family, then her victimhood suggests that God is either not omnipotent, or that he should be indicted for his absence precisely where he is most needed.

The Underground Man then attempts to describe family love in which God is present. But even this love is characterized by violence and torment, the blame for which he lays on the wife's jealousy. He fantasizes about the quarrels this will cause, which of course lead to even sweeter bliss once they have made up. This recalls his earlier fantasies of being wronged by men so as to enjoy the moral superiority of forgiving them, and, in the case of the officer, the ensuing bliss, but the dynamic is now translated into spiritual terms: which should therefore be taken with some skepticism:

> No one, no one at all has to know what goes on between a husband and wife if they love each other. However their quarrel ends, they should never call in either one of their mothers to act as judge or to hear complaints about the other one. They must act as their own judges.

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young age to a much older, rich creep, like the fifteen-year-old who was engaged to Svidrigailov (Part VI, Chapter IV); or, perhaps, like Sonia Marmeladova, she was forced into prostitution by a father who spent his time and money on suicidal drinking binges, rather than support his family (Part I, Chapter II).

> Love is God's mystery and should be hidden from other people's eyes, no matter what happens. This makes it holier, much better. (67-8).

This disturbingly ambiguous image ostensibly asserts a vision of marital love as a holy act which eludes description and cannot be entirely understood from the outside, a mysterious experience of the divine. In other words, it is yet another attempt to describe a sacred space, to set the married couple apart from the profane world, and the world of the commerce of people in particular (see footnote no. 29). In this vision, marriage resembles an Edenic setting for the begetting of children—note the language from Genesis—a semi-divine act that doubles as a path to transcending death: "Even after you die, [your children] will carry your thoughts and feelings all during their life. They'll take on your image and likeness, since they've received it from you" (68).

The image should be read in two ways. It is, on the one hand, deeply pathetic insofar as the Underground Man himself is almost certainly an orphan, longing to be born from "living fathers," and so idealizes this love from parents which he never had, and locates God in the image of the loving family. On the other hand, it contains a certain malign pretense toward godhood, for it sacralizes a dynamic of love involving abuse and isolation, even as the Underground Man seeks to manipulate Liza, as he himself admits, "by means of [such] images" (68). In other words, the Underground Man's a view of marriage is a form of idealized isolation in which the wife is brought "underground," so to speak, where he can exert greater control. One might recall here Dostoevsky's diary entry, in which he refers to marriage as "the greatest deviation from humanism, the complete isolation of the pair from everyone…"[134]

[134] See Chapter I, page 40.

Liza sees through the narrator's simultaneously manipulative and naïve sentimentalism, and responds "Why you—speak exactly like a book" (86). This remark alone disproves interpretations of her as naïve, as less sophisticated than the Underground Man: not only is she sufficiently familiar with literature to recognize the "ready-made" sentimental clichés the Underground Man speaks in; she recognizes them as ready-made, and can navigate her way through them. Moreover, in a very short time she has attained great insight into one of his defining psychological characteristics: that he seeks to impose literature onto life with tragically clumsy pathos. Tragic in that, unwanted orphan that he is, his ideas of what constitutes loving family life come entirely from books, and have little bearing on reality. The scene anticipates his haphazard, occasionally contradictory lament at the end of being left "without books," lost and without values, without living fathers, a sort of "stillborn" humanity born of "ideas," and oppressed by being "flesh and blood." What his image promises is not Dostoevsky's desire for evolution through generations toward *sobornost*—neither communal nor physical resurrection—but only this "stillborn," abortive resurrection. And it does nothing to redeem the problem of child abuse and the exploitation of women.

Liza as abused child constitutes another link with the Underground Man, and poignantly forms a potential basis—one might say "primary cause"—for empathy between them.[135] He discloses almost nothing about his childhood except that he was raised and sent to school by "distant relations," on whom he was financially dependent.[136] He tells us only that they were

[135] I say "empathy" because, though the Underground Man clearly abuses her emotionally, he does actually realize that she has a great depth, a capacity for thought and suffering that distinguishes her from people like Zverkov and the various imagined interlocuters he engages with—the faceless *"vsemstvo"*[you-all-ness] as he refers to them at the end of the novel.

[136] We are never actually told, but it is possible that these are the same "distant relations" who left him six thousand rubles, possibly as a sort of atonement.

emotionally abusive, and filled him with doubt and mistrust, and that once he entered school he never heard from them again. The combined impact of abuse, abandonment, the taunts of his classmates, and the humiliation of poverty has clearly wrought not only irreversible emotional damage, but spiritual damage as well. Denied the love and support of parents who are supposed to love and support him, he is instead dependent for his material existence on persons who are initially actively hostile, and then dissolve into distant, faceless anonymity. Though it is unreasonable to hold a child to account for such dependence, it has nevertheless indelibly shaped the Underground Man's psyche, his heightened anxiety toward all external forces to which he might owe his existence, his choices, his actions, be they laws of nature, human nature, social relations, personal relations, or literature. What experience could more precipitously lead a child to see life as a cruel joke, tantamount to pervasive indebtedness to a hostile, impersonal material universe abandoned by God? This, too, is the spiritual, stillborn orphan-hood he describes at the end: "not conceived by living fathers," be they flesh and blood parents or the living God. No wonder his compulsion to become some sort of disembodied monad, to withdraw from the physical world and transform into an almost purely intellectual being unfettered by flesh, to establish his underground redoubt where he can create his simulacrum of autonomy.

Dostoevsky seems to offer hope in a way that crucially reverses Paul: Liza, the harlot, offers not corruption but, to all appearances, salvation, an exit from the Underground. After the Underground Man reduces her to tears with the image of the prostitute's grave, he seems to display genuine remorse: "Liza, my friend, I shouldn't have...forgive me" [*Liza, drug moi, ia naprasno…ty prosti menia*]. (73; 529).[137] This ellipsis, which is in the original text, constitutes yet another

[137] Katz translates it as "you must forgive me," but this sounds more forceful to me than the original Russian.

psychoanalytically significant break in speech—this time accompanied by physical contact (he takes her hands, and she begins to squeeze his so hard they hurt). The Underground Man recognizes his cruelty, takes responsibility for it, and asks for forgiveness—if only for a moment. He then gives her his address and asks her to come see him.

Apollonio argues that this moment constitutes an incomplete confession: the Underground Man asks Liza for forgiveness, but fails to ask for God for saving grace, that strength necessary to change one's life. He is unable to do so because he would have to "give up his role as the 'savior'" (519). I would add to her insight that his failure is also tied to his vision of all relations as some sort of debt, and in particular his sense of the unnerving possibility that one can never claw one's way out of debt on the moral-spiritual plane, but rather must resign oneself to it. In the Christian tradition one appeals to God as a forgiver of debts, as in the Lord's prayer, which contains the petition, "And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors."[138] In a commentary entitled, "Concerning the Our Father," the French theologian, philosopher, and activist Simone Weil reads this petition as ultimately concerned with overcoming egoism, which, she asserts, is a misguided belief that the world is indebted to us.[139] Her articulation of the theological significance of debt resonates with the Underground Man's anxieties about—and attachment to—personality, and reframes in modern existential terms the same relations between God, the self, and debt that Paul expressed:

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[138] "Debts" is also translated as "trespasses" and "sins," but the original word from the Gospel of Matthew is "debts," which is preserved in the Russian [*dolgi*]. McReynolds also addresses God as debt-forgiver, specifically in the context of sin. See her Chapter 10, "This Is What I Cannot Bear," which argues that *Demons'* Stavrogin cannot accept Christ's sacrifice as redemption payment for his sin of raping and driving Matryosha to suicide.

[139] Weil was indeed influenced by Dostoevsky, and alludes to Ivan Karamazov's theodical challenge in her essay "Evil" (*GG* 68).

> The principal claim we think we have on the universe is that our own personality should continue. […] The instinct of self-preservation makes us feel this continuation to be a necessity, and we believe that a necessity is a right. […] Our personality is entirely dependent on external circumstances which have unlimited power to crush it. But we would rather die than admit this. From our point of view the equilibrium of the world is a combination of circumstances so ordered that our personality remains intact and seems to belong to us. All the circumstances of the past that have wounded our personality appear to us to be disturbances of balance which should infallibly be made up for one day or another by phenomena having a contrary effect. We live on the expectation of these compensations. The near approach of death is horrible chiefly because it forces the knowledge upon us that these compensations will never come.
>
> To remit debts is to renounce our own personality. It means renouncing everything that goes to make up our ego, without any exception. It means knowing that in the ego there is nothing whatever, no psychological element, that external circumstances could not do away with. (*WFG* 223-4)

This is most definitely underground territory, for the Underground Man, the "offended, crushed, and ridiculed mouse" (9), hyper-conscious of the universe's ability to annihilate him, seeks to preserve "what's most precious to us…our personality and our individuality" (21), and desires justice and revenge against all that has humiliated him, but can find no "primary cause" to seek justice. The narrator's fantasies of being worshipped, dominating his enemies, inheriting millions and donating it to humanity, all betray a profound emotional attachment to the delusion that, though he is the actual debtor, the universe owes him for his suffering. His desire to preserve his sliver of personality prevents him from remitting this claim and asking forgiveness for those debts

he cannot repay, for he fears he would disintegrate into the faceless *"vsemstvo"* were he acknowledge his metaphysical indebtedness. Indeed, the blunt severity of Weil's exhortation resembles the spiritual violence of Dostoevsky's own call to "annihilate" one's *I*," and calls to mind that troubling paradox of Christian desire: even if we interpret the annihilation or renunciation of the I to refer only to egoistic desire, individuality is such a fragile, contingent thing that the life-force which sustains freedom and love may not survive such destruction.[140] The Underground Man, who is so cripplingly conscious of this fragility and contingency, simply cannot resign himself to his indebtedness.

The fact that the Underground Man is in debt, rather than holding claims to others, is perhaps what grants him that still-indistinct, shadowy suspicion that his personality does not belong to him, and leads him not only to terror, but to moral outrage, that his ego is, in fact, quite superfluous to the universe, and can only survive underground. Indeed, as mentioned, he hurries to repay Simonov the next day, as though to liberate himself from the monetary ties to "real life." This buys him no consolation; he still feels, rather, "as if some crime were weighing on my soul" (76). He dreads Liza's arrival, fearing she will see him in his wretched underground state. When she arrives, she says, "I want to...get away from...that place…once and for all" (84). Her desire to exit the brothel—her own "underground"—clearly echoes the plea of the prostitute lying in her grave, as well as the Underground Man's own suppressed desire to leave the Underground. Again, the Underground Man is presented with the possibility of resurrection as leaving the Underground and embracing "real life."

[140] See Chapter I, page 41.

Liza reverses the dynamic: when she sees the suffering beneath his cruelty and embraces him, his shock at her compassion again interrupts his stream of abuse and reduces him to speechless sobbing, able only to croak, "They won't let me…I can't be…good!" (87). This, like the moment he asks her forgiveness, is a break in speech punctuated by a silent, physical gesture which contains incalculably more meaning than could words. Insofar as Liza's response to his cruelty rejects retribution, it appears to be a path out of out of transactional relations; moreover, out of his verbal prison, out of his physical isolation and up from the grave—a spiritual resurrection through the touching of two bodies. He recognizes this potential spiritual transformation and frames it accordingly in religious terms even as he distances himself from it, dismissing it as a woman's fancy: "[I]t's in that kind of love that a woman finds her *resurrection*, all her *salvation* from any sort of ruin, and her rebirth, as it can't appear in any other form" (88, my emphases).[141] The Underground Man rejects the hope that Liza offers because he cannot exert control over it; her presence is an oppressive intrusion of "real life," and her offer, perhaps, would constitute a debt which could never be repaid.

But does the text itself also reject the hope she offers on a deeper artistic level, and for different reasons? This hope is troubling, after all, not least because it places a kenotic, sacrificial burden on the woman to redeem her abuser. This would constitute yet another "selling" of Liza—her torment for the potential salvation of the Underground Man. Such a transaction would cast further doubt on the distinction between the "energies" or operations of the profane and sacred realms. As Agamben writes,

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[141] *[D]lia zhenshchiny v liubvi-to i zakliuchaetsia vse* voskresenie, *vse* spasenie *ot kakoi by to ni bylo gibeli i vse vozrozhdenie, da inache i proiavit'sia ne mozhet, kak v etom*" (546).

> The ambiguity at issue here [in the relation between the sacred and profane] does not arise solely out of a misunderstanding but is, so to speak constitutive of the profanatory operation—or, inversely, of the consecratory one. Insofar as these operations refer to a single object that must pass from the profane to the sacred and the sacred to the profane, they must every time reckon with something like a residue of profanity in every consecrated thing and a remnant of sacredness in every profaned object (77-8).

The distinction between the two spheres grows murkier considering the parallels between the Underground Man's cycles of debt—both financial and metaphysical—and the spiritual debt by which we owe our bodies for the price of redemption. It seems to me that Dostoevsky suggests a troubling relation at the metanarrative level. Recall that the spiritual heart of the novel—the encounter with Liza—is made possible not only by the Underground Man's debt, but by hers as well: her alleged debt-bondage to her madam, not to mention having been "sold" by her father. Such transactions further complicate the relation between the "energies" of the profane and sacred realms; this is perhaps where the text's threads of religious hope and skepticism are most in tension.

The skepticism—bordering on despair—allows Liza to leave with her dignity intact, but leaves no room to act, no exit from the grave. The message of hope embraces the mingling of sacred and profane, especially in the individual body, and opens a path to redemption and resurrection, albeit one that runs through Liza and thereby objectifies her. That mingling reveals troubling parallels, such as those between the Underground Man's cycles of debt—financial, metaphysical, and spiritual debt in which we owe our bodies for the price of redemption. Material and spiritual debt may differ in kind, but they seem to constitute a point at which the sacred and profane converge: the former is the mechanism of the latter. The relation between them is far more

intimate than one of being “wholly other,” like positive and negative, corporeal and spiritual, worldly and transcendent: it is the intimacy of interdependence.

# Chapter 3

## Spectral Flesh and the Theology of Capital in *Moby-Dick*

### I

### Melville and Religion

On the October 11th, 1856, Herman Melville, having little or no money in his purse and financial woes to flee from on shore, accounted it high time to get to sea, and set sail from New York.[142] It was one week short of five years since the initial publication of *Moby-Dick*, and his literary career had sunk considerably.[143] He was headed toward Glasgow aboard a screw-steamer of the same name, and arrived about a week later for the first leg of a grand tour that would ultimately take him to the Levant and Constantinople. He first made his way to Liverpool, where, on November 10th, he stopped by the United States Consulate to pay a visit to his friend, fellow writer, and muse, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was then serving as Consul for the Pierce administration. Hawthorne recorded their time together in much greater detail than did Melville, noting his younger friend's poor health and "morbid state of mind," which might explain his "heterodoxy in the matter of clean linen" (Hawthorne 432). Hawthorne describes a man who, much like his character Ishmael, seems to have set out on a voyage in an act of sublimated suicide:

> Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he has "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, never will rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists…in wandering

[142] Melville, *Journals*, 49.
[143] October 18th, 1851 in Britain as *The Whale;* November 14th in the United States as *Moby-Dick.*

> to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worthy of immortality than most of us.[144] (432-3).

Given Melville's awe for Hawthorne, the hours and even days these usually taciturn men spent in conversation on the few occasions they could meet, and his possible erotic feelings for the older man,[145] there is reason to take Hawthorne's description to heart.[146] It presents Melville as possessing a far more complex religious attitude than many of his contemporary critics realized—not a few conflated his sharp criticism of missionaries in *Typee* with "moral obtuseness," "small anathemas against civilization," and "spite against religion."[147] To be fair to the critics, however,

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[144] Stewart, Randall, ed. *The English Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1941), pp. 432-3. (Change citation?)

