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**Holy Saturday Between the Sublime and Beautiful:
Fantastic Realism in Kristeva and Desmond's Dostoevskian Ideal**

Abstract

This article examines Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism," which challenges the explanation of rationalism or empiricism in the need for determinate categories fixed in nature. His use of paintings by Hans Holbein, Claude Lorrain, and Raphael in terms of the sublime and beautiful exemplify an understanding of Holy Saturday and its status between death and resurrection. Julia Kristeva's reading of Dostoevsky's melancholy as exemplifying a religious ideal and William Desmond's metaxological philosophy allows us to propose a terminology that rhymes with Dostoevskian between-ness, a conclusion that does not resolve the space between the beautiful and the sublime but remains open to the confessional enigmatic liminality that is Holy Saturday.

Keywords: Fedor Dostoevsky, Julia Kristeva, William Desmond, fantastic realism, metaxu, between-ness, sublime, beautiful, eros, painting

Sublimation alone withstands death.

Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1989, 100)

Here we have stepped to the edges of the hyperbolic, though in monstrous form.

The monstrous is sublime, but there are diviner sublimities at that edge,

diviner ways of crossing, or being crossed [...].

William Desmond (Desmond 2012, 119)

In one of his posthumously published notes, dedicated to Dostoevsky, but formulated as a universal statement about Russian existence, one of the greatest 20th century After being put in front of the firing squad and suffering in Siberia for several years, Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky founded a metaphysical sensibility which he names fantastic realism. In a letter from 1868 referring to the critics who called him a fantasist, he said that his idealism is more real than their realism (see Frank 2010, 298-9, 575). Literary critic Michael Wood recently put this into the form of a question when considering ghost stories,

deals with the devil, and magic: "are the fantastic phenomena real or not?" (Wood 2020, 42) If this is too simple a question for how artistic, religious, and philosophical truth come together, consider the following: "Suppose that, instead of analysing the classical arguments [for the soul's immortality¹], we rethink the meaning of astonishment before being, in light of the marvellous singularity of a life." (Desmond 1995, 25) With these words, William Desmond proposes at the heart of his metaphysics a point in Dostoevsky's life: "Think now of Dostoevsky on the morning of his first death. He was sentenced to death for political conspiracy. He was halfway into death, on the verge of execution, tilted over the brink of nothing." (ibid.) Even though Dostoevsky himself was put in front of a firing squad, Desmond's description is not a factual or scientific account of history or biography, but a fantastic one. "But he was suddenly reprieved, brought back from death, resurrected to life again." (ibid.) Perhaps his answer to Wood's question is that real phenomena are fantastic. Or as Joseph Frank states, "Dostoevsky sees his own 'realism' as becoming 'fantastic' because it delves beneath the quotidian surface into the moral-spiritual depths of the human personality, while at the same time striving to incarnate a more-than-pedestrian or commonplace moral ideal." (Frank 2010, 575) To interpret a fantastic ideal that is also worthy of the term knowledge, Dostoevsky's stories interpret reality. However, the reality he interprets after experiencing particular paintings and after his own personal experience, is not the same reality beforehand.

Julia Kristeva also speaks to this phenomenon, but rather than literal "first death," she communicates forgiveness after suffering. Using the example of Job, she writes how "he [Job] lives constantly under the eyes of God and constitutes a striking acknowledgement of the depressed person's dependency on his superego blended with the ideal ego: What is man that you (God) should make so much of him?" (Kristeva 1989, 185) Both Desmond and Kristeva speak to an astonishment before being. When one is about to die in front of a firing squad or suffering mentally, a certain narcissism can overcome one.² The question Kristeva poses to Job is the following: "Would suffering persons be narcissistic, overly interested in themselves, attached to their own value, and ready to take themselves for an immanence of transcendence?" (ibid.) The answer lies in Desmond's analysis of Dostoevsky in front of the firing squad. "The sweetness of the morning air struck him, the

¹ In our discussion of immortality, the death of his first wife well after he was put in front of the firing squad spurred him to write *The Idiot* and to present "the feeling [...] of a terror before the unknown, a terror that would have no reason for being if Dostoevsky had been convinced that some sort of consciousness, in a form that he could not imagine, would cease to exist. As a matter of fact, Dostoevsky said himself that, after the execution, he 'would be with Christ.'" (Frank 2020, 133; see also Miller 1981, 204)

² This narcissism is an acknowledgement of psychological evils, which even Freud in *Totem and Taboo* points out. Demonic forces can be psychic forces.

song of morning birds, the sky. He was stunned into marvelling at the sheer fact of being." (Desmond 1995, 25) We can see through Dostoevsky's writings how he came to see himself outside of pure immanence, to see himself, like Job after having suffered, as "dependen[t] on a divine Law, as well as of his irremediable difference in relation to that Law." (Kristeva 1989, 185)

As we will see here, both Desmond and Kristeva assert a Dostoevskian ideal: that between-ness, what Desmond calls the *metaxu*, contains the germ of truth, which I will locate between the sublime and beautiful. The journey between means that at the very heart of realism, Dostoevsky challenges the core of knowing by means of empiricism, rationalism, or idealism. In fact, any form of mathematical or scientific knowing as well as abstract conceptual access to Truth or the Absolute is entirely put into question. Yet the knowing of Holy Saturday by means of fantastic realism is at the root of Dostoevsky's literature and writing and still retains a form of realism. This kind of knowing, at times intuitive, at times through feeling, becomes equally atheistic as much as theistic. In his letter from 1868 in which he defines fantastic realism, the character of his story goes through the between of Holy Saturday: "He tries to attach himself to the younger generation – the atheists, Slavs, Occidentalists, the Russian Sectarians and Anchorites, the mystics: amongst others he comes across a Polish Jesuit; thence he descends to the abysses of the Chlysty-sect; and finds at last salvation in Russian soil, the Russian Saviour, and the Russian God." (Dostoevsky 1914, 158, letter from December 11(23), 1868) While this was not Dostoevsky describing himself, the notion of character becomes central to his dialogism.

