

Kenosis and Confession in Dostoevsky

By

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses the notion of kenosis and explores its appropriation in Dostoevsky's fictional and non-fictional writing. Relying on the theological doctrine of kenosis, this study investigates the historical origins, development, and ethical implications of its underlying concepts – “greatness in smallness” and “strength in weakness.” Concentrating on Dostoevsky's novels *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot* and *Demons*, this work looks for peaceful strategies of relating to otherness and demonstrates the relevance of nonjudgmental witnessing for a balanced relationship between self and alterity. This dissertation focuses on Dostoevsky's literary rendering of confessional discourse that promotes kenotic state of mind in view of the transcendent Other. I argue that Dostoevsky links confession and kenosis as modes of thinking imperative for human coexistence and progress.

The first chapter surveys existing textual discussion of such conceptual kenotic movements as self-minimization and self-emptying, seen in various theological and philosophical traditions. It also affirms the significance of kenosis in Dostoevsky's own worldview. The next two chapters examine several confessional interactions from Dostoevsky's most famous novels, foregrounding the role of dialogic consciousness in his literary vision of confession as a practical implementation of the kenotic principle. Chapter Two focuses on successful transformational confessions that benefit their participants, while Chapter Three covers relational aberrations that become evident in an erroneous setup of a confessional moment. The conclusion discusses the use of the kenotic idea as a rhetorical device in Dostoevsky, linking his authorial choices with the development of the philosophy of polyphony.

Introduction

A recent study of confession in Russian literature by Sylvia Sasse analyzes addressees in Dostoevsky's confessional discourse to help differentiate a truly successful confession from a pseudo-confessional situation used by the author as a rhetorical device. She makes note of a number of patterns that characterize Dostoevsky's use of confession, stating that the triune confessional configuration has been intentionally utilized by the writer outside of religious context to produce a variety of emotional effects. Rhetorically, confession can be an appeal for sympathy from the opponent. It can also be the technique of creating sincerity as a tactical succession to the interlocutor's point of view or naming the possible counterarguments in the anticipation of the other's response. A false confession can be used in conversational rhetoric to distort, substitute and insinuate information as well as shock the recipient.¹

Dostoevsky's literary use of confessional discourse fits well within the historical trends of the Russian Empire, and is therefore a typical, rather than an extraordinary phenomenon. As Kizenko points out, from the 17th century through to 1917,

confession in Russia became simultaneously a means of education, a political tool, a devotional exercise, and a literary genre. It became all the more important as Russia extended its empire. From first encouraging Russians to participate in confession to improve them and integrate them into a reforming Church and state, Church and state authorities then turned to the sacrament to integrate converts of other nationalities. Sacramental confession might blur with criminal confession, as it did in some political interrogations. Confession thus became the point at which several goals – salvation, education, discipline, control – met.²

¹ Sasse, *Wortsunden. Beichten und Gestehen in der russischen Literatur. Zasse, Iad v ukho. Isповed i priznanie v russkoi literature*, 71.

² Kizenko, Nadieszda. *Good for the Souls: A History of Confession in the Russian Empire*.

The body of Dostoevsky's confessional discourse is an interplay of genres – from secular to sacramental – and incorporates a variety of literary forms reflecting different types of confessional practices present in the 19th century Russia.³ For Dostoevsky, the genre of confession was a perfect literary setting for visualizing the multiple variants of dialogic existence of a word within a variety of conversational situations explored in the scope of a novel. Bakhtin noticed that every word in Dostoevsky's texts receives an answer: “Твёрдого, мертвого, законченного, безответного, уже сказавшего своё последнее слово нет в мире Достоевского” (“There is no solid, dead, finished, unanswered, final word in Dostoevsky's world”).⁴ Bakhtin developed his theory of dialogically oriented word based on Dostoevsky's confessional speech, noticing that such word can relate to a particular human addressee, to the word of the law or the transcendent Other. It can also exist in the process of polemics with the utterances of others, which can trigger a controversy of possible meanings.