[145] See Jordan Stein's "History's Dick Jokes: On Melville and Hawthorne" in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* for one of many sources that address Melville and Hawthorne's relationship.

[146] At least with regard to Melville's religious attitudes, if not his "high and noble nature." Research has uncovered correspondence between Melville's wife, Elizabeth Shaw Melville, and her family members that suggests he was very likely a violent husband and father, whom the family believed to be "insane." Though this information came to light to a wide audience as early as 1975, its significance was largely passed over until Elizabeth Renker published her work, *Strike through the Mask,* in 1996. See her third chapter, "Wife Beating and the Written Page," which fleshes out both the detective work of uncovering the dark family secret, and Melville's own recurring poetic metaphor of the page as a human face, and writing as an act of violence upon it.

[147] The first two charges come from an anonymous review, "Melville's Moral Obtuseness," in the New Haven *New Englander* 4 (July 1846): 449-50, and the third from another anonymous review, "Melville's Spite against Religion and Its Missionaries," in the New York *Evangelist* (May 27, 1847). Both reviews are included in the Second Norton Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick,* pp. 478 and 484, respectively.

Not all critics were so harsh: no less than Margaret Fuller, the Transcendentalist and feminist, advised that "it would be well if the sewing societies, now engaged in providing funds for such enterprises [the missionary work criticized in *Typee*], would read the particulars…and make inquiries in consequence before going on with their efforts" (Ibid. 475, originally in the New York *Tribune,* April 4, 1846). (Women's sewing societies often functioned as hubs for activist and

Melville himself invited not a little of this controversy. Upon completing *Moby-Dick,* for instance, he wrote to Hawthorne, "This is the book's motto (the secret one),—Ego non baptiso te in nomine [patris]—but you make out the rest yourself,"[148]—the rest being "sed in nominee diaboli!" as Ahab "deliriously howls" after dousing his newly forged harpoon in the pagan blood of Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo (*MD* 372). He acquired a reputation, too, for mildly scandalizing his family members and social circle with his "irreverent" language, apparently taking gleeful satisfaction in it.[149]

Well into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries, many (though not all) Melville scholars have either imputed to him rather reductively anti-religious views. Lawrance [sic] Thompson, in his massive *Melville's Quarrel with God* (1952), argues that Melville did, in fact, believe quite literally in a wrathful Calvinist God, but hated and rebelled against this God, though he was forced by social pressures to conceal this message of rebellion beneath the surface of his literary works.[150] Harold Bloom affirms Melville's general unbelief, his "rejection of Biblical

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charitable work, especially concern abolitionism, mission work, women's rights, and the temperance movement.)

[148] *Letters* 132. The letter is dated June 29, 1851.

[149] Later that year he "confessed" to Hawthorne, again regarding *Moby-Dick, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."* November 17, 1851 (*Letters* 143).

[150] Thompson writes, "I noticed that Ishmael was particularly fond of sarcastically saying two things at once: of insinuating a meaning which was quite contrary to the superficial sense of the overt statement.[…] I noticed that Ishmael's overt meanings reflected a sympathy with the Christian doctrine of obedience and acceptance; but that the underlying and insinuated meaning hinted at a deliberate and sly ridicule of concepts sacred to Christian doctrine" (7-8). Though I find his overall argument far too reductive, I think Thompson is quite right to read Ishmael's narration as double-voiced: it is possible to read Ishmael's frequent sentimentalities and poetic ecstasies as dripping with sarcasm. There are two problems, however. First, Ishmael is not necessarily identical with Melville himself. Second, sarcasm is a profoundly complex psychological apparatus: it can be employed precisely to couch what is otherwise too sentimental in a defensive cushion of resignation or cynicism, thereby expressing an earnest ambivalence.

theology, his almost Gnostic distrust of nature and history alike" (*HM* 2).[151] Hershel Parker's massive two-volume biography plays up Melville's grudging connection to his wife Lizzie's Unitarian Parish (2: 68, 501, 896) and his Presbyterian mother's attempts to get him to participate in organized religion in general.[152]

These critical evaluations do not quite capture the Melville whom Hawthorne presents, who rather seems tormented doubter than a gleefully juvenile blasphemer, or even a rational skeptic. Perhaps his supply of lighthearted blasphemous humor had abandoned him by his late thirties, when thoughts of mortality and the beyond begin to visit with increasing and unsettling familiarity. Indeed, Hawthorne's description would be at home in a Dostoevsky novel. This man who cannot rest in the indefiniteness of belief even shares a deep affinity with Dostoevsky himself, who, as I discuss in the second chapter of this dissertation, confessed in his famous letter to Natalia Fonvizina, "I am a child of this age, a child of unbelief and doubt, to this day and even (I know it) to the grave. How many fearsome torments this thirst to believe has cost me and costs me even now, and only grows stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it."[153] Dostoevsky's answer was to insist on the necessity for faith in the image of a loving Christ "even if someone

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[151] Bloom writes, "Steeped, as were Carlyle and Ruskin, in the King James Bible, Melville no more believed in the Bible than did Carlyle and Ruskin. But even as *Moby-Dick* found its legitimate and overwhelming precursors in the Bible, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, so do *The Piazza Tales*" (1-2). True, Melville almost certainly did not believe that there was a perfect and upright man in the land of Uz whose name was Job and who sued God in a divine court of law. To reject the literalness of the Bible, however, is not necessarily to reject Biblical theology, but rather, perhaps, to read it as a literary-poetic account of a people's attempts to reconcile with the mystery of the nature of God and human existence.

[152] Parker writes of the period during which *Moby-Dick* was written: "With only one son under the same roof, her only child not to claim a proper relationship to God as she knew Him, [Maria Gansevoort, Melville's mother] focused her prodigious attention on Herman, determined that he become a professing Christian and regular church-goer" (1: 795).

[153] Dostoevsky, *SS v 15 tomakh,* (T. 15, 96), my translation.

were to prove to me that Christ were outside the truth" (Ibid). Melville, on the other hand, seems to have persisted in a state of ambivalence and indeterminacy, always with an eye toward the unknowable, the ineffable, and the indefinite. The ineffable is, in large part, the spiritual concern of *Moby-Dick*, the "plot" of which is as much Ahab's and Ishmael's attempts and failures to understand and describe the semi-divine whale as it is to kill it.

There have also been efforts to examine Melville as this more ambivalent, critically engaged theological thinker, if not a decidedly religious man. William Braswell's *Melville's Religious Thought* (1943), for instance, discusses his ambivalent but evolving attitudes toward God and religion, though, like Thompson, it plays up his strictly antitheist tendencies, at least with regard to *Moby-Dick.* Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible* (1949) explores Melville's profound, relentless, and often ironic engagement with the Bible as source material not only for characters and themes, but also style and form. T. Walter Herbert, in his study *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: a World Dismantled* (1977), asserts that "Melville's religious perplexities were shaped by the fact that he absorbed in childhood the opposing theories of Unitarianism and the most conservative orthodoxy [Calvinism]" (6).[154] The theologian William Hamilton's *Melville and the Gods* (1985) claims Melville as a sort of prophet of the "Death of God" movement in Christian theology which emerged in the 1960s. And, though there has been no book-length study of the

[154] Melville inherited the liberal Unitarianism from his father, Allan Melvill [sic]. He inherited the Calvinist strain from his mother, Maria Gansevoort, who clearly was not so conservative as to refuse to marry a Unitarian, but who, supposedly, became much more deeply tied to her Dutch Reformed faith after her husband's death. Melville would eventually marry Elizabeth Shaw, a Unitarian, and attend a Unitarian Church, All Souls, though the frequency and sincerity of his attendance are much debated.

topic, many critics have explored Melville's personal interest in Gnosticism, as well as how Gnostic thought shaped his characters, especially Ahab.[155]

The past decade or so has seen renewed attention to Melville's religious imagination. Ilana Pardes' book, *Melville's Bibles* (2008), illuminates the incredible—and often subversive—originality of Melville's engagement with biblical exegesis.[156] Dawn Coleman has suggested that Melville's participation in the All Souls Unitarian parish in New York City may have been more active than originally thought, and convincingly argues that his engagement with Unitarian ethics significantly shaped his fiction, particularly in his novel *Pierre*.[157] Jonathan Cook's *Inscrutable Malice* (2012) is an extended reading of *Moby-Dick* through the lens of Job, and attempts to "restore to the center…the problem of natural and moral evil" by engaging with its theodical and apocalyptic elements, so as to rectify Melville scholarship's recent neglect of theological, mythical, and metaphysical concerns in favor of readings focused on politics, ideology, race, sexuality, the body, ecology, etc.[158]

These overarching themes, however, are not mutually exclusive.[159] The "crisis of faith" which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and of which Melville, as much as

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[155] See Thomas Vargish's article, "Gnostic Mythos in *Moby-Dick,"* (1966); Arthur Versluis's *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (1993), and Harold Bloom's *Omens of the Millennium: the Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (1996).

[156] Pardes writes that "In *Moby-Dick* [Melville] not only ventured to fashion a grand, new, inverted Bible, in which biblical rebels and outcasts assume central stage, but also aspired at the same time to comment on every imaginable mode of biblical interpretation, calling for a radical reconsideration of the politics of biblical reception."

[157] Coleman, Dawn. "Melville and the Unitarian Conscience." *Visionary of the Word: Melville and Religion,* edited by Jonathan Cook and Brian Yothers, Northwestern University Press, 2017, pp. 129-157.

[158] See Cook, Jonathan. *Inscrutable Malice: Theodicy, Eschatology, and Biblical Sources*, pg. 5.

[159] Cook does not state that they are mutually exclusive; I merely want to offer a reading that attempts to reconcile at least the themes of religion, the body, and capitalism.

Dostoevsky, was a product—had very much to do with all of them. In particular, this chapter will investigate the relation between Melville's religious and economic concerns as they converge in the body, or, more generally, flesh. I argue that the elusive, phantom-like *and yet material* nature of the white whale, Moby Dick, functions as a site of interference between theological and capitalist economic concerns. Both Christianity and capitalism posit a tension and movement between the transcendent and material realms: divine incarnation on the one hand, and, on the other, the embodiment of abstract monetary "value" in commodity form. These overlap in the white whale, who is both an incarnate godhead and the supreme hunted beast of the whaling industry.

First, I will contextualize the novel's concerns within Melville's personal and historic milieu, addressing in particular American Protestant attitudes toward the body and capitalist economic activity. Intellectually speaking, the above-mentioned crisis of faith evolved, in part, out of the Protestant Reformation, the religious-political wars of the seventeenth century, religion's clashes with Enlightenment rationalism, and then Romanticism's challenges to universalism. This evolution was itself driven by the massive political and social upheaval caused by the rise of commercialist and capitalist enterprise, colonialism, the beginnings of industrialism and urbanization, and the accelerated transformation or collapse of social institutions, all of which conspired to hurl together people of conflicting worldviews, and to dislodge any sense of the timelessness of meaning and value. Ishmael's conclusion upon seeing Queequeg worshipping his statue, Yojo, that he must join his friend in pagan idolatry not despite his faith, but *because* he is a Christian "born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (57)**,** is almost inconceivable outside its globalized working-class milieu. His oozing sarcasm notwithstanding, Ishmael's theological casuistry nonetheless demonstrates the increased necessity felt by religions

of the era to engage with conflicting worldviews without relapsing into the religious violence that characterized, for instance, the Thirty Years' War. That necessity was itself driven by the historical novelty of (relatively) non-antagonistic encounters with the "Other" on an unprecedented scale—something also made possible and necessary by the rise of the global economy.[160]

New York was a burgeoning hub of this global economy, which made possible a relatively tolerant environment in which a liberal Unitarian might marry a conservative Calvinist without scandal, as Allan Melvill,[161] Herman's father, married Maria Gansevoort, Herman's mother. Young Herman was baptized in the Dutch Reformed Church of his mother, but his father saw that he also received a liberal, secular education. Allan's French imports business put the family at the forefront of the Transatlantic trade, and they witnessed both the promises and treacheries of commercial capitalism: Herman lived in relative luxury for the first decade of his life, until his father's credit line dried up and they had to flee Manhattan for Albany.[162] Some scholars have seen Unitarianism as tied in Melville's mind with his father's optimistic view of human nature, free will, and divine benevolence; the naivety of which became all too obvious in light of Allan's abysmal failure, bankruptcy, and concomitant mental collapse and early death—which (ostensibly) left young Herman open to the bleak fatalism of his mother's Calvinism.[163]

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[160] I by no means wish to convey that this global economy and all that accompanied it—social displacement, colonialism, etc.—did not result in violence on a vast scale; of course, it did. However, it also created, here and there, the conditions in which someone like Ishmael could peaceably meet a cannibal.

[161] The final "e" was added later.

[162] Parker's biography details the episode. See *Vol. 1,* Chapter 1: "The Flight of the Patrician Wastrel and His Second Son."

[163] This is the line of thought that Herbert, among others, takes: "Herman derived more from his father's character and the disaster that befell him than a generalized suspicion that things religious are deceptive. Allan's downfall was played out in the terms provided by specific religious traditions; it was a tragedy in which liberal belief conspired with moral failure to bring on bankruptcy, madness, and death" (46). Herbert argues that this disaster served as incontrovertible

I would suggest that Melville's relationship with Calvinism, as well as Christianity more generally, cannot be reduced to a lesson learned from his family's ruin, though the disaster almost certainly informed his engagement with theology. The mature Melville could see for himself that not all Unitarians were profligate, and that Dutch Calvinism—whether in New York or the Netherlands—was, as much as any religion, at the center of banking, risky mercantile enterprise, and financial speculation. Though he evidently remained haunted by the "Puritanic gloom" he describes in his essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses,"—"that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or another, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly freed" (*Shorter Fiction* 238),[164] the headstrong, non-conformist writer felt a certain distaste for Calvinism's doctrinal rigidity. Despite his father's failures, Melville seems to have been drawn to Unitarianism later in life, as Coleman's research has made clear. It offered a certain rationalism—a Christianity that emphasized the moral spirit of Christ's teachings over his supposed miracles.[165] Whatever he felt or believed in his private life, his works of fiction seem caught in a certain dialectic between the two: a rational skepticism of Calvinist doctrine, and a

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proof of a grimly Calvinist predestination and cosmic order: "What is apparent to us as a contradiction between Allan's optimistic faith and the tragic reality of his fate was suffered by Herman as a conflict between evident features of the real world. God's ordering of human events through Providence was not a debatable hypothesis for him; it was a fact of life so obvious as to require no defense" (54).

[164] This is taken from "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville's famous review of Hawthorne's short story collection, *Mosses from an Old Manse,* and which he interrupted his work on *Moby-Dick* to write. Melville is describing Hawthorne's "mystical blackness," his sense of "Original Sin" (Ibid). It is clear, however, that Melville sees this as a point of kinship with Hawthorne.

[165] It was also very socially engaged in moral problems of the day, most notably slavery. Melville's six-volume collection of the *Works* of William Channing, the most famous Unitarian theologian of the time, contained many inscriptions or mark-ups, including in the essays "The Moral Argument Against Calvinism" (Vol. 1) and "The Evils of Slavery" (Vol. 2). Viewable at http://melvillesmarginalia.org/.