1. Kristeva's dialogism

Julia Kristeva claims that an agent cannot be distinct from a subject in Dostoevsky and that "the drives of [his] heroes turn back on their own space." Activity and passivity become in dialogue. This is the definition of dialogism in some sense. Concerning the art and interpretation of his literature, the characters are subjects and agents of their own suffering. "Neither inside nor outside," Kristeva continues, "in between, on the threshold of the self/other separation and before the latter is even possible, that is where Dostoevsky's brand of suffering is set up." (Kristeva 1989, 176) Since this is where the dialogical character of the literature comes from, a "breathtaking polyphony" in which Bakhtin's insight combines with Job's timeless tale, the notion of a crystal palace, as we will see, becomes all the more essential in order to understand this enigma at the heart of human nature. A small passage in *Notes from Underground* helps us understand Kristeva's reading.

1.1 The Underground man's agency

The underground man compares himself to a mouse who has remembered an insult for some forty years "down to the last, most shameful detail." (Dostoevsky 2001, 9) This fantasy is rehearsed repeatedly. The agent cannot become distinct from the subject in such a way that the fantasy allows him to "fabricat[e] all sorts of incredible stories about itself under the pretext that they too could have happened...[even] on its deathbed" (ibid.). Kristeva sees the death drive at work here and yet his vision "lies less in the quest for pleasure or profit [...] than in a longing for voluptuous suffering." (Kristeva 1989, 179) Here in this state the underground man describes himself as in "that cold, abominable state of half-despair and half-belief." (Dostoevsky 2001, 9) There are many ways of understanding this state, but its half-aliveness and half-deadness accentuates a kind of pleasurable longing, "the essence of that strange enjoyment I was talking about earlier." (ibid.) The character of the underground man converses with himself about his enjoyment, recalling and anticipating "refinements of pleasure." Anticipating descriptions at the end of *Devils* in which "it's from a monkey you're descended" and confronting the stone wall of science and mathematics, one must accept one's fate and not try to calculate existence in a utilitarian way. The audience is a group of educated readers to whom he addresses and attempts to answer the question, what is to be done? "But then what is to be done if the direct and single vocation of every intelligent man consists in babbling, that is, in deliberately talking in endless circles." (Dostoevsky 2001, 13) The text is thus one of vocation, one of calling, and discovering why existence matters.

The vocation of the underground man appears to be stuck in a vortex of self-reflection and narcissism. "I should have chosen a career for myself [...] I would have been a sluggard and a glutton, not an ordinary one, but one who, for example, sympathized with everything beautiful and sublime." (ibid., 14) He repeats over and over the phrase, which Michael Katz tells us was a cliché in 19th century Russian criticism (see ibid., 6). To answer the question of vocation, then, is to "turn *everything into* the beautiful and sublime." (ibid., 14, my emphasis) He refers to a painting and this same painting of "The Last Supper" reappears in *Devils*. Is there a way to save the cliché from non-meaning? We will return to this question in the second section.

1.2 The Crystal Palace

As Joseph Frank tells us in his biography of Dostoevsky, when he finally crossed the French border, he discovers "that his railroad compartment has been invaded by police spies." (Frank 2010, 375) The shudder of horror invades him and he hopes his readers feel it too.

Certainly, Russia did not have spies like France. Russia, according to Dostoevsky, did not find it necessary to have spies. Indeed, France and even more, London, represents the "soullessness and heartlessness of Western life." (ibid., 376) Frank even says that Dostoevsky paints with a "palette even darker in hue than that of Dickens." (ibid.) When he visits the London World's Fair and the Crystal Palace in particular, which had been devoted to the latest scientific developments, the architecture of the Crystal Palace was "an image of the unholy spirit of modernity that brooded malevolently over London." (ibid.) This image becomes central for the underground man as the image of depravity. A question then arises concerning communication of the divine. In the writings of William Desmond, as we will see, the outcome of religious finesse wanes as "the hollow earth [waxes] on which we have constructed a variety of crystal palaces." (Desmond 2005, 9) The crystal palace is not singular. It entails a kind of monstrosity, of which Desmond sees Dostoevsky as the prophet. There is no place for suffering in the crystal palace, since "all possible questions will disappear in a single instant simply because all possible answers will have been provided." (Dostoevsky 2001, 18 and 25)

