

EDWARD ASCROFT

THE DOUBLE'S DOUBLES AND DOSTOEVSKY'S SHAMEFUL SUBJECT

Edwin Muir stated in *Latitudes* in 1924 that “Dostoyevsky wrote of the unconscious as if it were conscious; that is in reality the reason why his characters seem ‘pathological’, while they are only visualized more clearly than any other figures in imaginative literature... He was in the rank in which we set Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe.”¹

This essay aims to read the psychological insights of Dostoevsky’s oeuvre in the context of modern psychoanalytic theory. Unlike traditional readings of the pathological plot situation in Dostoevsky’s first major novella, *The Double*, a psychoanalytic reading of Goliadkin’s psychological crisis avoids the reductionism of interpreting it through a simplified and uncritical concept of ‘madness’. The present reading of *The Double* will be through the methodology employed by Jacques Lacan in the analysis of ‘madness’ in his essay *Kant avec Sade*, in conjunction with a psychoanalytic grounding of *shame*. According to the present reading, Dostoevsky’s *The Double* is a representation of the affect of shame as a function of repressed desire and the death drive. This comes to light through the ‘circular’ narrative structure of Dostoevsky’s novella which mirrors the hero’s rite of passage *not* from sanity to madness but through the various psychic registers. Thus the ‘shameful’ subject, Golyadkin, with his affects, moves from presentiment as unconsciousness (the imaginary), to the diegetic gaze (the symbolic), to pass, through the symptomatology of shame and its realisation in the death drive, into the register of the Lacanian ‘real’.

In Lacan’s treatment of the famous dream, related by Freud, of *Father can’t you see I am burning*, the split between consciousness at odds with its own nightmare (with its ‘real’) precedes the fundamental split between the subject as subject of the dream and the gaze that structures it.² Golyadkin, the protagonist of *The Double*, is a figure who dramatizes this split. Dostoevsky’s representation is constructed in a way that the narrative appears ostensibly as a series of repetitions and literary motifs. This representation is often transposed across Dostoevsky’s short fiction, structured by an opening refrain that situates the lucidity of the protagonist in direct contiguity with its opposite, namely madness. These opposites are objectified through a narrative voice, which is

1. Edwin Muir, *Latitudes* (New York: B.W. Huebsch Inc., 1924), p. 10.

2. Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Alan Sheridan (trans.) (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 70.

often both painful and comically ironic. This ambivalence forces the protagonist to speak: to *confess* to himself and to the reader, in order that the narrative voice may be externalised. Golyadkin is a protagonist saturated with inner speech, which, if it were not translated into narrative voice, would appear in a series of audible truncations, elisions and circumlocutions whose causes would remain indeterminable. This inner speech is complemented visually through the common tropes and signifiers of shame and indecision: blushing, pacing, retracing of steps, halting, and a desire to remain inconspicuous. However, these tropes provoke shame not as a mere literary affect or hyperbole of the anti-hero, but are a structural phenomenon, signifying the relation between the gaze of the narrative and the affect of shame as an ontological entity of subjectivity. The desire to remain inconspicuous is the antecedent of a more radical concept – namely, the death drive – which is the dramatic drive of (self-)destruction. The paradox of subjectivity arises here: the protagonist, who is “constructed through the gaze,”³ and subjectified ‘in the open’, is predetermined to become a ‘shameful’ subject, bent on his own self-annihilation.

Shame as an affect bears a remarkable similarity to the radical descriptive and theoretical positing of the death drive (Freud and Lacan), as a *wish* for destruction of the subject itself, or a desire to disappear and return to a state of nothingness. In psychoanalysis, shame is not a mere form of embarrassment but a fundamental relation of the subject to sexuality (Freud) and *jouissance* (Lacan). Shame also grounds the subject’s relation to the Other. It is often transposed into morality. However, in psychoanalysis, shame is not a part of any ‘moral’ categorical imperative but belongs to the structure of the psyche which is a topography: shame is related to the gaze which is related to the lack that constitutes the subject.

The Lacanian concept of the gaze has a pre-existing structure: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”⁴ The representation of this gaze in narrative form situates the protagonist as this “looked at” subject. However, represented through the literary function of irony and narrative voice, this subject (and his reader) appears as the subject who merely “sees.”

Golyadkin’s Imaginary World: The Mirror Stage and *méconnaissance*

The opening paragraphs of *The Double* begin in a refrain prevalent in Dostoevsky’s short fiction. For instance, it occurs in the representation of the as yet unnamed narrator in *White Nights*, who wakes up as if “forsaken by the whole world,”⁵ or the “madman”⁶ of *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, while

3. Compare Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, “Unreason as a Constituent of Reason: The Structure of Modern Consciousness According to Dostoevsky’s *The Double*,” *Su Feder Dostoevlij Visione Filosofica e Sguardo di Scrittore [Philosophical Aspects of Dostoevsky’s Works]*, Stefano Aloe (ed.) (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora editrice), pp. 431-449. I am grateful for being allowed to read this paper as an unpublished manuscript version, and I thank the author for making it available.

4. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 72.

5. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, David Magarshack (trans.) (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), p. 147.

6. Dostoevsky, *Great Short Works*, p. 717.