Calvinist skepticism of Enlightenment rationalism and free will.[166] But, no less important than this tension, Melville's fraught attitudes with various denominations evidently opened him up to more universal and fundamentally theological problems: the convoluted relationship between the material world and the transcendent, how (and whether) transcendent meaning and value are manifested in the world, and what this means for embodied human existence. This chapter examines Melville's engagement with these problems as they pertain to capitalism in *Moby-Dick.*

## II

### Christianity, capitalism, and the body

If Melville's spiritual desperation and ambivalence resemble Dostoevsky's, they are also linked by this concern with the broader theological implications of embodiment. As I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, the incarnation of the divine Christ means that Christian theology has always been profoundly concerned with the body, and, since Paul, it has conceived the body, in part, through economic terms, especially debt, redemption, and possession. Like

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[166] Both Melville and his characters are often redolent of Voltaire in their impudence toward both religious claims of doctrinal infallibility and "rationalist" theodical attempts to justify an absurd universe as "the best of all possible worlds." Likewise, both he and his characters—particularly Ishmael and Ahab—are extremely skeptical toward free will and the Enlightenment ideal of the rational self, occasionally expressing suspicions that their bodies, thoughts, and actions are controlled by external, mostly hidden forces. Ishmael, for instance, says of his choice to go whaling,2 "I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment" (22).

This Enlightenment rationalism must also be distinguished from Max Weber's use of the term "rationalism" to describe a tendency among certain Protestants—including Calvinists and, even moreso, Quakers—to discount the "magical" elements of Christianity, such as those sacraments and rituals that were associated with Catholicism, as well as to "rationalize" or streamline various economic processes and relations. I will address Weber later in this chapter.

Dostoevsky, Melville sees the rise of the capitalist money economy as challenging this aspect of Christian thought; at the very least, it reveals all the more clearly troubling aspects that have long been present in theology.

While Melville, even in *Moby-Dick*, is less explicitly concerned than Dostoevsky with the person of Christ, the white whale is several times hinted to be an incarnate godhead, a sort of Word made flesh—though the semiotic ambiguity of "whiteness" often provokes a severe doubt concerning Christian understandings of the relationship between flesh and the divine or transcendent.[167] More than once, for instance, Ishmael or some other character evokes, in the context of semiotic blankness, the apocalyptic resurrection not as a promise to be hoped for, but rather—much as the Underground Man fears—as something denied or gone wrong before it even occurs. The voyage of slaughter, mutilation, and industrial processing of flesh for profit is given explicit theodical significance: it serves as a site for what amounts to a theological investigation of capitalism, value, the body, the material world, and transcendence.[168]

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[167] Ishmael says of the sperm whale as a species (and the descriptions are intensified concerning Moby Dick in particular): "[T]his high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men," This, Ishmael asserts, is a featurelessness—or blankness—which silently bespeaks of genius: "Genius in the Sperm Whale? Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidical silence" (Ibid). This divine, featureless, yet fleshy silence seems to contrast sharply with the divine Word or Logos, or the God of The Book, and yet it paradoxically possesses meaning by signifying nothing, and evokes the hermetic tradition of apophatic mysticism.

[168] By "transcendence" I do not necessarily mean heaven or the afterlife, but the immaterial, quasi-Platonic or even Gnostic metaphysical planes to which both Ishmael and Ahab refer throughout the novel.

While there has been no shortage of works exploring Melville's engagement with either capitalism or religion[169]—not only many Christian denominations, but also Judaism, Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism, and likely more—few scholars have sought to understand the complex connection between these concerns. C.L.R. James and Robert K. Martin are two exceptions, though their comments on the connection between capitalism and theology are secondary to their main arguments, and therefore somewhat limited and unelaborated. James, the Trinidadian Marxist postcolonialist cultural critic, used *Moby-Dick* as a lens through which to critique post-World War II American capitalism. In the resulting work, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Melville and the World We Live in*, he asserts,

> "[Ahab] is a Quaker, and in his early days so hated the Catholic Church that he spat into one of the sacred vessels of the cathedral.[170] In short, he is a man who wants to live fully and completely according to his beliefs. That is the cause of his undoing. He has dropped his Quakerism. His basic religion for years has been the religion of his age—material progress." (9)

While this diagnosis does not account for Ahab's intense ambivalence toward both materialism and the material world, James is absolutely correct to call this "material progress" a religion, as it not only gathered countless "devotees," but also shaped its own constellation of meanings, had its own articles of faith, and even mimicked the Judeo-Christian messianic view of history with its own secular teleology—Progress.

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[169] The works cited above are notable examples.

[170] James refers to the "silver calabash" in Elijah's vague allusion to Ahab's duel or brawl: "But nothing about that thing that happened to him off Cape Horn, long ago, when he lay like dead for three days and nights; nothing about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?—heard nothing about that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into?" (87).

Implicit in James' assertion is a certain opposition between Christianity—or at least Quakerism—and capitalism, which goes hand in hand with "material progress." Robert K. Martin's provides a similar insight in his work *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville*: whereas in James' summation Ahab "drops his Quakerism" in exchange for materialism, Martin sees religion in general debasing itself to the extent that it accommodates capitalist production: As 'fighting Quakers' these men are a violation of everything their religion stands for, notably nonviolence and social equality. But, as the communitarianism and pacifism of early Quakerism gave way to profits and war, so the entire religious and idealistic basis of the American nation retains only the superficial claim to moral conduct" (88).[171]

But Melville, I believe, detects a more ambiguous tension between capitalism and religion. While Martin and James are certainly correct on one level, an account of how Quakers and Calvinists themselves perceived their relationships to labor, trade, speculation, and other forms of money-making reveals a more intricate relationship. This approach starts from an assumption that capitalism and religion (or Quakerism, at the very least) are not merely opposing forces, coexisting only by compromising themselves, but rather have evolved alongside and in relation to each other, both conceptually and materially. Not only does Christianity have a fraught relationship with the very economic metaphors at the heart of its theology; capitalist ideology, in many ways, apprehends the world through an implicitly theological or religious framework even as its most extreme forms threaten to desacralize the world.

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[171] Martin is elaborating on Bildad's final words to the crew of the Pequod as they depart: "Bildad's comic farewell is an indication of the accommodation religion has made to profit: 'Don't whale it too much a' Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance, either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts'" (88; the quote he cites is in *MD* 96).

Two critical tools will be helpful for understanding Melville's perceptiveness regarding this radical connection between capitalism, religion, and the body. One is Max Weber's seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* which analyzes the manner in which religious anxiety affects a society's relationship toward economic matters. The other is a fragment by Walter Benjamin entitled "Capitalism as Religion," which develops Weber's analysis into a more radical critique of capitalism. These two pieces help articulate two interconnected levels of what Melville explores in *Moby-Dick:* first, the religious anxieties—or, more generally, the theological psychologies—of its characters (primarily Ahab and Ishmael, but also Pip), which serve as entry points for the novel to delve into the second level: the more fundamental semiotic and ontological problems which obtain in theology and its relationship to capitalism, which is so grounded in the body.

## III

### Capitalism as religion: asceticism, labor, and debt

Weber's *Protestant Ethic* puts forth a direct—if occasionally counter-intuitive link—between Protestantism and the rise of modern capitalism, particularly in the United States. Though Weber almost certainly knew nothing of Khomiakov, his argument is a surprising complement to the Russian theologian's critique of Western Christianity, which the latter saw as so bound up with capitalism.[172] Both thinkers, moreover, believed this relationship to be inseparable from what they perceived to be the individualist emphasis of Western Christianity: the emphasis on one's own sins and good works, or on one's own correct faith, in contrast (for Khomiakov) to Russian

[172] See Chapter 1.

Orthodoxy's emphasis on communal spirit and brotherly love—*sobornost.* They went further to describe this individualism as a form of extreme isolation. Weber's text is thus a key contextual bridge between Melville and Dostoevsky. It is particularly relevant to understanding the American writer's engagement with capitalism and theology because it deals heavily with American Calvinism, and even Quakerism, the most prominent forms of Christianity to feature in *Moby-Dick.*[173] Moreover, it directly relates these concerns to theological attitudes toward the body, a component of Weber's analysis that is often overlooked.

Though Weber's theory has been partially refuted by subsequent studies,[174] it remains a deeply perceptive account of how Protestantism shaped the psychological and sociological experience of capitalist development in the United States and elsewhere. Central to his argument is what he calls the Protestant "inner-worldly asceticism," which is both somewhat paradoxical and misleadingly named for contemporary readers. It is focused not on shunning material reality in favor of an inner, spiritual world, but rather on embracing "intense worldly activity"—i.e. labor and capital accumulation—as a spiritual calling to ascertain one's state as one of God's "elected"—those chosen for salvation.[175] Weber directly connects this to the Calvinist anxiety concerning predestination: one did not "earn" salvation, as did Catholics, by tallying up a net balance of good works to outweigh one's sins; one was either saved or damned, and the resulting all-or-nothing

[173] Of the many books I have perused on Melville and religion there is hardly any mention of Weber.
[174] Weber does not thoroughly consider regional natural resources, economic structures, etc. Capitalism did not arise exclusively in Protestant countries (late medieval northern Italy is a counterexample), nor did all Protestant regions experience a rise in wealth or capitalist development.
[175] See Weber, 112.

anxiety had a totalizing effect on one's relationship to work. This is rooted, Weber argues, in a Calvinist (though not *only* Calvinist) utilitarian cosmology and understanding of Christian love:

> Brotherly love, since it may only be practiced for the glory of God and not in the service of the flesh, is expressed in the first place in the fulfillment of the daily tasks given by the *lex naturae*; and in the process this fulfillment assumes a peculiarly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment. For the wonderfully purposeful organization and arrangement of this cosmos is, according both to the revelation of the Bible and to natural intuition, evidently designed by God to serve the utility of the human race. This makes labor in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him. (109) [176]

To a certain extent, this ethos clearly anticipates contemporary Prosperity Theology, in which personal financial success serves as a sign of God's favor. There is, however, a crucial difference: a deep suspicion of the flesh, manifested as an ascetic hostility toward pleasure and luxuries as "idolatry of the flesh," as well as the emotion and ostentation characteristic of Prosperity Gospel.[177]

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[176] Though Weber does not mention this, I reckon that the multiple meanings in English of "work"—as both labor and, in the theological sense, of good deed—played a role in the American Protestant equation of labor with charity. Furthermore, though again Weber does not mention this, there is the role that work can play not only in producing signs of one's election, but also in distracting oneself from spiritual dread through total immersion in "rational" processes.

[177] Weber writes: "This worldly Protestant asceticism…acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. On the other hand, it had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethics. It broke the bonds of the impulse of acquisition in that it not only legalized it, but…looked upon it as directly willed by God. The campaign against the temptations of the flesh, and the dependence on external things, was, as besides the Puritans the great Quaker apologist Barclay [Robert Barclay, a seventeenth century Scottish Quaker] expressly says, not a struggle against the rational acquisition, but against the irrational use of wealth. But this irrational use was exemplified in the outward forms of luxury which their code condemned as idolatry of the

This suspicion of flesh—and the conception of work as a purgative against its temptations—become deeply problematic in the context of *Moby-Dick,* which depicts purely utilitarian labor, to be sure, but which also depicts labor as the site of reverie, Dionysian fury, camaraderie, and even ecstatic mutual masturbation.

Benjamin's sketch takes Weber as its starting point, though, as the title suggests, he conceives of capitalism not merely as religiously conditioned, but as an essentially religious phenomenon in itself, replete with its own sacramental forms and qualities and responding to spiritual anxieties.[178] He distinguishes three main ways in which capitalism is religious in structure:

1) It is "a purely cultic religion…[in which] things have a meaning only in their relationship to the cult; capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology. It is from this point of view that utilitarianism acquires its religious overtones."
2) "[T]he permanence of the cult. Capitalism is the celebration of a cult *sans reve et sans merci* [without dream or mercy]. There are no 'weekdays.' There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper."

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flesh, however natural they had appeared to the feudal mind. On the other hand, they approved the rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual and the community" (170-1).

[178] Lost for years among his unpublished papers, this short fragment—a mere three pages—was clearly an outline for a broader project that never materialized. I take it up because, since its publication 1985, it has assumed a disproportionate status as the subject of exegesis by scholars and philosophers, who see in it a fundamental shift in critical understanding of capitalism. Giorgio Agamben is perhaps the most famous among them; Eugene McCarraher's massive new tome The *Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* also positions itself as pursuing the path laid out by Benjamin.

3) The "pervasiveness" of guilt: "Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement….A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind, so as once and for all to include God in the system of guilt and thereby awaken in Him an interest in the process of atonement" (Ibid.)

The first two points clearly extend Weber's argument to the point of claiming the totalizing reach of capitalist ethos; we can see in them the utilitarianism of Starbuck and Bildad (more on that later). The extent to which there is "no dogma" or "theology" means not that there is no discernible theological dimension, but that capitalism is not organized according to doctrines external to it; its theology, rather, is implicit, and arises from its very processes; i.e. "the religious overtones of utilitarianism." It brings into itself all of life, which it restructures such that it admits nothing beyond.

The third point, pervasive guilt, is more novel and pressing. With the first two points in mind, one need merely recall the guilt one feels when one is not "productive." But Benjamin is hinting at a more radical form of guilt, involving what he refers to as "the demonic ambiguity of this word" (289)—that is, "*Schuld,"* both guilt and debt. This brings us back to Nietzsche's analysis of the debt-driven Christian moral psychology, which I discussed in the second chapter—though this is not originally a critique of capitalism, but of Christianity. Benjamin has in mind not only the individual's crushing emotional experience of guilt-debt, but something which is so pervasive in capitalism—and therefore in human relationships and society—that it expands to a cosmic scale. He takes up Nietzsche's figure of the superman alongside his analysis of *Schuld*-theology and explicitly applies them to capitalism:

> The paradigm of capitalist religious thought is magnificently formulated in Nietzsche's philosophy. The idea of the superman transposes the apocalyptic "leap" not into conversion, atonement, purification, and penance, but into an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification. For this reason, intensification and development in the sense of *non facit saltum* are incompatible.[179] The superman is the man who has arrived where he is without changing his ways; he is historical man who has grown up right through the sky. This breaking open of the heavens by an intensified humanity that was and is characterized (even for Nietzsche himself) by guilt in a religious sense was anticipated by Nietzsche. (289)

This "breaking open of the heavens" is not only the "crossing over" of the superman—his or her passing into something beyond human—but also God's own entanglement in the "system of guilt" (or debt), which, according to Nietzsche, closes humanity off from any means of redeeming itself,[180] leaving, as Benjamin says, intensification as the only path forward. In other words, capital itself pushes up through the firmament, enclosing God himself.

Indeed, one can see the "ungodly, god-like" Ahab as a Nietzschean figure of sorts, tearing open the heavens by "striking through the mask" in order to exact revenge upon a God who is involved in the cosmic "system of guilt." However, it is not immediately clear how his hunt for

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[179] *Natura non facit saltum:* Nature does not leap forward.

[180] I discuss this in my previous chapter, but it bears repeating that this is what Nietzsche refers to as "the paradoxical and horrifying expedient through which a martyred humanity has sought temporary relief, *Christianity's* stroke of genius: none other than God sacrificing himself for man's debt, none other than God paying himself back, God as the only one able to redeem man from what, to man himself, has become irredeemable—the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, out of love (would you credit it?—), out of *love* for his debtor!..." (*OGM* 63). (Italics and parentheses in original.) Though this is remarkably perceptive on Nietzsche's part, it is nonetheless implicit in the Gospels themselves, which refer to Christ's sacrifice as the "ransom" or "price" for humanity's salvation.

Moby Dick is related to capitalism, or even the extent to which he himself is conscious of such a relation. Ahab has been read as a sort of allegorical capitalist industrial tycoon, though this overlooks the fact that he is far more interested in his desire for revenge and metaphysical rebellion than in business. Nor does he explicitly rebel against profit-seeking and exploitation; this ambiguity, however, only makes the novel far richer and more psychologically nuanced as regards ideology and its distortion of meaning in the world.