This visit to London inspired the crystal palaces as an apocalyptic vision. Robert Bird describes it in the following terms: "It is not the city itself, but the smug self-satisfaction with the 'achieved ideal' that Dostoevsky finds most frightening. Set against the child prostitutes of the Haymarket, Western bourgeois capitalism is an echo of Babylon and a portent of the Antichrist. It is a vision that would remain with Dostoevsky for the rest of his life." (Bird 2012, 76) The tinge of horror sounds like the space between beauty and the sublime regarding the underground man's agency. His ability to reflect on himself as a double-sidedness, but "human nature acts as a whole, with all that it contains, consciously and unconsciously." (Dostoevsky 2001, 20) How do we feel as readers, and how did his audience of the 1860s feel, about London and about the crystal palace? What inspires us to see the undersides of progress and utopia by means of the underground man's vision? This vision contains the monstrosity, what he calls man's nature of being "monstrously ungrateful. Phenomenally ungrateful." (ibid., 21) A vision of a definition of man as ungrateful is certainly not the man of the crystal palace. Yet the man of the crystal palaces "inject[s] his own pernicious fantastic element into all this positive rationality." (ibid., 22) The fantastic element is crucial for both directions. Whether the positivist or imaginative telling of possible societies, possible allegories, yes, even the possibility of evil (see Kristeva 1989, 101), phantasms are the basis of Dostoevsky's fantastic realism.³

³ Or in Husserl's language of presentification, see Shang 2020.

1.3 Holy Saturday

The notion of being between death and resurrection returns through painting in a kind of waking dream, or what Dostoevsky himself called a "fusion of the fantastic and the real." (Frank 2010, 298-9) "Changing in accordance with the religious climate, melancholia asserted itself [...] in religious doubt. There is nothing more dismal than a dead God, and Dostoevsky himself was disturbed by the distressing sight of the *Dead Christ* in Holbein's painting, contrasted with the 'truth of resurrection.'" (Kristeva 1989, 8) Becoming aware of this state, what the underground man named consciousness, entails an act of naming suffering. Kristeva's text, her description of beauty, outlines this space. It is an in between space, liminally and marginally non-existent in Newtonian or Cartesian terms. The Enlightenment was an attempt to measure this space. Even after death the love of a beautiful object still remains. Beauty, Kristeva asserts, may not die with death. Yet the object reappears "as the absolute and indestructible restorer of the deserting object" in such a way that "I bring forth [...] an artifice, an ideal, a 'beyond' that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself – *ek-stasis*." (ibid., 99) She enters now into the realm of sublimation without precisely speaking of its relationship to beauty. Naming it "allegory, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*," she sees the meaning of the loved object as also an "artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing." (ibid.) The meaning then given to the beautiful object becomes sublime in its transformation from death to life, but still not entirely dwelling in either realm. Speech gives way to suffering, "including screams, music, silence, and laughter." (ibid., 100) Here is the space that resists death and holds it in abeyance. Recognizing how traces of "the opacity of things, like that of the body untenanted by meaning" allows for transformation. Times of crisis are key moments for this insight: "A subtle alchemy of signs then compels recognition [...] and this is *immediately* experienced as a psychic transformation of the speaking between the two limits of nonmeaning and meaning, Satan and God, Fall and Resurrection." (ibid., 101)

Kristeva describes Dostoevsky's experience as one of the effects of epilepsy. The effects that he describes throughout his work are those that allow the reader to experience fantastic realism, particularly in *The Idiot*, "the most intimate of all his books."⁴ Along the lines of Kristeva's reading of forgiveness in Dostoevsky, and Apollonio's interpretation of confession, the meaning of Holy Saturday is the meaning of recognition and consciousness itself by means of the in between. Carol Apollonio, in *Dostoevsky's Secrets*, says that slander and con-

⁴ For the claim that *The Idiot* is the most intimate of all his books and fantastic realism, see Frank 2020, 28-29, 140.

fession function as opposites. "The moment a person confesses with fullness of spirit, truthfully and reverently, to having committed an act of evil, he or she is by that act of confession purged and forgiven." (Apollonio 2009, 119) While each and every person is responsible for everyone, the accuser or slanderer attempts to deny this reality. This is why Christ descends to the dead. Of course, this is not precisely Apollonio's reading or Kristeva's, but if there is such a thing as confession or forgiveness in place of accusation and the underground man's consciousness, then Kristeva's words are apt: "In this sense *forgiveness*, coextensive with sublimation, diseroticizes beyond Eros. The Eros/Forgiveness pair is substituted for Eros/Thanatos, so that the potential melancholia is not frozen as an affective withdrawal from the world but *traverses the representation* of aggressive and threatening bonds with the other." (Kristeva 1989, 184) This is the moment where agent and subject are released from bonds by means of both the fantastic and the realistic, since there is the real possibility of "the ideal and sublimational economy of forgiveness." (ibid.) Taking the time to sit with death, to look into the tomb, we find it not as scary as we once thought. Courage and hope abide amidst the sadness. Both love and death in this sense are shaping the Holy Saturday moment.