However much Ahab flouts his shareholders, he fails to make a clean break from capitalism, and happily employs its means and iconography—e.g. industry, the gold doubloon—when they serve his ends. This is more or less consonant with Benjamin's assertion that there is no "conversion, atonement, purification, and penance, … but [only] an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification:" the apocalyptic catastrophe in which Ahab's quest ends is a minor ripple on the surface of the industry itself, perhaps even in its tragic allure. But the ambiguity of the relation between them—industry and the quest for revenge—gives his struggle its great complexity, and draws the entire crew (and the entire novel) into a polyphonic discourse around the meaning of labor, utilitarian cosmology, the semiotics of money, the relation of things and persons to value, and the nature of transcendence.

## IV

## *Moby-Dick* and the Society of Friends

As I mentioned, it is Calvinism and Quakerism which, of all denominations, feature most prominently in *Moby-Dick.* Ishmael states quite plainly that he was "born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian [i.e. Calvinist] Church" (57), and much of the novel's metaphysics is pervaded by Calvinist sensibilities, especially in matters of fate, free will, and semiology, the last

point of which I will elaborate upon in this chapter. Most of the novel's notable Nantucketers are Quakers: Starbuck, Peleg, Bildad, Bildad's sister, Charity, and the half-legendary Nat Swaine, "once the bravest boat-header out of all Nantucket and the Vineyard, [who] joined the [Quaker] meeting, and never came to good," as Peleg recalls. In spite of "all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess," however, Ahab's religious background is quite fraught and confusing, and I believe Melville did this quite deliberately.

As James asserts, the Nantucketer Ahab is almost certainly a Quaker by birth, though this religious identity is more complex than the popular image of Quakers suggests. Quakers, though no longer a majority of the island's population, remained prominent Nantucket during the 1780s, when the character was born.[181] But this assertion, which is based on Elijah's cryptic hints that Ahab had spat into the "sacred vessel"—an act which provokes a "skirmish" with a Spaniard, whom Ahab kills—evidently contradicts at least the popular image of certain traditional Quaker beliefs, and therefore belies the incident's complexity and ambiguity. For one, Friends were—and remain—notoriously pacifist, and therefore unlikely to provoke fights with Spaniards. Furthermore, while the United States in general was no exception to the virulent anti-Catholic prejudice throughout the Anglophone world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (indeed, well into the twentieth), Quakers were the *least* anti-Catholic.[182] Though it is true that the

[181] Insofar as it is a "Scripture name—a singularly common fashion on the island"—though hardly exclusive to Quakers; the choice to name him after Scripture's most notorious idolater was his "crazy, widowed mother's" (16). As for when he was born, *Moby-Dick* takes place in 1840 at the very earliest, judging by the inscription on one of the memorial placards at the chapel. Ahab tells us that he has been whaling for forty years, since he was 18, thus putting his date of birth somewhere in the 1780s.

[182] Britain and its colonies were virulently anti-Catholic, but William Penn, though he himself believed Catholicism backwards and oppressive (as did most Quakers), laid down laws of religious toleration in Pennsylvania to ensure Catholic rights to worship in public. See Frost, J. William. "Religious Liberty in Early Pennsylvania." In fact, as Joseph Casino writes in his article,

Society of Friends rejected the sacraments—Catholic and otherwise—as irrational superstitions, they were fervidly committed to religious toleration, and would not have desecrated the ceremonial ordinances of other denominations.

James, however, is perhaps begging the question at a more fundamental level, for though Ahab's very profession is at odds with traditional Quaker quietism, thousands of Friends nevertheless had their livelihoods in whaling all the same. Indeed, Quaker beliefs and communities at the time of the novel's events were in the midst of radical upheavals: like the "mainstream" American Protestants surrounding them, the Society of Friends were also touched by the Second Great Awakening in the first half of the nineteenth century. Already in the 1780s change was underway in American Quaker communities: the American Revolution posed a major challenge to their pacifism, and though Nantucket ostensibly remained neutral, the number of Friends on the island began to drop precipitously—not as a result of death or emigration, but because many either left or were expelled from their Meetings. [183] The War of 1812 put further pressure on Quaker communities, leading, in part, to various schisms, the expulsion of some Quakers who had supported the wars, a precipitous drop in numbers, and to the phenomenon, as Ishmael describes, of "fighting Quakers, …Quakers with a vengeance" (73).[184]

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"Antipopery in Colonial Pennsylvania," "After 1692, when Maryland prohibited public mass by statute, nowhere else in the British colonies except Pennsylvania could Catholics worship publicly, although there was no regular resident priest until 1729 and no official church building until 1732" (289).

[183] Andreas Hess writes that "overall numbers had fallen from 2,200 in the 1770s to 1,300 in the 1790s" (Hess 247), a forty percent drop. Quakers comprised only about a third of Nantucket's population of 4,620 "free persons" in 1790, according to the U.S. decennial census.

[184] See the Nantucket Historical Association's article, "A Brief History of Quakers on Nantucket:" https://nha.org/research/nantucket-history/history-topics/brief-history-of-quakers-on-nantucket/

Perhaps even more important than the wars to the disruption of traditional Quakerism, however, was the development of commercial capitalism itself. The explosive growth of the whaling industry also brought to Nantucket's shores an influx of whalers, sailors, and various merchants of different denominations, often from mainland New England and New York—including Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians (many of them sharing Calvinist beliefs). Captain Bildad's comments, "He's a queer man, Captain Ahab…Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges…" already hint at Ahab's outsider status, not to mention the fact that he would likely have been exposed to non-Quaker theology (78).[185] But though he was likely born a Quaker, it is far from assured whether he remained a Quaker through his adult life up to his antitheist "conversion," especially considering Melville's emphasis on the whaling industry's multiculturalism.

Commercial trade, speculation, and the rise of industry also generated social and economic disparities among Friends, which in turn contributed to spiritual disagreements, eventually culminating the so-called Hicksite-Orthodox schism of 1827.[186] Though not all the "Orthodox" Friends saw themselves as "Orthodox," and not all their opponents were actually followers of Elias Hicks, the charismatic Quaker preacher, the split generally arose along socio-economic lines. The "Hicksites" tended to be of more modest means (though not necessarily poor), and were often farmers or craftsmen who saw their rural, labor-intensive livelihoods as in keeping with traditional

[185] According to Thomas Hamm, Quakers really only began to attend university in the 1850s, and even then in small numbers. Prior to then, university education was held in deep suspicion, and often censured in meetings. See Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907*, pg. 40. Furthermore, American universities, especially in the Northeast, were still heavily religious, often

[186] The term "Orthodox" in this case meant something like "mainstream," and even dogmatic—not orthodox Quakerism, but Quaker Orthodoxy, implying that Quakers were part of orthodox, (i.e. Protestant) American Christianity at the time.

quietism, and who shunned both industrial and capital development as spiritually corrosive. Quietism was the best means for an individual to cultivate his or her Inner Light—essentially the voice of the Holy Spirit—which, they believed, dwelled in all people, even non-Christians, and had the same spiritual authority as Scripture. The Hicksites were of an almost anarchistic bent, with a heavy commitment to pacifism, the abolition of slavery,[187] equality of the sexes, religious toleration, and freedom of conscience, and a deep suspicion of both secular and religious institutions and hierarchies.[188]

The Orthodox, on the other hand, tended to be wealthy, to live in cities, and to embrace modern industry and commerce enthusiastically. They are, evidently, the Quakers of whom Max Weber writes for the most part, though he does not explicitly distinguish between the groups or convey the fundamental causes of their differences. Whereas Hicksites emphasized their own ascetic lifestyle as the true expression of Christian life, the Orthodox were far more concerned with espousing a more mainstream, dogmatic belief system. Ironically, the stricter the belief

[187] Orthodox Quakers also tended to lean abolitionist, but, because of their social prominence and involvement in commerce, were far more accommodating to the institution of slavery. Thomas Hamm writes: "In 1842 Orthodox Friends in Richmond, Indiana, turned out by the thousands to hear a political address by Henry Clay, giving him a hero's welcome...When a Hicksite abolitionist presented Clay with a petition that urged him to free his slaves, the Orthodox went to great lengths to dissociate themselves from it, fearful that, in their own words, the taint of abolitionism mmight lose them 'the place and influence which, as a Society' they enjoyed 'with the rulers of the land'" (27).

[188] Historical side note: in many ways, Tolstoy's Christian anarchism—and, indeed, Tolstoyan Christianity—shared a deep affinity with this both the Hicksites and the traditional quietist Quakers. They shared an emphasis on one's own conscience as possessing greater moral authority than the Scriptures, pacifism and repudiation of any state or religious institutions, suspicion of pleasure (alcohol and even art—I am unfamiliar with Quaker views of sexuality, I hardly imagine them to have been "sex-positive," though I am fairly sure they did not advocate total abstinence, as Tolstoy did in later years), the rejection of the "irrational" aspects of Christian faith (i.e. miracles and sacraments), and a traditional, agrarian critique of modernity and capitalism (Tolstoy's own personal contradictions notwithstanding). Indeed, Tolstoy's first major English-language translators, Louise and Aylmer Maude, who were also personal friends, were Quakers.

system, the less rigorous their lifestyles became, relatively speaking, in the sense that Orthodoxy allowed them to adopt the new capitalist inner-worldly asceticism of which Weber writes, and which was incompatible with traditional Quaker quietism. As Robert Doherty writes:

> The Orthodox wanted to make their peace with the secular world. They endorsed a formal religion which would emphasize belief rather than behavior—a system which would allow them to participate in the affairs of the world without the tensions produced by an emphasis on quietism and fulfillment of a behavioral code…In short, they wanted a religion that would give meaning to, that is, sanction and recognize their activities in the world. Thus, they stressed the importance of doctrine. A religious man was, in their eyes, one who believed in a specified set of religious ideas" …The Orthodox also intimated that secular success might well be used as a guide to one's spiritual progress…The general membership should be passive and let the problems of belief, membership, and salvation be resolved by those on whom God had granted His blessing in the form of material wealth" (31).

The specific doctrines the Orthodox embraced included a reassertion of the Trinity, which they believed Hicks was rejecting,[189] the ultimate authority of the Bible as spiritual revelation, and the crucial role of faith, rather than good works, in one's salvation, all of which clearly brought them more into line with the mainstream Protestant tenets of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura.* While Hicksites rejected Orthodox dogmatism,[190] they were perhaps even more critical of Orthodox

[189] Hicks was, in many ways, close to Unitarianism in his belief that Jesus was no more divine than any other person, except to the extent that he had perfectly cultivated his Inner Light.

[190] Doherty writes, "[The Hicksite liberals] launched a direct attack upon Orthodox doctrine. Specifically, the liberals denied the validity of the Bible as a guide to God's unchanging revelation, of the concept of Christ's atonement, and the idea of the Trinity. [T]he primary basis for their attacks…was their belief that communion between man and God was continuous and that this communion could be pursued individually through the spiritual union of the meeting. The Spirit of God was in all men. Neither Christ nor priest, neither creed nor ceremony was the key to

*worldliness,* or "creaturely activity," i.e. involvement in capitalist enterprise, merchant trade, speculation, and, of course, whaling.

The Orthodox, then, abandoned the more stringent "monastic asceticism," in Weber's terms, and to which the Hicksites adhered, in favor of the inner-worldly asceticism. The "Quaker ethic," in other words, did not entirely disappear, but rather was transformed. Though Weber's discussion of Quakers is a little hazy,[191] his general assessment of the link between the Quaker work ethic and rationalization largely holds true for both groups:

> The Quaker ethic also holds that a man's life in his calling is an exercise in ascetic virtue, a proof of his state of grace through his conscientiousness, which is expressed in the care and method with which he pursues his calling. What God demands is not labour in itself, but rational labour in a calling. (161-2)

The difference between the two groups, which he does not discuss, is in their particular understanding of rationalization, by which Weber meant both the "radical elimination of magic from the world" as well as the systematic, utilitarian optimization of economic processes.[192] The Hicksites and traditional Quakers more strongly expressed the former; the Orthodox more enthusiastically embraced the latter, though this went hand-in-hand with faith.[193] Both groups, however, viewed "rational" labor as key to warding off idolatry of the flesh.

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salvation" (85). (They did not entirely reject Scripture's validity so much as its *ultimate* authority; i.e. its superiority to the Inner Light.)

[191] This is not necessarily his fault, as, by the time Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic,* nearly all Quakers were Orthodox, and for some time.

[192] "Magic" referring to what they thought of as religious superstition, i.e. the sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist. The Hicksites would also have included the doctrines of atonement through Christ's death and resurrection, as well as of the trinity itself.

[193] Weber writes, "[I]n so far as Baptism affected the normal work-a-day world, the idea that God only speaks when the flesh is silent evidently meant an incentive to the deliberate weighing of courses of action and their careful justification in terms of the individual conscience. The later

Melville clearly had some grasp of the evolution and tensions within the Quaker communities in the nineteenth century. In *Moby-Dick,* the Bible-thumping Captain Bildad clearly evokes this new Orthodox Quakerism of early nineteenth century America. In contrast to his Bible, which virtually stands in as a metonymy for the man—there is a conspicuous lack of anything resembling "Inner Light" about him. Moreover, his very involvement in industry, commerce, and speculation marks him—along with Peleg, and presumably Ahab in earlier years—as Orthodox. He fittingly weaves religious and economic admonitions together in his final words to the crew:

> Don't stave the boats needlessly, ye harpooneers; good white cedar plank is raised full three per cent within the year. Don't forget your prayers, either. Mr. Starbuck, mind that cooper don't waste the spare staves. Oh! the sail-needles are in the green locker! Don't whale it too much a' Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts. (96)

We can see in Bildad's words how close he comes to that Calvinist utilitarian cosmology outlined by Weber, and even to the more extreme critique offered by Benjamin: that under the religion of capitalism, there are no feast days because *every day* is a feast day. The labor of slaughtering whales becomes a celebratory feast, an act of worship. Ishmael provides a telling portrait of Bildad, too, in which the Captain is his own words made flesh:

> For a pious man, especially for a Quaker, he was certainly rather hard-hearted, to say the least. He never used to swear, though, at his men, they said; but somehow he got an inordinate quantity of cruel, unmitigated hard work out of them. When Bildad was a chief-

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Baptist communities, most particularly the Quakers, adopted this quiet, moderate, eminently conscientious character of conduct. The radical elimination of magic from the world allowed no other psychological course than the practice of worldly asceticism" (149). He is wrong insofar as it is those who "eliminated magic" *most* fervently who also opposed capitalist advancement.

> mate, to have his drab-coloured eye intently looking at you, made you feel completely nervous, till you could clutch something—a hammer or a marling-spike, and go to work like mad, at something or other, never mind what. Indolence and idleness perished before him. His own person was the exact embodiment of his utilitarian character. On his long, gaunt body, he carried no spare flesh, no superfluous beard, his chin having a soft, economical nap to it, like the worn nap of his broad-brimmed hat. (74-5)

Though it seems, at first, that Bildad's hard-heartedness is incongruous with his Quaker piety, we now know that it is precisely his "piety"—his Orthodox faith—which allows him to take on the role of severe task-master. In fact, in the vocabulary of inner-worldly asceticism, it could even be read in a charitable light, for Bildad merely imposes on his crew, by sheer force of personality, the same salutary effects of labor—that purgative against the idleness and idolatry of the flesh—of which he himself is the "embodiment." (I am by no means saying Melville agrees with this ethos; merely that it has an internal coherence.) As Ishmael quite explicitly describes, economic rationalism (in Weber's sense of utilitarian calculation and systematization) is written into Bildad's very body, which seems to regard its own flesh with suspicion, to banish it insofar as it is possible to do so. As the novel unfolds, this peculiar suspicion of flesh develops, through both Ishmael and Ahab's anxious meditations, into the much stranger paradox that the body, or flesh itself, contains its own absence or negation, its own spectral quality. One might call it "spectral flesh," and it is at the center of an anxiety that extends much deeper than the Protestant concern with idolatry of the flesh to the core of Christianity, especially the tension within Christianity between its more "orthodox" tendency to emphasize divine incarnation, the body, etc. and the Platonic or Gnostic tendency to view the body and material world with suspicion.

# V

## Spectral flesh

In his 1993 *Specters of Marx,* Derrida describes the elusive, indefinable relationship between the spirit, the body, and this paradoxical state which lies between them, the specter:

> As soon as one no longer distinguishes spirit from specter, the former assumes a body, it incarnates itself, as spirit, in the specter. Or rather, […] the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. […] The spirit, the specter are not the same thing […]; but as for what they have in common, one does not know what it *is*, what it is presently. *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. (4-5)

Derrida is writing of many different specters: Marx's infamous "specter of communism," the "specter" of Marx himself, the specters of whom Marx writes—including the ghost of King Hamlet, the "nothing" which Barnardo sees—and countless others, either over the course of the book itself or in the field of "hauntology," which it spawned. What all these specters share is the potency of their absence, of their "non-present presence," the fact that their non-actuality is itself an actuality which bears upon history and the world, just as King Hamlet's ethereal presence-as-

absence weighs far heavier on Prince Hamlet now that he is "gone." They all persist in a liminal, even paradoxical, state between immanence and transcendence, or "both/and," or "neither/nor."

Over and over specters and the spectral appear in *Moby-Dick*, sometimes as phantoms, or ghostly appendages, other times as shadowy remnants of flesh, living ghosts, or resurrected bodies, which never appear as a sign to confirm religious hope, but almost exclusively to unsettle it. There are the "five dusky phantoms" (180) of Ahab's boat crew, Fedallah chief among them, with their "ghostly aboriginalness" (191). There is Pip, a living ghost who is not a disembodied soul but a de-spirited body—his soul having been drowned at sea. There is Moby Dick, who is constantly described as a ghost-like "flitting apparition" (193). There is Ahab himself, who, following some event shrouded in mystery, "lay like dead for three days and nights" (87),[194] and returned from this death-like state only to be dismembered by the white whale, whereupon "his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another" (156), as though his body were caught in tension between the material and spirit realms, as Ishmael describes when the crew first spots the "spirit spout" of Moby Dick:

> And had you watched Ahab's face that night, you would have thought that in him also two different things were warring. While his one live leg made lively echoes along the deck, every stroke of his dead limb sounded like a coffin-tap. On life and death this old man walked. (192)

There is also Ishmael, who seems to have been touched by death from childhood, when he awoke in a state of sleep paralysis with a phantom hand in his own, and which he recalls when he awakes with Queequeg's warm arm thrown about him in loving embrace, as though death were

[194] According to the cryptic "prophet," Elijah. This death-like experience evidently predates Ahab's encounter with the whale.

already embedded in their mutual affection.[195] Ishmael himself is something of a resurrected ghost who, as Betsy Erkkilä emphasizes, *dies* in the first edition of the novel along with the rest of the crew, the Epilogue—in which he is saved by Queequeg's coffin life-buoy—having been added for the second edition (265). Even prior to this, he seems to have died as a self-enclosed subject, a cohesive character, and dissolved into the narratives of his crewmates, and returns reconstituted as "Ishmael"—evidently not his original name—to tell the stories of those dead and absent men—to "re-present" them, as it were. As the reader encounters first Queequeg and then the rest of the crew, they are already dead, and their apocalyptic end has already occurred—living death is woven into the fabric of the book.

Ishmael expresses anxiety concerning this spectral quality of flesh from the beginning of the novel—indeed, it is, in part, this shared anxiety which attracts him to Ahab's quest. Though it is only with Ahab that Melville begins to more fully articulate the unsettling financial/economic dimension of this anxiety, Ishmael is perturbed by a more general semiotic problem. When he enters the Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford, the memorial tablets dedicated to sailors lost at sea disturb him because they conceal no body beneath, unlike tombstones, which allow the bereaved to say, "*here* lies my beloved," and to rest assured knowing their words and their mourning are directed toward a concrete object (45).[196] In fact, these marble tablets are the first occasion for Ishmael's obsession with *blankness*: "what bitter blanks," he calls them, "[w]hat deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines [of their epitaphs] that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave" (45).

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[195] In one sense, Ishmael is "resurrected," as it were, from his suicidal isolation into Queequeg's loving embrace; still, it is utterly strange that his immediate impression is that, except for his terror, the embrace is "very similar" to his most horrific childhood nightmare.

[196] Melville's italics.

There seems to be a semiotic inversion at work, in which the signifier is more concrete than the referent—what could be more concrete than a stone tablet?

It is precisely in this inversion, however, that the sign's emptiness—and the absence it signifies—become all the more palpable: the "deadly void" and "placelessness" both positively act upon Ishmael, such that the epitaphs call forth that tangible spectral presence. These "bitter blanks" which "gnaw upon all Faith" prefigure the spectral whiteness of Moby Dick himself, and lay bare that, indeed, signification itself is premised on a certain kind of faith in the relation between the sign's components. Ishmael, viewing these tablets, is thus haunted by the unfulfilled promise at the center of Christian faith: resurrection of the flesh, which, as in *Notes from Underground,* has somehow gone horribly wrong. With characteristic ambivalence, however, he asserts a cavalier indifference to his body:

> Yes, there is death in this business of whaling—a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me…[C]ome a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot. (45)

This passage goes far beyond the Protestant concern with idolatry of the flesh. It is, rather, one of the clearest instances in the novel of Platonism, or even Gnosticism: the oysters gazing up at the heavens—the realm of forms or ideas—through the image-distorting water evokes the chained men looking at shadowy forms on the cave walls, confusing them for reality. More precisely,

despite its sliver of jocular impudence toward "Jove," it is a perfect example of Platonism's absorption into Christianity, i.e. its emphasis on the immaterial soul in tension with the Pauline or proto-orthodox emphasis on the body. Indeed, Ishmael says that his "true substance" is, properly speaking, a *lack* of substance, a mere shadow—though a shadow is the immaterial imprint of the physical body. Ishmael's bravado regarding his invincible soul contains more than a hint of self-consolation against the fear not merely of death, but of a denied resurrection. He not only distances himself from the body, but wholly dissociates from it ("it is not me"). This cheery defiance should be treated with a certain suspicion, considering that Ishmael has just had his very-much-embodied redemptive moment of loving affection, a return to life from his suicidal state. That moment is, indeed, implicitly framed as a "resurrection" both from his isolation and, albeit in delayed form, from his vision of death—the phantom hand.[197]

It is Ahab who begins to articulate the more specifically economic dimension of this phenomenon. Ahab, like Benjamin—or the Underground Man, for that matter—is fixated on the pervasiveness of debt, which is no longer merely that which one owes one's creditors, but an entire web of relations that one cannot avoid if one simply exists in the world. It is both concrete economic ball-and-chain and intangible metaphysical curse, as in the "primordial debt" to which I refer in the previous chapter. Dostoevsky and Melville intersect here in a profound way, for their preoccupation with spectral bodies is profoundly connected to their concerns over the relation between religion and economy, especially as it is grounded in debt. Just as the ghost-like Underground Man resents the debt he accrues to inhabit the world of matter and flesh, so too does

[197] "I lay there dismally calculating that sixteen entire hours must elapse before I could hope for a resurrection" (37). While this is technically in reference to his punishment (spending the day in bed) as opposed to his nightmare, the biblical language he uses to describe that nightmare—"outer darkness"—is used by Matthew to refer to hell (Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30).

Ahab begrudge his "debt" to the carpenter to whom he turns for a new leg, and which he perceives as but representing a universal existential indebtedness:

> Oh, Life! Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's books. I am so rich, I could have given bid for bid with the wealthiest Prætorians at the auction of the Roman empire (which was the world's); and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with. (360)

Even if this financial language is primarily metaphorical, it nonetheless emerges from a mind which bears the indelible stamp of capital, which perceives the universe as a giant ledger, and all relations as entries in its pages. Ahab's heightened awareness of that universal debt is catalyzed, moreover, by his need to make his body "whole" again, a need made manifest in the agony caused by his phantom leg: "when I come to mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the same identical place with it…my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one" (360). His sensation of this phantom limb, the physically palpable presence of his dismembered leg, leads him to ponder whether flesh itself encloses its own spectral form, as he asks the carpenter:

> How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest; aye, and standing there in thy spite? … And if I still feel the smart of my crushed leg, though it be now so long dissolved; then, why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery pains of hell for ever, and without a body?[198] (360)

[198] It's worthwhile to consider to what extent the often unbearably self-serious Ahab is not merely a tragic, but a tragicomic figure. The carpenter responds to Ahab's dire metaphysical speculation by thinking that he's merely got the wrong measurements for the replacement leg: "Good Lord! Truly, sir, if it comes to that, I must calculate over again; I think I didn't carry a small figure, sir"

Ahab's question clearly echoes his famous "pasteboard mask" speech from "The Quarter Deck" chapter, in which he posits that "some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask" (140). Here, however, he extends his gnostic distrust of the material world to his very body, fearing that he is not the Promethean avenger he imagines himself to be, but merely a debtor to the perverse cosmos against which he rebels. The spectral missing leg, which Ahab experiences as a malevolent, alien presence, causes him, like Ishmael, to dissociate from his body, to doubt whether he was truly in possession of his body to begin with. Ahab makes that fear explicit in "The Symphony," in which he asks, hesitating even to use the first person, "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (406). This is an anxiety he shares with the Underground Man, who likewise fears not only that he cannot claim possession over his body, but that his very flesh entangles him in a web of debt-bondage on both the material/interpersonal and spiritual planes.[199] Furthermore, as with the Underground Man, that fear is inverted into a severe *ressentiment*, such that Ahab feels he is owed recompense for having been indebted in the first place, and vows vengeance against Moby Dick as a sort of debt-extraction.

Pip, too, is stricken by a similar sort of permanent bodily dissociation when he is stranded after jumping from the boat in fear, the sea having "jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (321). Ishmael qualifies, "Not drowned entirely, though" (Ibid), but the

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(360). The comedy is clearly at the expense of the rather dense carpenter, who has no proclivity for introspection, but nonetheless deflates Ahab's own grandiosity. Especially if we consider Ahab alongside his double, the jolly, self-deprecating Captain Boomer, who suffered an almost symmetrical loss—his arm—to Moby Dick, it would seem Melville suggests there is a certain ridiculous quality to Ahab's inability to view himself or the world with any irony or humor.

[199] And, as with the Underground Man's anxiety, there is a resonance with Pauline theology: "[K]now ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19)

mad surviving shred of soul, however, no longer identifies itself with Pip, whom he regards as dead, and refers to himself in the third person, not unlike Ahab: "Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from the whale-boat. Pip's missing" (391). It is this very moment that evidently arouses Ahab's curiosity and sympathy; he questions this spectral boy's living body: "And who art thou, boy? I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes. Oh God! that man should be a thing for immortal souls to sieve through! Who art thou, boy?" (392). Considering the clear kinship between the two—their madness,[200] their ghostliness, their gashed souls "sieving" through their bodies—it is odd that ultra-egoist Ahab, who sees himself reflected in everything (e.g. the doubloon), cannot see himself in Pip's eyes. But the syntax—"I see not *my* reflection"—might also suggest that Ahab sees something else reflected in Pip's empty eyes: that same phantom-like emptiness or absence of identity which "uninterpenetratingly" inhabits his own body.

Moreover, though it is not the same cosmic debt which haunts Ahab, there is an economic dimension to Pip's spectral state, as well, for he is rendered a ghost upon being subjected to a brutal calculation of profit by Stubb:

> "We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama. Bear that in mind, and don't jump any more." Hereby perhaps Stubb indirectly hinted, that though man loved his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence. (321)

Though Stubb is not entirely heartless, and assumes the other whale-boats will rescue Pip, all Pip knows is that he has been sacrificed in pursuit of commercial profit. Stubb, moreover, implicitly taunts him with the menace of slavery, which indeed viewed blacks as little more than bodies to

[200] "One daft with strength, the other daft with weakness," as the Manxman says (392).

be commodified, and thus, as Christopher Freeburg writes, "renders Pip utter flesh" (51).[201] He thus reduces Pip here to a mass of flesh that is exchangeable with that of whales, all individual qualities erased in favor of quantifiable exchange "value." While Ishmael's sublime poetic description of Pip's soul-voyage to the bottom of the sea, where he sees God and the primordial universe,[202] attributes a religious quality to the boy's death-like experience and subsequent "holy foolery," its spiritual aspect cannot be separated from the material economic consideration. That is, perhaps, why Pip sees through to the emptiness or fundamental contingency of the doubloon's value and meaning several chapters later.

The great specter that haunts the text and draws all others in its wake is the white whale itself. Over and over again Ishmael evokes the spectral quality of whiteness, above all with reference to Moby Dick himself, the "flitting apparition" who "haunt[s] the uncivilized seas" (152).Whiteness, "the great principle of light" which paints "the charnel-house" of the world in all its colors—"subtile deceits," as Ishmael calls them, like life painted upon death—bespeaks, for him, of countless ghostly forms: "white phantom sails," "the shrouded phantom of the whitened

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[201] I am partly indebted to Freeburg's analysis: "Being crudely reduced to one's instrumental value, or to no value at all, by someone of official standing like Stubb brings us back to [Francis] Parkman's buffalo or Indian analogy [that certain frontiersman have implicitly asserted the moral equivalence of killing Indians and killing buffalo]. In invoking the slave market and Pip's value there, the issue of his meekness and powerless is realized as his own condition but also the conditions of slaves in that market. This reference substantiates Pip's broader black exemplarity by designating him as from Alabama even though he hails from Connecticut. Moreover, this utter dehumanization and powerlessness directed at Pip parallels Walter Johnson's descriptions of "turning people into products" on the slave market where slave bodies were stripped, ordered, decorated – treated as dead objects that had to be fashioned for sale" (51).

[202] "[C]arried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad" (321-2).

waters," "the white gliding ghostliness of repose" in the great white shark, to name only a few.[203] "Therefore," he muses, "in his other moods, symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul" (162).

In "The Whiteness of the Whale" (Chapter 42), Ishmael expounds at length on how the whale's spectral nature is a function of the semiotic promiscuity of whiteness, which is "at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind" (165). Whiteness, Ishmael suggests, unites these contradictions in a blankness which is simultaneously overabundant with and bereft of meaning. This coincidence of mutually exclusive values is not merely a product of the myriad psychological associations we all possess, but rather, as he asserts, exists in the very nature of whiteness itself, apart from individual subjectivity:

> [I]s it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (165)

This "colorless, all-color of atheism" undeniably echoes the "bitter blanks [which] gnaw upon all Faith" that disturb Ishmael at the chapel in their confounding semiotic pointing toward a "non-

[203] Ishmael rattles off an epic catalogue of things white which lasts almost the entire six and a half pages (in the Norton Critical version) of Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," which in many ways constitutes the poetic and philosophical core of the novel. He traces a movement from the regal majesty of whiteness (including in explicitly racist ideological terms) down into our unsettling, spectral associations with the color: "that pallor of the dead, [from which] we borrow the expressive hue of the shroud in which we wrap them," "the same snowy mantle [we throw] round our phantoms; all ghosts rising in a milk-white fog," and "the king of terrors [who], when personified by the evangelist, rides on his pallid horse" (162).

object, [a] non-present present, [a] being-there of an absent," in Derrida's words. Indeed, the list-form of the chapter [see previous footnote] is almost comically simple but for the sense that each catalogue entry moves asymptotically toward nailing down the essence of whiteness only to be eluded once again, because it is that spectral emptiness which "no longer belongs to knowledge," the "naught beyond" that Ahab, too, fears.