2. Between the sublime and beautiful

The Crystal Palace is not like Claude Lorrain's painting *Acis and Galatea*, mentioned by Dostoevsky after he saw the painting in Dresden in 1867. As Jacques Cateau tells us, Dostoevsky did not have particularly unique tastes, but rather had the "classic tastes of the Russian nineteenth century." (Cateau 1989, 22) Yet Dostoevsky was to metamorphose this painting into allegory, forging "his own pictorial mythology." (ibid., 23) His description of this painting in *Devils* does not represent the same story as Ovid. Rather, for "Stavrogin and Versilov it becomes the almost philosophical landscape of the Golden Age, the 'cradle of humanity', 'universal harmony', the dream Utopia, balm of hardened hearts, hope of lost souls; though it is menaced, as Acis is by Polyphemus, by a tempest of fire and blood: the flames of the Paris commune, the red spider of crime." (ibid.)⁵ The painting represents the reverse of what Kristeva sees in the Holbein painting, *Dead Christ*, and yet it is the image that precedes her chapter on Dostoevsky in *Black Sun*. She does not say too much about it, but what she does say cuts to the core of what someone who images or fantasizes what love is like without forgiveness or confession. "The painting itself is a representation of the idyll between the river-god Acis and the sea-nymph Galatea, under the wrathful but, for the time being, sub-

⁵ Compare this to Frank's interpretation of *Demons* where Dostoevsky's fantastic realism becomes "myth (the imaginary amplification of the real) and not history, art and not literal truth." (Frank 2010, 626)

dued gaze of Polyphemus who was then her lover.” (Kristeva 1989, 201) Here we have a preoedipal or the “Golden Age of incest” in which lovers have no need to distinguish each other or possess each other.

What does it mean to be *both* sublime and beautiful? What kind of language do we use for this experience? According to Robin Feuer Miller, "Dostoevsky raises the themes and techniques of the Gothic novelists to new heights, for he forges a metaphysical system out of a language which, in the hands of lesser novelists, remains merely a style, an effective fictional point of view." (Miller 1981, 108) She discusses Edmund Burke as at the origin of this style. Other novelists who touch on this feeling are Poe, Hoffman, Radcliffe. As Joseph Frank explains, Dostoevsky had the "uncanny ability to visualize and dramatize the extraordinary within the conventions of realism, and without any (overt) supernatural intrusion." (Frank 2010, 56) If there is a word for this feeling that Dostoevsky among others is getting at, it is sublime. But it is not only landscapes that capture this feeling. There had been hundreds of years of an aesthetics of beauty, and yet the sublime, while always existing, was only named as such in the eighteenth century. While Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* also captures this, as we will see below, the reason we are so touched by such varying feelings is because it takes us back to an earlier self, even an ancestral self. Our relationship to our mother, like our relationship to mother Earth is one of returning to childhood.⁶ This means childlike wonder meets adult knowledge. Another way that one can describe this feeling along the same lines touches on much of the psychological literature as well, to which the Gestaltists of the 20th century who are mechanists attest ("A definite stimulus would act on a locally defined receptor and produce a definite response"). It cannot be based on just reflexes or habits, but rather preformed skills or movements. In other words, we cannot just take a drug and feel the same thing we feel in front of Claude Lorrain, Hans Holbein, or the Raphael. In the presence of the painting, landscape, or writing (among many other works and places/ spaces), we *really fantastically* feel this.⁷

2.1 Holbein and *The Idiot*

If the notion of between-ness stands, whether between fantasm and reality or beauty and the sublime, then it is by means of particular "presentifications." (Shang 2020) To imagine another empathically or to encounter a painting such as *Dead Christ* is to imagine what it is like to be there in the flesh after Christ's burial. Nothing in the painting tells us what it feels like to be there. None of us reading this will have the encounter itself with the real except

⁶ For an interpretation of Dostoevsky and mother earth, see Ivanov 2019.

⁷ In the same letter of December 1868 where he defines fantastic realism, he also describes the power of Raphael's Madonna.

through presentifications like Holbein's or Dostoevsky's. In *The Idiot*, and in Kristeva's *Black Sun*, the reality or belief of the death of Christ is laid out in front of the viewer or reader. Aesthetically a judgment of a painting, like judgments of beauty or the sublime, are not judgments of the reality or presence of the body or an object in the world. Kristeva thinks that the depressive moment in *The Idiot* concerns the question, "how is it possible for God to die?" (Kristeva 1989, 130) The aesthetic of the painting and of the novel is to present the reality as an anamorphic one, which means that it can only be seen or experienced if not seen from a certain angle or twist of the light. In the psychoanalytic terms of identification, "man is nevertheless provided with a powerful symbolic device that allows him to experience death and resurrection even in his physical body, thanks to the strength of imaginary identification – and of its actual effects – with the absolute Subject (Christ)." (ibid., 134) The boundary between life and death allows for a space and the reason for this space is to confront the viewer or reader with a presentification of "the ultimate edge of belief [...] the threshold of nonmeaning." (ibid.)

When in *The Idiot* Myshkin, the Christ-like hero, visits Rogozhin's house and sees the copy of the Holbein painting with the same dimensions as the actual painting in Basel it is in space of "lofty and rather gloomy [darkness]." (Dostoevsky 1992a, 217; cf. Frank 2010, 549) The paintings on the wall are "sombre" and "smoke-begrimed" and included "portraits of bishops" and "landscapes." (ibid., 228) But the one that sticks out to Myshkin "depicted the Saviour, just taken down from the cross." (ibid.) Rogozhin does not see in this painting what he is meant to see. The presence of painting arouses a discussion about God's existence. In order to believe, to have faith, one must transcend rationality or empirical evidence. Myshkin rejects language, which Robin Feuer Miller tells us, "even as Myshkin talks about the inadequacies of rational discourse and the atheists' overreliance upon, the implied author does not exempt Myshkin from the same overreliance upon such discourse." (Miller 1981, 184) Rogozhin recounts four different encounters that he had in the past week. The encounters are described and then followed by a summation of his view of religion: "the essence of religious feelings doesn't depend on any reasoning, or transgressions, or crimes, or atheism; it is something quite different and always will be, it is something our atheists will always gloss over and avoid discussing." (Dostoevsky 1992a, 232)