The white whale, however, is all the more confounding and paradoxical for being a creature of flesh, none too subtly compared to that of a god incarnate. This monstrous corporeality, moreover, hardly diminishes the whale's ghostly quality, but only intensifies its horrific aspect. True, Ishmael's countless descriptions of the slaughter, dissection, consumption, processing, and anatomical study of the flesh of other whales heighten, by contrast, the ghostly enigma of this creature who eludes his enterprising hunters, and who evidently lies just beyond the grasp of industrial commerce. And yet Moby Dick's flesh, of terrible proportion and power, shatters any illusion of incorporeality as it staves first the whaling boats and then the Pequod itself, a collision between the forces of industry with horrific spectral blankness at the novel's tragic apex. The nature of the relation between spectrality and economic activity, however, is fraught with ambiguity, considering Ahab's personal motive for killing Moby Dick is vengeance, not profit. As we have seen, however, Ahab himself frames that motive in economic terms, the more so when he nails the doubloon to the mast as reward for sighting Moby Dick. Not only does this serve as financial incentive to the crew; the "meaningless all-meaning" of Moby Dick's spectral whiteness finds its analogue in the mystical signs of the gold coin, and more generally in the semiotics of money, which has its own spectral character, existing and mediating somewhere between two worlds: the symbolic and material.

# VI

## "Money's the measurer"

*Moby-Dick* is teeming with both systemic and workaday economic observations: descriptions of the means, instruments, and processes of production; the conditions of labor and wage-earning; the joys, perils, and symbolism of various work activities; the share-holder system of financing whaling expeditions; the enterprising utilitarian spirit of the Quaker whalemen; the vast and interconnected global whaling economy and the creation of systems of knowledge revolving around it; and an entire chapter dedicated to the most visible symbol of economy, namely, money, in the form of the sixteen-dollar Spanish doubloon Ahab nails to the mast as reward for sighting the white whale—and as a bribe against mutiny:

> I will not strip these men, thought Ahab, of all hopes of cash—aye, cash. They may scorn cash now; but let some months go by, and no perspective promise of it to them, and then this same quiescent cash all at once mutinying in them, this same cash would soon cashier Ahab. (178)

And yet, with the comic exception of Flask, who plans to use it to purchase cigars, none of the crew quite observes the doubloon as money *per se*. Indeed, the quest of hunting Moby Dick appears to fall outside the purview of business.[204]

Starbuck is the first to note this apparent conflict of interest. "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab?" he objects shortly after Ahab nails the

[204] The novel's structure seems to reinforce this separation, held together as it is by this main quest, while Ishmael's countless observations constitute mere digressions. But it can just as well be read in the opposite direction: that the digressions, are intrusions of the framework into the picture, and that the main quest is a means to glimpse that deeper, partly-hidden framework, the material conditions which shape the quest's meaning.

doubloon to the mast: "it will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (139). The captain's contemptuous dismissal—"Nantucket market! Hoot!"—almost risks losing the support of the crewmen, whose pay consists entirely of their share of the sales in that market. The doubloon partly allays such fears, but Starbuck's objection has already, albeit unintentionally, provided another reassurance: they need not abandon their business pursuits in order to pursue the white whale, who, after all, follows the same migratory patterns as other whales, and whom they therefore would (and do) encounter during their usual whale-hunting activity. The hunt for Moby Dick, while perhaps fraught with greater risk, does not exactly run counter to the business dimension of the voyage. Rather, the relation between these dimensions is highly complex; they are often even in tandem with each other.

Beyond this practical mutual inclusivity, moreover, Ahab proposes a more fundamental tension, framing his quest in terms of financial metaphor so as to conciliate the first mate:

> "But come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer. If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then, let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here!*"[205] (139)

Ahab thus establishes an intertwining moral economy of vengeance against the whale: Moby Dick's death is recompense for the suffering he has inflicted, and its value is undergirded by the gold doubloon. If the Nantucket market represents economic activity, in Weber's terms, as the "impersonal social usefulness" toward which one ought to direct one's labors as a purgative against

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[205] "He smites his chest," whispered Stubb, "what's that for? methinks it rings most vast, but hollow" (139).

self-indulgent idolatry of the flesh, Ahab's economy of vengeance is intensely personal.[206] And yet both are cosmic in their dimensions: Starbuck, like Bildad, sees the universe as a field of God-given resources to be harvested, while Ahab sees it as a vast tally of accounts to be balanced.[207]

From the moment Ahab nails it to the mast, the doubloon and the whale are linked in both a material and symbolic economy: by tentatively equating the coin's value with that of the whale (or its death), Ahab, and Melville through him, set their semiotic ambiguities into dialogue with each other and alongside the realm of industry and commodity. Moby Dick's divine/demonic aura extends toward the doubloon's esoteric, mystical qualities, which the crew members look upon with a certain religious awe.[208] These qualities are, however, at various turns ambiguously pagan with its zodiac, mystical Judaic—"the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics"[209]—and Christian, especially Catholic in its not-so-subtle Marian enthusiasm—"Spanishly poetic," "purest,

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[206] A nineteenth-century reader would have caught the implicit allusion to Paul's enjoinder against taking personal revenge, likewise framed in financial terms: "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19), itself a de-fanged allusion to Deuteronomy 32:35, "Vengeance is Mine, and recompense," when God assures the Israelites that their enemies would be punished. Ahab dispenses with God's assistance, or, indeed, directs his vengeance *against* God: "Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were " (*Melville* 143).

[207] Both economies are also inseparable from certain religious or ideological attitudes concerning the body. Starbuck, no less than Bildad, is, paradoxically, a literal embodiment of Protestant suspicions toward idolatry of the flesh: "He must have been born in some time of general drought and famine, or upon one of those fast days for which his state is famous. Only some thirty arid summers had he seen; those summers had dried up all his physical superfluousness. He must have been born in some time of general drought and famine, or upon one of those fast days for which his state is famous. Only some thirty arid summers had he seen; those summers had dried up all his physical superfluousness" (102). Ahab's suspicion extends into that "little lower layer:" the mutilation of his body has led him to fear that matter itself is some sort of universal deception.

[208] "For it was set apart and sanctified to one awe-striking end; and however wanton in their sailor ways, one and all, the mariners revered it as the white whale's talisman" (332).

[209] These signs recall not a little the "hieroglyphics" on the skin of whales (and Moby Dick in particular), or, as Stubb himself notes, Queequeg's tattoos: they hint at some mystical, alien meaning, but do not provide it.

virgin gold," "untouchable and immaculate to any foulness" (332). Ishmael further comments that "though [it was] placed amongst a ruthless crew and every hour passed by ruthless hands, and through the livelong nights shrouded with thick darkness which might cover any pilfering approach," no one so much as attempts to steal it: it seems they indeed see something in it beyond its mere monetary value. This is not solely because of the doubloon's esoteric qualities, but because it has been set apart, at least temporarily, from the sphere of ordinary exchange and profit, in the manner of a sacred object, occupying a liminal space between transcendence and the immanent, material world. The suspension of its ordinary economic utility, however, forces open the question of money's (not just the doubloon) peculiar relationship with these two realms, why it is both a fetish of "materialism" (especially in the vulgar sense) and the apparently mystical capacity to enable exchange by abstracting all qualities into a single, quantitative, ethereal "value."

There is in general an almost sacramental quality to money that is often reflected in numismatic imagery. Benjamin, for instance, writes that one of the elements of "capitalism as religion" is the similarity "between the images of the saints of the various religions and the banknotes of different states" and the "spirit that speaks from the ornamental design of banknotes" (290). The face of the doubloon, a version of Lady Liberty,[210] is, like so many images of saints or of pagan gods, a personification of a certain virtue, albeit a distinctly secular and republican one, at that. But she is tellingly hidden, fastened with a nail through her head against the mast, not unlike Ahab "with a crucifixion in his face" (109), as though concealing or erasing the human in favor of the cosmic sublime, exposing instead the obversal mountainous landscape with stars, zodiac, and the equatorial sun beaming overhead. This sun, with a face stamped upon it, gazes

[210] "*Libertad"* is written across her hairband.

down at the looker like a god from on high. This obverse is not exactly capitalism's secular saint, but rather a mystical, esoteric image of the cosmos imprinted onto the lifeblood of global commerce.

Melville scholars have noted the doubloon's religious aura, as well. Though the sailors in general do not seem to literally worship the object—with the exception of the Zoroastrian Fedallah, who worships the sun image—Ilana Pardes describes it as an idol along the lines of the golden calf forged by the Hebrews at Sinai in Exodus, and therefore replete with "political underpinnings" (Pardes 108). Nils Röller describes it as "iconic"—in that it functions as an image on which to focus the crew's hopes—and "gothic"[211]—in that it "corresponds," as money was thought to do during the Middle Ages, "to a value guaranteed by the material used and not, as was usual at that time for bank notes, through deposits" (122).[212] This "gothic" value is in contrast and tension with the profit-sharing contract Ishmael agrees to when he signs onto the Pequod.[213] Though these terms, "iconic" and "gothic," undeniably have religious valences, Roeller does not make a theological argument for the case of money in *Moby-Dick.* However, the theological implication of such an argument is that there is something numinous about the coin: it does not merely signify value, as do paper currency, promissory notes, and other legally ensured contracts; rather, it *is* value, and even ensures those more abstract forms of money noted above, as it does *en masse* in

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[211] Röller borrows these two terms from the philosopher-mathematician Brian Rotman's book *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero.* "Gothic" here roughly means "medieval," and is not used in the architectural/aesthetic sense, nor in the grim and lurid.

[212] Ishmael acknowledges as much, adding that the aesthetic quality adds to the inherent value of the gold itself: Here palms, alpacas, and volcanoes; sun's disks and stars, ecliptics, horns-of-plenty, and rich banners waving, are in luxuriant profusion stamped; so that the precious gold seems almost to derive an added preciousness and enhancing glories, by passing through those fancy mints,

[213] Röller does not mention this, but the profit-sharing contract is essentially based on risk and faith—that is, credit (*credere*)—the belief that the promise of payment will be honored.

the case of the gold standard.[214] Thus, if the contract or bill or note is a promise in which we put our faith, then the gold is the god-like ensurer or fulfiller of that promise.

The chapter, however, strains to the limit any understanding of money in at least two directions: what money *means* (semiotically, financially, emotionally, and so on) and what money *does*; or, more precisely, what money allows us to do. *Moby-Dick* is both a skeptical and exuberant book about the nature of signification and interpretation, and "The Doubloon" (Chapter 99) eclipses even "The Quarterdeck" and "The Whiteness of the Whale" (Chapters 36 and 42) as a dramatized reflection on the convolutions of reading the world and objects within it. Its action consists almost entirely, on the one hand, in the interpretation of the doubloon's exposed tail-side, and, on the other, in the observation of (and reaction to) others' interpretations.

Ishmael writes at the beginning of the chapter, "[S]ome certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (331-2). Meaning and utilitarian value (or, perhaps, exchange value), he seems to suggest, exist in a certain dialectical tension, if not direct opposition, with each other: significance endows objects with an value which lies beyond use and exchange, and to ignore or disbelieve this is to consign the earth, even the cosmos itself, to commodification, as the coin's sublime landscape imagery suggests. The conceit is driven home with a certain comic menace when all stable meaning threatens to dissolve into perspective: as the sibylline Pip remarks, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (335). Of course, Ishmael does *not* take it for granted that significance—which, after all,

[214] The U.S. had been on a bimetallic standard since the Coinage Act of 1792, which in itself belied the "absolute" value of gold, which fluctuated in relation to that of silver. The Panic of 1837 and the gold rush of the 1840s and '50s also caused upheavals in the relative value of specie to banknotes.

entails a thing pointing *beyond* itself—lurks *within* all things, but is rather quite concerned with that "bitter blankness" of meaning at the core of all things.

Along with the white whale itself, nothing in the novel has such an unsettling overabundance of meanings as does the doubloon—an overabundance that, like the blankness of the whale, comes full circle into nothingness. It functions less like a projection screen and more like a mirror, reflecting one's own image even more directly, as Ahab, who sees himself in it, observes in characteristic third person:[215]

> The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (332)

Thus the pious Starbuck sees an allegory of Christian faith; the stoical Stubb an allegory of merry resignation and persistence through life's sorrows and toils, and then turns to watch others: the irreverent, unimaginative, courageously stupid, and mathematically impaired Flask calculates the nine hundred sixty cigars that sixteen dollars can purchase at two cents apiece; the superstitious, "sepulchral" Manxman reads vague prognostics; Queequeg sees his own tattooed body, and perhaps the lost button of a king; the Zoroastrian Fedallah bows to the blazing sun in veneration; and the traumatized Pip sees nothing but the act of looking itself, stripped of any semantic content, grammar without human sense.

This drama of looking reveals little of the crew members' individual personalities that is not already known, but it does expand the books already-labyrinthine circling about the process of

[215] Ahab's grammatical peculiarity again reinforces the paradoxical link between his titanic ego and his self-dissociation.

interpretation itself, particularly as it plays out aboard the Pequod. Pardes puts forth the provocative claim that, though the doubloon is a "visible symbol of [Ahab's] rule", it nevertheless "generates an array of interpretations that proliferate beyond the captain's control" (108-9), and that, despite the hierarchic disparities between the various observers, "no interpretation is given clear priority" (110). Implicit in this argument is the possibility that the doubloon, at least in its aesthetic aspect, becomes a democratic space for interpretation.[216]

But while such a democratic space is hardly unimportant, is it nevertheless a democracy with meaningless choice? After all, Ahab never attempts to assert control over the crew's diverse perspectives and interpretations, which, indeed, do nothing to overturn the political hierarchy aboard the ship, and ultimately sink along with it to the bottom of the ocean. Pardes and many others—including the crew themselves—ask us to examine the doubloon as something other than money, but perhaps the very fact that the doubloon is ultimately anchored in the realm of commerce allows these alternative meanings to proliferate without breaking free from its original purpose in the novel as cash reward.

Indeed, amid this drama of looking, the doubloon's monetary function is conspicuously overlooked, and is all the more important for that reason. Melville indirectly points to this oversight, as well, through Stubb, whose essentially takes over as narrator for the larger part of the chapter, and whose observations of the crew frame it. Even as Pip repeatedly chants, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look," Stubb, the "money-making animal," cannot bear his guilt toward Pip and *looks away:* "[P]oor lad!—I could go hang myself. Any way, for the present,

[216] Pardes includes the reader in this democratic process: "Melville supposedly detaches the doubloon from its assigned cultural inscriptions, inviting his readers to 'nail' it, to momentarily suspend its customary semiotic definition and normative circulation and explore its poetic grandeur" (113).

I'll quit Pip's vicinity" (335). He can extract from the doubloon an apolitical allegory of life and death, but overlooks it as money because he cannot face his own complicity in dehumanizing Pip in pursuit of profit. If anything, the doubloon is able to neutralize the "democratic" interpretations because, with the exception of shallow Flask,[217] none of them engage with it *as money*, and thus never come to grips with its basic functions, which drive them forward: recompense, exchange, and commodification.

## VII

### Money, transcendence, transubstantiation

The doubloon's ability to neutralize any democratic potential of interpretation is directly related to the "levelling" nature of money in general: its way of erasing the individual, qualitative aspects of any given thing (or person) and reducing them to mere differences in quantity, i.e. monetary value, as Georg Simmel describes in his monumental *Philosophy of Money* (1900). This protean quality of money implies a sort of purely abstract realm of value which, to all appearances, exists independent of things—it is essentially transcendent. As Simmel describes, this transcendence resembles in no small way certain theological conceptions of God:

> [M]oney in its psychological form, as the absolute means and thus as the unifying point of innumerable sequences of purposes, possesses a significant relationship to the notion of God—a relationship that only psychology, which has the privilege of being unable to commit blasphemy, may disclose. The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities

[217] Even Stubb can't shake the suspicion that Flask might be correct: "Shall I call that wise or foolish, now; if it be really wise it has a foolish look to it; yet, if it be really foolish, then has it a sort of wiseish look to it" (334).

> and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is—according to a beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa—the *coincidentia oppositorum.*[218] Out of this idea, that in him all estrangements and all irreconcilables of existence find their unity and equalization, there arises the peace, the security, the all-embracing wealth of feeling that reverberates with the notion of God which we hold. [***] There is no doubt that, in their realm, the feelings that money excites possess a psychological similarity with this. In so far as money becomes the absolute commensurate expression and equivalent of all values, it rises to abstract heights way above the whole broad diversity of objects; it becomes the centre in which the most opposed, the most estranged and the most distant things find their common denominator and come into contact with one another. Thus, money actually provides an elevated position above the particular and a confidence in its omnipotence, just as we have confidence in the omnipotence of a highest principle to grant us the particular and the baser at any moment and to be able to transform itself into them. (236)

The coin, then, is the material embodiment of this abstract transcendence or psychological form—the "ideal" form of money, as it were—and thus spectral in its own right. This mystical aspect of money fits in with the novel's broader concerns: Ishmael's anxieties regarding whiteness find a parallel in the all-reconciling transcendence of money which Simmel describes: both threaten us with the same overabundance of meaning collapsing in on itself. Ahab's assertion that "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," that "some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask" (140), likewise resonates with the transcendent abstraction lurking behind "the whole broad diversity of objects,"

[218] Unity of opposites. From his essay, "*De docta ignorantia*" (1440).

endowing it with "value"—albeit value which fluctuates according to the invisible, often inscrutable, but apparently reasoning (if arbitrary) hand of the market. Ahab does not explicitly draw parallels between the two—Moby Dick is the mask of the godhead made flesh, not of the market economy—but he does in fact describe the whale in terms befitting either the executor or legal authority in some commercial or financial contract: "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (140).

Beyond its "unifying" or "all-reconciling" transcendence, money shares another quality with God: its movement between the transcendent and immanent realms. The two transcendent "entities" become embodied, physically manifest in the world—as the Word made flesh on the one hand; and, on the other, as hard cash, or as those commodities for which money is exchanged. Indeed, money, and particularly coinage, have, for centuries, been likened to the eucharistic Host. As Jochen Hörisch writes,

> The stamped Host will be inherited by the stamped coin. Those two, the Host and the coin, resemble each other, not coincidentally, in their design; both must be issued by an authority; both have two sides; both raise the Faustian question of whether the thing is sacred or profane. (27)

Again, this mysterious liminal existence between two realms is reflected in the spectral white whale—its haunting transcendence character and its monstrous materiality—the more so as it is linked with the doubloon. This dual existence corresponds more than a little to Marx's description of the dual nature of the commodity, though it corresponds by way of a rather ambiguous contrast, as Moby Dick himself contrasts with those whales who are actually killed and refined into saleable commodities. A commodity, for Marx, is defined by its existence in both concrete material form and abstract, immaterial value:

> Commodities come into the world in the form of use-values or material goods, such as iron, linen, corn, etc. This is their plain, homely, natural form. However, they are only commodities because they have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value. Therefore they only appear as commodities, or have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e. natural form and value form. (*Capital* 138)

Marx posits that it is this internal tension between the commodity's two natures which gives rise to the creation of money.[219] Indeed, he describes this emergence in sacramental terms which, in a sense, go beyond Simmel's description of the abstract, god-like character of money by directing it back toward the immanent and material—the "becoming flesh" half of the equation, as it were. Marx refers to the process—or "miracle," as he calls it in Volume 2 of *Capital*—by which the use-value of a product is transformed into exchange-value, and ultimately into money itself, as "transubstantiation," i.e. the Catholic sacrament in which the ceremonial bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ to be consumed during the eucharist. Marx describes the transubstantiation of the commodity in *Volume 1*:

[219] More recent scholarship has disputed some of the specifics of Marx's account of the origin of money. Shahzavar Karimzadi, for instance, writes that Marx tries too much "to confine it within his dialectical method" (77), rather than produce a theory from historical evidence. Graeber, drawing on a wealth of historical and anthropological evidence, argues that debt, rather than the exchange of commodities in trade networks, preexisted and gave rise to coinage and money. However, Marx's explanation is not inconsistent with classical economics of the 18th and 19th centuries, and, if it gets the facts wrong, nonetheless provides a sort of mythic explanation for the role that money plays in the relationship between the apparently contradictory concrete and abstract natures of the commodity. Moreover, his description of the nature of the commodity remains deeply compelling, as does his poetic understanding of its almost mystical relationship with money.

> Like the relative form of value in general, price expresses the value of a commodity (for instance a ton of iron)[220] by asserting that a given quantity of the equivalent (for instance an ounce of gold) is directly exchangeable with iron. But it by no means asserts the converse, that iron is directly exchangeable with gold. In order, therefore, that a commodity may in practice operate effectively as exchange-value, it must *divest itself of its natural physical body* and become transformed from merely imaginary into real gold… (197, my italics)

This transubstantiation is not literal, but a semiotic sleight of hand hinging on the mysterious ability of money to signify the value of iron by stripping away its physical attributes, thereby "transforming" it into gold. Though somewhat ironic, it is no idle choice of words on Marx's part, for doctrinal understanding of the Eucharist and transubstantiation has always revolved around the manner in which the symbol—i.e. the bread and wine—corresponds to its referent—i.e. the real flesh and blood of Christ. The denominational debates concerning transubstantiation (Catholics), consubstantiation (Lutherans), and even wholesale rejection of the Eucharist (Quakers, for instance, rejected all sacraments) which burst forth during the Protestant Reformation almost read as Structuralist texts. For instance, Calvin—whose theology Melville was most familiar with—was keenly attentive to this correspondence, because an improper relation or signification between them was tantamount to deception by God:

> There is no ground to object that the expression [the body of Christ] is figurative,[221] and gives the sign the name of the thing signified. I admit, indeed, that the breaking of bread is

[220] One could easily substitute a barrel of spermaceti.

[221] Calvin specifically refers to a passage from Paul: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). Earlier in the same letter, Paul refers to the Eucharist and the

> a symbol, not the reality. But this being admitted, we duly infer from the exhibition of the symbol that the thing itself is exhibited. For unless we would charge God with deceit, we will never presume to say that he holds forth an empty symbol. Therefore, if by the breaking of bread the Lord truly represents the partaking of his body, there ought to be no doubt whatever that he truly exhibits and performs it. The rule which the pious ought always to observe is, whenever they see the symbols instituted by the Lord, to think and feel surely persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is also present. For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? If this is true let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us in seal of an invisible gift as that his body itself is given to us. (*Institutes* II:564)

Calvin, in other words, argues that faith eliminates the distance between the symbol and the referent: the eucharist thus goes beyond an ordinary "sign," and brings its referent into itself, thereby making the thing signified present despite its absence—spiritual, if not spectral, flesh—though the bread and wine do not literally become flesh and blood. Though the precise semantic distinctions are rather elusive, it was crucial to Calvin and countless other theologians given the sacrificial nature of the eucharist: the communal consumption of the crucified and resurrected body of Christ, the ransom price of salvation.

Considering these semiotic contortions, it is easy to understand the anxiety the Ishmael—Calvinist by birth, if no longer—has when gazing at those "bitter blanks," the faith-destroying marble epitaphs to un-resurrected, "placelessly perished" sailors. Ahab, moreover, has his qualms

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manna from Exodus as "spiritual meat" (1 Cor. 10:3), an apparent oxymoron as tantalizingly ambiguous as does his description of the resurrection body. This paradox of the body which is simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal has evidently been present at the heart of Christianity since its inception.

with the eucharist: the silver calabash he spat into "afore the altar in Santa" is either the Catholic ciborium or the communion chalice—the eucharistic vessels.[222] But this may not have been out of Quaker contempt for Catholics, as James suggests; rather, it may have had to do with that same rage which seethes in him throughout the novel, most notably with regard to Moby Dick and his own body: his rage against the invisible transcendence embodied in or lurking behind all material things, his suspicion that material reality does not coincide or correspond with that which he wishes it to signify. That possibility is all the more plausible considering that Elijah hints—albeit extremely vaguely—that the quest at the center of the novel—revenge against the whale who most embodies that spectral paradox of material transcendence—hinges on Ahab's act of blasphemy,

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[222] "Calabash" is certainly an odd word to describe a eucharistic vessel, and adds to the cryptic nature of Elijah's insinuations, but the only other time it is used in the novel is to describe another ceremonial vessel in a humorous scene involving a cross-cultural misunderstanding on Queequeg's home island of Kokovoko, when the captain of a merchant ship is invited to a wedding feast, and witnesses the ritual blessing of coconut water:

> [T]he High Priest opens the banquet by the immemorial ceremony of the island; that is, dipping his consecrated and consecrating fingers into the [calabash] before the blessed beverage circulates. Seeing himself placed next the Priest, and noting the ceremony, and thinking himself—being Captain of a ship—as having plain precedence over a mere island King, especially in the King's own house—the Captain coolly proceeds to wash his hands in the punchbowl;—taking it I suppose for a huge finger-glass. (61-2)

The captain is clearly a parodic double for Ahab, and his accidental desecration is likewise a comic version of Ahab's "skirmish," for no brawl erupts, but only a gently mocking laughter. Like bread for flesh or wine for blood, the coconut water clearly serves as a symbol for a bodily substance—sperm—albeit one with joyous, life-producing connotations in the context of *Moby-Dick's* often phallic idiom, rather than sacrificial associations—it is a wedding feast, after all.[222] And, like Queequeg himself—who, after praying, so "unceremoniously" pockets his idol, Yojo—his people are unphased by the improper treatment of the blessed substance, as though they have a very fluid sense of boundaries between the sacred and profane, or between the consecrated sign and the sacred thing to which it refers (life force, perhaps). The implicit pairing of this "eucharist" with Ahab's sacrilegious sputum is all the more comical given the fact that the joyous, non-sacrificial ceremony is literally among cannibals, who are evidently much less semantically fussy about the flesh they consume. It also anticipates the "Squeeze of the Hand" chapter, likewise a joyous, communal (and homoerotic) scene centered around sperm—and the literal transubstantiation of whale spermaceti.

along with his consequent duel with the Spaniard: it was subsequently prophesied that Ahab would lose his leg.

Despite the semiotic convolutions at issue in eucharistic theology, Marx's understanding of transubstantiation is not strictly confined to language or psychology: it is also caught up in the dynamics of sacrifice implied by the eucharist. Just as, in Calvin's analysis, the eucharist is a symbol, and yet somehow also the true bodily *presence* of Christ, so too, for Marx, does the linguistic or symbolic dynamic of transubstantiation, exchange, and commodification possess a certain material truth. There is something odd in Marx's reflexive construction—the commodity divesting itself of its own body—all the more so for apparently deflecting attention away from the human agent who commodifies. But perhaps, in a deeper sense, it suggests that the product becomes enmeshed in a more general, even universal process of commodification and transubstantiation that has taken on a life of its own. And while commodification does not always involve direct brutality—iron, linen, and corn are inanimate, after all—his choice of the word "body" (*"Leib"*) evokes a mortal frailty, and even suggests a potential violence latent within the process. "Divest," too, acquires an eerie aura, simultaneously sacramental and euphemistic of murder or suicide, as of some creature that is sacrificed and becomes purely ethereal as it leaves its bodily frame.

## VIII

## Sacramental Industry

If Ishmael's and Ahab's semiotic anxieties resonate with those of Calvin, the material sacrificial aspect of transubstantiation which Marx describes resonate with the economic activities on board the Pequod. That latent violence within the process of transubstantiation fully unfolds or

materializes in the slaughter of whales and the strained and mangled bodies of the men who hunt them—notably Pip, who is spectralized, "divested" of his body, from the moment he suffers the threat of commodification. All economic activity in *Moby-Dick*, furthermore, revolves around a very real transubstantiation: the "liquidation" of flesh, in two senses of the word. Whale flesh is actually liquified, not merely divested from its natural body but rendered quite formless. In this process it is literally transubstantiated, refined into a liquid asset or commodity, easily converted into cash, of which the doubloon is the ever-present icon for the crew.

The clearest example is perhaps the famous "Squeeze of the Hand" (Chapter 94), in which Ishmael and his fellow crewmen squeeze clumps of spermaceti back into homogenous fluid. Whatever the juvenile exuberance of the chapter's masturbatory comedy, its spiritual and political dimensions are extremely complex, even tragic. The repetitious bodily motions throw Ishmael into an almost Bacchanalian frenzy in which he experiences a utopian vision of brotherly (indeed, homoerotic) love and kindness that verges on the heavenly and eternal:

> Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

> Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti. (322-3)

Though they do not consume this "sperm," the process becomes a sort of sacramental communion centered around the "flesh" of a sacrificial creature, i.e. the whale.[223]

There is, furthermore, a religious communalism to this merging of bodies in an essentially faceless anonymity which parallels the *sobornost* sense of the community of believers who, having overcome their individual egos, merge as the body of Christ on earth, albeit in a sexual manner antithetical to religious doctrine. In fact, Ishmael himself uses the same language of universal "catholicity"—albeit with some irony—when convincing Bildad to allow the pagan Queequeg to ship on the Pequod, defending the harpooneer as a member of the "First Congregation:"

> I mean, sir, the same ancient Catholic Church to which you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother's son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets no ways touching the grand belief; in *that* we all *join hands.* (84, final italics mine)

[223] It also recalls the sperm-like consecrated coconut water of the "eucharist" at the wedding on Kokovoko.

Though women are notably absent, the loving "squeeze of the hand" clearly echoes this universal "we all join hands." Indeed, because of women's absence it is also an alternative to traditional domestic marriage ("the wife, the heart, the bed…"), and thus is also very close to Dostoevsky's religious-utopian vision of a marriage-less heaven characterized by an "annihilation of the *I*"—though Dostoevsky imagined that this utopia ushered in by self-sacrifice and biological evolution, rather than by sexual ecstasy or mutual masturbation—far from it.[224] So, too, does this utopia founded on brotherly love and sexual affection seem to offer an alternative to the brutalities of capitalism, the same "living death" of intense atomization from which the Underground Man suffers and seeks resurrection.

And yet, just as the Underground Man's attempts at resurrection are themselves inseparable from exploitation and abuse, so, too, Ishmael's ecstatic vision could not be more deeply embedded within the process of violent commodification, since it is predicated on the sacrificial slaughter of whales for profit.[225] Melville drives this point home (Ishmael seems blissfully unaware) by the chapter's placement within the novel. It directly follows "The Castaway," in which Pip is stranded

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[224] It is fascinating that both writers, at least in these specific instances, imagine heaven as a world without marriage. I regret that the absence of women, suspicion toward marriage, and other problems of gender relations fall outside this chapter's purview.