For Dostoevsky himself the experience of the painting was a true challenge to his belief due to its presentification power. Joseph Frank calls Holbein a "fellow artist" who paints in the same vein as the writer writes, and Kristeva calls the style "between classicism and mannerism [...] between life and death, meaning and nonmeaning, it is an intimate, slender response of our melancholia." (Kristeva 1989, 137) There is no fundamental answer to the quandary, which Frank describes: "No greater challenge could be offered to Dostoevsky's

own faith in Christ the God-man than such a vision of a tortured and decaying human being, whose face bore not a trace of the 'extraordinary beauty' with which, as Dostoevsky was to write in the novel, Christ is usually painted." (Frank 2010, 549)⁸ For Rowan Williams, the painting itself is an "anti-icon, a religious image which is a nonpresence or a presence of the negative." (Williams 2008, 53) Because only demons or Judas Iscariot were ever shown in profile, there is no divine light to illuminate the life of the figure making a "double negation of the iconographic convention." (ibid.) For characters who cannot look onto the truth head on, the Holy Saturday image is one of angles, sides, presentifications for those "not wanting to confront what is going on [...] exposed [...] unrecognizable" (ibid., 125) for subject, agent, viewer and image. If there is too much emphasis on the deadness of Christ in this painting and its subversive power, the terror of which can be called sublime with no trace of beauty, Kristeva reminds us that there is another side to the painting as in the anamorphic Holbein. "A hidden message seems to emerge [...] the body demeaned by old age, disease, and solitude, all the physical signs of inescapable death, illness, and sadness itself would in that sense point to an inability to forgive [...] On the contrary, the Resurrection appears as the supreme expression of forgiveness: by bringing his Son back to life the Father becomes reconciled with Him." (Kristeva 1989, 192) The terror of death in a split second becomes hope of resurrection.⁹

2.2 Claude Lorrain and *Devils*

Unlike the overwhelming power of the Holbein painting, the effect of the Claude is different. For Holbein, the effect was that of a terrible panic without beauty at all and the picture itself as "the medium through which this notion of some dark, insolent, senselessly infinite force to which everything is subordinated is unwittingly conveyed." (Dostoevsky 1992a, 431) This fits much of what Burke and Kant called the sublime. For Burke, everything that is obscure with a tinge of terror (Burke 1958, part II) defines the ambit of sublimity. It is important for those in the between to be cognizant of this fact when we talk about the use of painting in the *Devils*. It is no longer *Dead Christ* that is the subject matter here, but rather the golden age, an ideal utopia we spoke of earlier. In a sense, our vision of immortality. What

⁸ Frank returns to a discussion of this painting and its importance for the novel in Frank 2020, 146ff.

⁹ Robin Feuer Miller describes this differently, "The eternal qualities of time and death illustrated the transience of this world [...] Aspects of everyday life provide analogues for understanding eternity and time [...] Myshkin makes his experiences serve as fables for elucidating the mysteries of God and faith [which] manifests itself, both in the stories he tells and in his relations with the other characters, as a sad acceptance of the coexistence of evil with good and of the inevitability of double thoughts." (Miller 1981, 186-7; see also 212-3)

was spoken of above in terms of astonishment before being is part of this definition of the sublime, but in entering the world of the painting and the myth of what "involuntarily comes to mind when you look at the painting," (Dostoevsky 1992a, 431) we are captured and enraptured in the story. This is a fundamental question of Burke's in differentiating beauty and the sublime. "Can something which has no image appear in the form of an image?" (ibid.) Burke speaks to how images relate to language. (see Burke 1958, part V) The crucial aspect of this aesthetic idea concerns both the fantastic and the realistic. What happens to Dostoevsky's fantastic realism between *The Idiot* and *Devils*? Part of the answer to this question is already presaged in earlier works like *White Nights* and *The Double*, but can be heard in the following description of Ippolit from *The Idiot*: "Ippolit gives the reader a complete and devastating metaphor for the portrayal of the corruption of beauty and for the lack of spiritual strength, because all these thoughts have come to him precisely while gazing on the representation of Christ's face, the supposed source of that beauty and strength. The dumb being of nature appears on the very countenance of Christ." (Miller 1981, 213) So while Holbein's painting is sublime and obscure, touching on terror, it is still of Christ. As we move to *Devils*, there is no sign of Him, not even a *Dead Christ*.