[225] The novel as a whole forces us to at least consider this as morally equivalent to violence against people; it cannot be dismissed simply because the whale is not human. In a separate chapter, "The Whale as a Dish," Ishmael probes the meat-eater's conscience: "It is not, perhaps, entirely because the whale is so excessively unctuous that landsmen seem to regard the eating of him with abhorrence; that appears to result, in some way, from the consideration before mentioned: *i.e.* that a man should eat a newly *murdered* thing of the sea, and eat it too by its own light. But no doubt the first man that ever *murdered* an ox was regarded as a *murderer*; perhaps he was hung; and if he had been put on his trial by oxen, he certainly would have been; and he certainly deserved it if any *murderer* does. Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (242, my italics). Not only does Ishmael repeatedly call the consumption of meat "murder;" his defamiliarizing reference to "bipeds" and "quadrupeds" rejects any all-too-easy distinctions between humans and animals.

at sea, sacrificed, as it were, for the very sacrificial whale whose spermaceti enables Ishmael's religious experience. The traumatized Pip, presumably, is excluded from those men who so lovingly gaze at each other while joining hands. The chapter, furthermore, is less than halfway over before Ishmael abruptly shifts from ecstatic love to descriptions of the whale's dissected flesh—we learn of workaday scientific nomenclature of such bodily parts and substances as "white-horse," "gurry," "plum pudding," "slobgollion," and "nippers," all of which come under the diverse weaponry of the whaling trade: the mincer, pike, gaff, and spade, which often sever the toes of those who wield them.

The ritual, sacrificial aura of the refinement process is even more explicit when the mutilated, dissected—even castrated[226]—whale carcass is then fed into the infernal try-works to be rendered down:

> [A]fter being tried out, the crisp, shrivelled blubber, now called scraps or fritters, still contains considerable of its unctuous properties. These fritters feed the flames. Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope, once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body. Would that he consumed his own smoke! for his smoke is horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for the time. It has an unspeakable, wild, Hindoo odor about it, such as may lurk in the vicinity of funereal pyres. It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit. (326)

[226] In the following chapter, the whale's penis is literally sliced off, turned inside out, and worn as a protective "cassock" for the process of mincing the whale flesh into thin "bible-leaves:""Arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbishoprick [sic], what a lad for a Pope were this mincer!" (325). The ludicrous combination of religious/ceremonial and phallic imagery and puns further emphasizes the simultaneously sacramental and sexual aura of this "transubstantiation."

Marx probably could not imagine a more vividly literal manifestation of the commodity "divesting itself of its natural physical body" than this whale feeding the fire which consumes its own flesh, enmeshed in a not merely cannibalistic but autophagous, self-perpetuating process of demonic transubstantiation. One can, of course, ascribe responsibility to the crew, except that they, too, seem caught up in it themselves, and have merged with the hellish landscape of the Pequod, which "drove on, as if remorselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed" (326). By their immersion into this thoroughly material process, they become a ship of demonic phantoms, their existence already tangibly suffused with death.[227]

"The Doubloon," significantly, takes place shortly after the "Try-Works" chapter, directly following "Stowing Down and Clearing Up," which describes the crew's chores of barreling the refined oil and wiping down first the ship and then themselves. They then proceed to "finally issue to the immaculate deck, fresh and all aglow, as bridegrooms new-leaped from out the daintiest Holland" (330), where they enjoy something like a fantasy of bourgeois domesticity: "[they] humorously discourse of parlors, sofas, carpets, and fine cambrics; propose to mat the deck; think of having hanging to the top; object not to taking tea by moonlight on the piazza of the forecastle"

[227] "Their tawny features, now all begrimed with smoke and sweat, their matted beards, and the contrasting barbaric brilliancy of their teeth, all these were strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works. As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooneers wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. […] Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions in my soul[…]" (327).

(330). But for the three men perched aloft to sight yet more whales, no trace remains of the prior night's industrial hellscape or the violent engagements of money-making. The commodity has not merely been divested of its natural body; it has been erased, hidden, and even—for a time—stricken from memory: none of the crew recalls the gory ordeal even when gazing at the gold coin, that fetish which, according to Marx, is the implicit end goal of transubstantiation.

At the core of commodification and transubstantiation, however, are not merely specific forms of production, nor even its self-consuming perpetual motion, but the opening up of the possibility of commodification in general, such that the material universe itself suddenly made vulnerable to "divestment from its natural body," to the conversion to exchange-value. The cosmos must thenceforth be apprehended in this new way, even if it is to resist conversion. This is, in fact, very close to what Ishmael writes of the search for meaning in the doubloon: that, to quote again, "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (331-2). He is more concerned here with poetic meaning or metaphysical significance than with use-value, as Marx is, but they share a profound wariness toward the ever-expanding conversion of the material universe into commodity, or private property. Ishmael makes this steady forward-march explicit in "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish"

(Chapter 89),[228] in which he describes a sort of vast, relentless process of primitive accumulation spreading over not only the continents of the earth,[229] but even liberty, rights, people:[230]

> What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waifing it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish.
>
> What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?[231] (31)

This is the relentless logic signified by the doubloon. No matter its aesthetic quality, its precious material, its apparently numinous quality, its allegorical or symbolic potential, the crew understands implicitly that its removal from the sphere of exchange—the gesture which marks it

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[228] A "fast-fish" being a whale that has been killed by one ship's crew and claimed with a pennoned "waif-pole" lest any other crew attempt to take it. A "loose-fish" has not yet been claimed.

[229] Melville's immediate American political context was the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the legacy of Jacksonian "expansion;" these find a ready analogue in today's economics of compulsive "growth."

[230] Erkkilä, too, detects a shared valence between Melville and Marx in this chapter, and invokes Marx's use of metaphoric specters: "For Melville as for Karl Marx, the logic of democracy is inextricably bound up with the imperial logic of capital. The *specter* of imperial capital that haunts the revolutionary dream of freedom in *Moby-Dick* receives its fullest articulation in 'Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish'…" (263, my italics).

[231] One can read this final question as commenting on the author's struggle to win over a readership. However, the virtuosic shifting of scope—expanding from the whale to the Americas to the world before bearing down with intense focus onto the reader—signals something far more insidious, and all the more eerily prescient from the perspective of the current age of the "attention economy:" that once the material world has undergone enclosure, privatization, and so on, the immaterial will follow: human thought and attention.

as sacred—is only temporary, that, like all money, it serves to facilitate exchange, to suspend time, so to speak: to close the gap between one exchange to the next, at which moment the doubloon will once again pass into the realm of the profane—not necessarily in the obscene sense, but toward the material world, a movement suggested by Marx's term.

Indeed, if transubstantiation can be conceived as an act of sacramental magic, then it is a magical disenchantment of the cosmos, a mysterious de-mystification in which the material universe is "rationalized" in Weber's sense of the term: all meanings and considerations disappear apart from utilitarian calculation. Even Ahab's quest to annihilate Moby Dick—the enigma *par excellence*—is an attempt to impose human sense and understanding onto something which eludes reason and comprehension. Thus one can understand the captain's self-aware monomania: "all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (157). His means are sane because they operate with rationalism and efficiency as he marshals the force of capital and industry to inflict his debt-vengeance upon Moby Dick and the cosmos. Ahab's economy of vengeance and Starbuck's "Nantucket market" thereby converge through the doubloon, their shared money-fetish. It is not merely that money's all-reconciling nature allows the crews myriad readings to coexist harmlessly within its shade; it is, in part, precisely because there is no critique of the doubloon *as money* that they can do so without disturbing its basic and all-consuming end function: to facilitate commodification and exchange. The medium, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, subsumes all messages into its logic.

## IX

## "Apocalyptic Leap"

The captain's theological quest of destroying Moby Dick as godhead incarnate, though it may subsume the business quest of hunting whales in general, is therefore nonetheless intertwined with it, rather than opposed to it in any meaningful way. It is, however, misdirected, for it is not really the white whale that has "dismembered" him. Ahab himself connects his physical wound with the atrophy of affection and love, if not Ishmael's redemptive homoerotic sort, then at least his marriage and any sense of friendship. The captain's word choice—he uses the word "dismember" three times in as many sentences—suggests that he has lost not only his "member," but also his "membership," his sense of any communal belonging.[232] His isolation is a sort of living death akin to that from which the ghost-like Underground Man suffers: Ahab is the "isolato" *par excellence*, unable to integrate in community of men which Ishmael so fetishizes, be it that "First Congregation," or the grand democratic and multiracial "Anacharsis Clootz deputation" (107),[233] or his own family.

His exclusion from family life is only partly due to his injury,[234] and he comes desperately close to realizing this in a confessional moment, when he is speaking to Starbuck in "The

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[232] Ishmael introduces this valence of meaning when he half-playfully, half-evasively asserts that Queequeg is "a born member of the First Congregational Church."

[233] James writes about Melville's interest in the Anarchsis Clootz: "Clootz's ideas went far beyond those of his fellow [1789] revolutionaries. He was known as the Orator of the Human Race, he was an ardent advocate of the Universal Republic, and he called on the National Assembly to establish the brotherhood of all men by carrying war to all the tyrants of the world. […] Melville seems to have been fascinated by Clootz…but whereas Clootz thought of uniting all men in a Universal Republic, based on liberty, equality, frathernity, brotherhood, human rights, etc., Melville, in 1851, had not the faintest trace of these windy abstractions. […] His candidates for the Universal Republic are bound together by the fact that they work together on a whaling-ship" (19-20).

[234] Before the Pequod sets sail, Ahab wrenches his ivory prosthetic so violently that it "all but pierced his groin" (355), presumably rendering him impotent. and, during his recuperation, "had hidden himself away with such Grand-Lama-like exclusiveness; and, for that one interval, sought speechless refuge, as it were, among the marble senate of the dead" (Cite: 106).

Symphony" (Chapter 132).[235] Though he laments that "one poor leg should have been snatched from under me," his grief is fixed primarily on the sheer intensity of isolation that derives from his line of work:

> Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! Aye and yes, Starbuck, out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore. When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a Captain's exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without—oh, weariness! heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command! (405)

The true "castration," as it were, is his occupation in the commercial whaling industry. Both Starbuck, who warns Ahab of the madness in pursuing "a dumb brute…that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" (139) and the rumors "that every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent" (155-6), are simultaneously right. The "intelligence" has merely been misattributed: it is not only the whale's instinctive cunning, but the "rationalism" of countless utilitarian calculations by myriad commercial entities and agents, captains, mongers, entrepreneurs, investors, businesspeople of all sorts, heaped into one massive Hobbesian commercial-industrial leviathan. Bereft of human relationships, Ahab becomes, to the world, the bearer of strictly economic value—that is, his "managerial" role as ship's captain in one of the most powerful mega-industries of the day. The

[235] He says to Starbuck: "I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow—wife? wife?—rather a widow with her husband alive! Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; and then…for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!" (405).

loss of his leg is merely the visible, physical trauma that releases all his cathectic rage onto the white whale.

It is because Ahab fails to fully apprehend and articulate this that, when he sights the white whale soon after, he does not call off pursuit, but recommits to it with renewed fury, claiming the doubloon as rightfully his, though he chooses not to "redeem" it, leaving it at the mast as further incentive to the crew for the white whale's death.[236] Thus the violence of commerce culminates with a ruthless economic logic in the failed execution of debt-vengeance, in that Nietzschean "apocalyptic leap," as Benjamin describes, "not into conversion [i.e. a breaking away from capitalist logic]," but rather into "explosive and discontinuous intensification."[237] Michael Rogin writes,

> The sea devours and dissolves the object world; commodities provide humans with their sense of power over nature. Instead of being consumed, humans consume commodities. The white whale reverses that process. It drives Ahab back to the original human helplessness against which commodity creation defended. (115)

While this is true, it is one thing to acknowledge that nature, or death, eventually consumes all human life; it is quite another to fling oneself into its jaws. Why is it specifically the white whale

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[236] He adds still more incentive by promising to divide ten times the doubloon's value among the men should they succeed in killing Moby Dick.

[237] One can imagine a potential critique of Nietzsche here: it is not by overcoming or exorcising his sense of debt/guilt, bad conscience, or *ressentiment*, but rather by *intensifying* or further perverting them that Ahab becomes an *"Übermensch"* of the sort that has captured popular imagination, capable of ruthlessly casting aside ordinary moral considerations in executing his grandiose, mythopoetic vision. That is not necessarily true to Nietzsche's conception; had he read Melville as he did Dostoevsky, he very well may have diagnosed the stronger, more charismatic Ahab with the same underlying psychological maladies as the feeble, hysteric Underground Man (they are, after all, both spectral figures). However, Melville, along with Benjamin, seems to suggest that those psychological maladies are inseparable from the epic grandeur of someone who, like Ahab, is willing to go "beyond good and evil."

who is the crew's undoing?

The answer lies in the symbolic elusiveness not only of Moby Dick's whiteness, but also of his spectral flesh, its liminal state between matter and transcendence. Ahab's economy of revenge, in which the indifference of money is fixed to the blank indifference of Moby Dick (or of the universe, or God), is an attempt to obviate that humiliating "mortal inter-indebtedness" of being by instead extracting a debt-vengeance from the universe. But the universe is indifferent toward any such debts, and thus appears as a blankness which the ego, or human reason, simply cannot categorize, comprehend, or dominate. Rather than seek meaningful transformation of material social relations,[238] Ahab flings himself at the "pasteboard mask," the "prison wall," which he cannot alter, and therefore annihilates himself. Both the commercial economy and Ahab's seek to realize themselves in the whale's slaughter, to materially ground their transcendent end goals—the abstract monetary "value" of the whale as commodity and Ahab's bloody recompense, respectively—in its flesh. The doubloon, as both the crew's driving financial motive and the whale's symbolic talisman, is the operative mechanism by which the Moby Dick's spectral and semiotic blankness is to be brought into human comprehension.

The problem, however, is that Ahab has linked the doubloon, with its capacity to endlessly transubstantiate, with the phantasmic white whale which remains, to the end, utterly impervious to transubstantiation, refuses to be divested of its natural body or contained within human knowledge or desire for meaning. But if the whale's whiteness is so overladen with meaning that—like the polysemous doubloon—it collapses into meaninglessness, that absence of meaning again becomes meaningful. But that is not merely because the white whale is a blankness onto which

[238] Though Ahab does make symbolic gestures toward social transformation, such as placing Pip in his captain's chair, an interesting move in the context of current politics of equity.

one can project, as does Ahab, any social, psychological, aesthetic, or even theological meaning; in the end, it defies even these.

Rather, it becomes meaningful *because* it defies these projections of meaning as a blankness or nothing which is nonetheless *there*—in Derrida's words, a "being-there of an absent or departed one [which] no longer belongs to knowledge." That it eludes signification "gnaws"—much as those "bitter blanks" in the chapel—at any faith which desires a material embodiment of transcendent meaning, or material fulfillment of its promises, be they resurrection, recompense, or financial return. And yet, because it eludes knowledge, reason, and signification, it remains beyond the logic and processes of capital and commodification, however infinitely those wish to expand. Thus the white whale, ostensibly an agent of apocalypse, counterintuitively becomes an agent of possible redemption—albeit an indifferent one—by redirecting the misguided desire for cosmic recompense toward the project of utopian social transformation envisioned by Ishmael, even if it forever remains unfulfilled. However, as with the question of the Underground Man's (denied) redemption, which is premised on his abuse of Liza, Ishmael's utopian vision faces its own problem: whether it is exclusive to men, and whether it can overcome the sacrificial violence which gave birth to it.

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