In the censored chapter "At Tikhon's" found in 1921 among Dostoevsky's papers, we may read one of the most profound bits of literature about the metaxu. It is found in the middle of a letter confessing to a rape of a young girl by the main protagonist, Stavrogin. The content of a dream is told in this letter and the image of the painting by Claude is revealed in the dream, "not as a picture, but as if it were the real thing." (Dostoevsky 1992b, 471) As we have seen, Kristeva tells the tale of the Golden Age as one of the timelessness of forgiving, and this is truly a profound reading of the tale, but there is another way of reading this painting still following the text of *Devils*.¹⁰ What Stavrogin calls in his confession "the cradle of European civilization," an "earthly paradise," and which is impossible to put into words, is an ideal image of heaven. But not even a fantastic realist one. Rather, a false interpretation twisted by dream-like states that wish for eternal bliss without suffering. If *Dead Christ* is without beauty, this image is without sublimity or any shadow of fear. Stavrogin writes, "the cliffs and sea, the slanted rays of the setting sun – all this I still seemed to see, when I woke up and

¹⁰ For a similar reading of Dostoevsky's "Dream of a Ridiculous Man," which is a retelling of Stavrogin's dream here in *Devils*, see Majernik 2017. There he writes, "But unlike the Underground Man, he sees in his dream that an authentic life – life in truth – is possible, and this revelation shakes and awakens him. On the other hand, the authentic life is capable of falling into inauthenticity, as it indeed happens due to the influence of the Ridiculous Man, who unintentionally but irreversibly corrupted the authentically-living humans in his dream. Patočka analyzes this story as a meditation on the two basic modalities of human life that it showcases. Truth understood as 'not any [particular] reality, but the key to *all of them*.'" (32, quoting Patočka's *Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion*).

opened my eyes, for the first time in my life literally awash with tears. A feeling of happiness as yet unknown to me invaded my heart until it hurt." (Dostoevsky 1992b, 472)¹¹ This telling goes beyond what is present in the painting to another "asymbolia" of the painting, that of Rousseau's state of nature. As Robin Feuer Miller has shown, *Devils* is a commentary on Rousseau and how generations create ideas, fictionally and ideologically, in which the younger generation, as susceptible as they are, take them to heart. "[M]en and literary characters are [...] begotten from ideas," she writes, "The reader of Rousseau's *Confessions* must for himself distinguish between fact and fancy in the writer's autobiography." (Miller 2007, 94-5) Whereas Kristeva's reading of the Golden Age of the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment* and *Devils* is one of forgiveness through love, Miller's Rousseau "constitutes an epidemic [...] resembl[ing] the plague of which Raskolnikov dreamt in the epilogue." (ibid., 98) For certain, if there is such a thing, the truth of Holy Saturday and Stavrogin's dream is that there is punishment despite his idealistic state of nature resembling Claude Lorraine's painting.

The hope or ideal in *Devils* is that there is no longer inequality, no possessions, no marriage, and all of these are "imaged" or presentified in *Acis and Galatea*. Miller interprets *Devils*, like St. Augustine and Rousseau's *Confessions*, as "a work that describes a crucial conversion." (Miller 2007, 99)¹² The swine that have polluted Russia or ideas of socialism are not immediately present in the painting. In fact, what it points to and what Stavrogin longs for is a time of premodern socialism when agrarianism was the ruling ideology. Communism and capitalism in the 20th century, whether Lenin or Henry Ford, accepted technology in all of its forms. This dream of living off the land, a ridiculous dream, is the reverse of the Crystal Palace. "In this garden," Miller writes, "children would be born connected to the soil rather than to the pavement or the street and they would spend their childhood in play." (Miller 2007, 125) Nothing sounds more ideally Rousseauian.¹³ Yet the end point of *Devils* concerning "Stavrogin's ambition to transcend the human, to arrogate for himself supreme power over life and death, nonetheless runs aground on the hidden reef of conscience." (Frank 2010, 661) The father and the son can separate from the sin of transmission in the between. "No matter what he may think, Stavrogin cannot entirely eliminate his *feeling* for the difference between good and evil." (ibid.) Frank names this *feeling* in the dream of *Acis and Galatea*. Tikhon, who

¹¹ See also Kristeva 1989, 200-205 who discusses this same scene and says Stavrogin is "without access to the mediation of love, he is a stranger to the world of forgiveness."

¹² See also Coetzee 1985 for a discussion of confession in Dostoevsky following Augustine and Rousseau.

¹³ In another translation of *The Possessed*, there is a note to missing pages from the confession that do not appear in other translations of the novel. The notion of confession and conscience, good and evil, are contained within missing sheets, pointing to the Golden Age of the 10-year old who didn't even know about swear-words. "She probably felt in the end that she'd committed an enormous crime and was guilty of a mortal sin – she'd 'killed God'." (Dostoyevsky 1992, 465; see also Dostoyevsky 1962, 419-421)

hears Stavrogin's confession, sees what the other cannot see, that his dream of the Golden Age is "born of a heart wounded unto death." (ibid., 662) But Stepan the Hegelian deist and father of the revolution acknowledges to himself, "My friend, all my life I have been lying." (Dostoevsky 1992b, 741) Stepan's natural death, in a utopic-like scene ("If there is a God, then I am immortal", ibid.) is more fantastically real than Stavrogin's bitter end. As infected by ideas as if it were cholera or the plague, there must be a way of healing by returning to the between.

3. Desmond's *metaxu*

What is the metaxological realm of being? Following from Plato's *Symposium* and Dostoevsky, William Desmond thinks that desire is at its very origin. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is an astonishment before being. It is neither by means of abstract analysis nor pure immediacy that we have access to immortality through *Dead Christ* or *Acis and Galatea*. Desmond's thinking, resonant with Husserl's presentification, points out how "Desire erupts in experience." (Desmond 1987, 9) He sees this metaphysics as containing four stages, all of which are necessary: the univocal, the equivocal, the dialectical, and the metaxological. In order to find the space of the fourth stage, one must "dwell in, then move through and beyond the partiality of the first three." (ibid.) It is thus desire itself which leads us to the metaxological without remaining in these earlier stages. The metaxological is thus resonant with the dialogical, in which Bakhtin interpreted Dostoevsky's characters as exemplifying. While *mathesis* is the Greek term for the univocal or Pascal's term *l'esprit géométrique*, Descartes may be seen as the univocal thinker *par excellence* (see Desmond 1995, 47-83), the underground man, for Desmond, exemplifies the equivocal. But Dostoevsky is able to think and write from both the univocal and the equivocal, which is what makes for dialogue (or dialectic). In order to move from self to other, or self to another self, there must be "movement through the complex middle, between origins and ends." (Desmond 1987, 9-10) Hegel and Nietzsche were prophets of the dialectical, and Desmond sees his own metaxological way of being as one that "wrestle[s] with the problem of origins in relation to desire, dialectic, and otherness and to defend the emergence in desire of man's search for origins as among his most basic, metaphysical perplexities." (ibid., 11)¹⁴ Perhaps the painting that might best express

¹⁴ Desmond quotes Ricoeur here to point to the problem of psychoanalysis: "But psychoanalysis has no access to problems of radical origin, because its point of view is economic and only economic." (Desmond 1987, 213, quoting Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations*) What Kristeva would say to this is open to dialogue. Desmond's footnote continues, "Ricoeur goes on to ask for a hermeneutic of the religious imagination, implying that Spinoza, Schelling, and Hegel are more profoundly acquainted than Freud with its significance for radical origins." (ibid.)

this *metaxu* between beauty and the sublime is that by Raphael. It is the one painting that hung on Dostoevsky's wall while he was writing (see Bird 2012, 122-125, for an image of where it hung in his room). This painting, which he saw in Dresden, "possessed the quality not of a beginning or ending, but of timeless beauty." Like Michelangelo's two sculptures of *Pietà*, one at the beginning of his life and one at the end, both of which has Christ's limp body being held by his mother, the *Madonna* of Raphael is an artwork which may actually mix the two realms of beauty and sublimity.¹⁵ Desmond's metaxological may best express this state of being, in which astonishment at radical origins and ends are embodied and pictured. If Holbein's painting "neutraliz[ed] the possibility of resurrection" (Bird 2012, 126) and Claude Lorrain's Golden Age idealized it beyond reality, then Raphael metaxologically situates it within a relational ontology.

Unlike Kristeva who discusses Dostoevsky's work in detail, as we have seen, Desmond points to it occasionally and shows its importance for this deeper *metaxu*. In his discussion of the sublime, he shows how the infinite restlessness of human desire in light of infinity can have particularly anguishing results. Sublime desire in and of itself does not lead us to the *metaxu*. Neither does beauty in and of itself, but only in relation to its other. Just as with concepts of space, such as Giordano Bruno's, in which there is no absolute center, there is an equivocality about such univocity. Put simply, "our finitude cannot be such as to deny our infinite restlessness" (Desmond 1987, 148) and Desmond desires to mediate between unity and multiplicity in a search for wholeness (see *ibid.*, 151). While he does not write a great deal about the body, there is a Burkean bodily origin that can be found when he points out how selving is a matter of *sensitivity*: "Animals, for instance, complexify this inherence of self-mediation, in that they register and respond to their exchange with things as other." (Desmond 1995, 377) Even in this origin, we have intelligibility and mindfulness, "from particularity to personhood, from aesthetic givenness to the embodied, incarnate self, from being to being mindful" (*ibid.*, 379). This origin also comes about in the external world, such as in temples, mosques, mountain landscapes, and literature. Burke would apply all of these to beauty and the sublime in which these categories apply equally to science, ethics, and aesthetics (see Vermeir and Deckard 2012, 3-56). For Burke, the tension in the body is palpable. Yet in the tension is also a good of what Desmond calls throughout his work an "agapeic original." If darkness is the most affecting element in the sublime for Burke, the darkness of night, as the great Czech scholar Erazim Kohák tells us in *The Embers and The Stars*, is a gift, along with pain and solitude: "quietly, the darkness grows in the forest, seeping into the clearing and

¹⁵ For a discussion of the two Michelangelo sculptures in relationship to Burke's sublime, see Saint Girons 1993, 322-339.

penetrating the soul, all-healing, all-reconciling, renewing the world for a new day." (Kohák 1984, 29) Desmond uses the language of the idiot to also explain this origin. In order to feel afraid, to be aware of one's finiteness in the face of "dominating power" (Desmond 1995, 380) we must be open to a decentering, and in solitude there is a thisness (*haeccitas*) that in its desert-like wilderness allows for the self that is not just a subject or agent emerge. Imposing an order onto this "primal feeling of ourselves" does not contain it: "We have this taste of self, smell of self, this aura of self that each singular lives alone for itself, and lives inwardly. It is the inner taste of itself of inwardness itself." (Desmond 1995, 381)

The metaxological realm of being moves beyond the psychoanalytic and yet retains something of this origin in sublimation. But that is not the full story. There is one section of *Hegel's God* (2003) called "Evil and the Counterfits of History" that takes this theme of time and eternity up through the notion of *Urteil* (what Kant will call judgment in his third *Critique*): being which dirempts itself (see Desmond 2003, 147). For Hegel, the sublime not only exists in the ancient Jewish religion, but also in "more pagan, mythological world views [...]" Hegel's view of art might be seen as trying to do justice to both emphases, the mythopoetic and the more plainly historical" (Desmond 1986, 72). We are reaching the most speculative part of the sublime and its relationship to beauty as a relational ontology, how infinite eternity and historical time can be subsumed into each other and yet kept apart and alive in the present. These are the *aporiai* of time itself.¹⁶ Desmond's interpretation of Hegel and Hölderlin bridges art, religion, and philosophy without reducing the one to the other. "Pantheistic unity is dirempted into sublime dualism" for Hegel (Desmond 2003, 148) The power of nature, Desmond writes, cannot be negated by human creations or technology. Rather, "the human body elevated to the idealism of the sensuous: the Ideal. *Aesthetically* this is superior to Judaic sublimity." (Desmond 2003, 149) Simply speaking, the metaxu is felt and perceived by the body as between beauty and the sublime. Holy Saturday does not close off such an experience with either Good Friday or Easter as its end point. Rather, it renews astonishment at its very core through eros.

4. Kristeva again

We now return to this notion of eros after death (in the *metaxu*) as Kristeva might present it, since her strong claim is that "sublimation alone withstands death." (Kristeva 1989, 100) Now that we have seen Desmond's view of eros and the metaxological, what kind of

¹⁶ Concerning these *aporiai*, see Desmond's discussion of the underground man in conversation with Plato and Kant in his footnote in "Ways of Wondering: Beyond the Barbarism of Reflection" (Desmond 2010, 326-327).

love is it that exists at the end of *Devils*? How might Holy Saturday itself be resurrected in the flesh? The term fantastic realism allows us to place into language Kristeva and Desmond's Dostoevskian ideal. This ideal cannot be thought of in purely philosophical, artistic, or religious, but rather retains something of each of them. This is the genius of Desmond's *Intimate Universal* (see Desmond 2016) and Kristeva's *Black Sun*. Mephistophelean or Oedipean quest and its mystical resonance (see Wood 2020; Kristeva 2020). The Western and the Eastern are both in play. To return to the "great question" we asked at the beginning, "are the fantastic phenomena real or not?" we resume Michael Wood's answer: "yes in the story." (Wood 2020, 42) Wood calls stories "fantastic," and he refers to Shakespeare, Cervantes, Yeats, Nabokov, Marlowe, and Mann. But, for Kristeva, Dostoevsky beats them all as most fantastic. Why?

It may have to do with her own childhood in Bulgaria, her own Slavic soul and love of the earth (*pochvenichestvo* in Russian; see Miller 2007; Kristeva 2020). Without resorting to *The Brothers Karamazov* in Dostoevsky's own oeuvre, which Wood utilizes, "the principal question here [...] is neither the reality nor the punctuality of the magic connection but the vulnerability of any such occurrence to ridicule – and this represents another way in which one can be Russian and European at the same time." (Wood 2020, 42) This is why the Cervantean Poor Knight of *The Idiot*, a certain return to the Middle Ages and its belief in fairy tales, is not entirely possible but rather mockable, and thus the image of God and the Devil in the period for which Dostoevsky encountered them through paintings exemplifies Desmond's words: "Here we have stepped to the edges of the hyperbolic, though in monstrous form. The monstrous is sublime, but there are diviner sublimities at that edge, diviner ways of crossing, or being crossed." (Desmond 2012, 119) To defend beauty, as Kristeva does, in light of the monstrous, and to revolt against both the Golden Age and against Mother Earth, contains their own inmost possibilities for dialectical abandon in suicide.

Dostoevsky's secret, as Kristeva and Apollonio point out, contains the healing impulses for our earth and soul's immortality. Being between beauty and the sublime means being between love and fear, understood as psychoanalytic, religious, and philosophical terms (like Libido and Thanatos, Faith and Doubt, univocal and equivocal). They are all necessary. The fantastic realism of the emotions love and fear, which underlie all of Dostoevsky's work, are open to ridicule and mockery, even humiliation. While Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* as anti-icon degenerates and leaves eros cold as does Claude Lorrain's *Acis and Galatea* in the characters of Rogozhin and Stavrogin, Kristeva's own answer, like Raphael's Madonna hanging in Dostoevsky's library, contains the secret.¹⁷ Desmond's answer in the metaxological

¹⁷ "Pagan, Dionysiac, Eastern, the pre-Christian tradition imprinted on the Byzantine Orthodoxy as it passed into Russia [...] the praise of salvation/love and especially the hypostasis of affection, at the intersection of suffering and joy and within Christ; the movement of 'those who have undergone the

contains a germ of the truth of knowing which is not static or Hegel's Absolute. Rather, our contribution to this discussion does not resolve the space between the beautiful and the sublime but remains open to the confessional enigmatic liminality that is Holy Saturday.

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Passion' (*strastotierptsy*), that is, those who have actually been brutalized or humiliated but respond to evil only with forgiveness [...] It would be impossible to understand Dostoevsky without it." (Kristeva 1989, 213-4)

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