The relationship between self and otherness occupied a significant place in Dostoevsky's philosophy. A stark example of his non-fictional ruminations on the themes of humanity, alterity and the transcendent can be found in the famous 1864 personal journal entry written down the day after his first wife's death.⁵ It reads:

*16 апреля. Маша лежит на столе. Увижусь ли с Машей?
Возлюбить человека, как самого себя, по заповеди Христовой,
– невозможно. Закон личности на земле*

³ See, for example, Daniel H. Kaiser, “The Sacrament of Confession in the Russian Empire: A Contribution to the Source Study of *Ispovednye rospisi*”; Nadieszda Kizenko, “Confession and the Autobiographical Genre in Early 19th-Century Russia”; Viktor Zhivov, “*Pokaiannaia distsiplina i individual'noe blagochestiie*” for more information on the historical role of confession in Russia.

⁴ Bakhtin, “*Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*,” *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh*, V. 6, 279.

⁵ For more discussions of the “Masha on the Table” fragment see Cassedy, Frank, Kasatkina, Scanlan, Young, and other scholars of Dostoevsky.

связывает. *Я* препятствует. Один Христос мог, но Христос был вековечный от века идеал, к которому стремится и по закону природы должен стремиться человек. Между тем после появления Христа как *идеала человека во плоти* стало ясно как день, что высочайшее, последнее развитие личности именно и должно дойти до того (в самом конце развития, в самом пункте достижения цели), чтоб человек нашел, сознал и всей силой своей природы убедился, что высочайшее употребление, которое может сделать человек из своей личности, из полноты развития своего *я*, – это как бы уничтожить это *я*, отдать его целиком всем и каждому безраздельно и беззаветно. И это величайшее счастье.⁶

April 16. Masha is lying on the table. Will I meet again with Masha? 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 alone was able to do this, but Christ was eternal, 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 should attain precisely the point where man might find, recognize and with all the strength of his nature be convinced that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his "I", is to seemingly annihilate that "I", to give it wholly to each and every one wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness.⁷

When the physical body ceases to function as a vehicle of consciousness, thereby disrupting the process of relating to the other, the loss takes away not only the physical co-living with another human being, but also a part of one's self that was created as a result of mutual visibility and interconnection of two separate wills. This gap in the embodied consciousness leaves people grasping at imagination, intuition, mysticism, magic, religion, and other ways to communicate with the intangible. A driving desire to continue the bond with the other leaves

⁶ Dostoevsky, *PSS*, V. 20, 172-175.

⁷ Proffer, Berczynski, *The Unpublished Dostoevsky: Diaries and Notebooks (1860 – 81)*, V. 2, 39-43.

humans communicating to the transcendent – that which lies beyond the physically perceptible material world. Unknown and unknowable, the transcendent is primarily the product of human speculation motivated by the intense cognitive appeal of eternal life. Throughout Dostoevsky's works, the themes of communal wellbeing, personal joy, and minimization of suffering are firmly tied to the religious worldview in which the transcendent is not a mere figment of human imagination, but the area of reason where one looks for the stronghold of faith and the pinnacle of human evolution. Beyond controversy, Dostoevsky's oeuvre draws on the ideas of Orthodox Christianity to articulate the desirable and undesirable ways of individual and communal existence, and those who interpret his texts would be remiss to disregard this central tenet of his perspective. G.A. Panichas, in his 1985 volume on Dostoevsky's spiritual art, phrases this understanding of Dostoevsky's philosophy as follows:

What needs to be insisted upon, in the face of the increasing attempts to make Dostoevsky into just another commodity for the consumption of Western readers and more grist for Western critics, is that Dostoevsky's greatest and primary debts were to "Orthodox culture", and that before his art and the people of his cosmos are understood, readers will have to have some idea of what constitutes an Eastern Orthodox milieu and metaphysic.⁸

As a system of thought, Christian theology posits the existence of a transcendent deity who exists beyond the confines of space and time. This deity, in turn, is capable of entering into the realm of space and time to take on human form, thus becoming incarnate. The purpose of incarnation is to provide a revelation of the deity's nature as an immanent Word, which is integrated into the physical world. It was this worldview and, more importantly, this feeling that Dostoevsky imparted to the entirety of his literary works. The philosophy of the Holy Scriptures

⁸ Panichas, *The Burden of Vision: Dostoevsky's Spiritual Art*, 92-93.

permeates his nonfictional writing as well. Dostoevsky's letters and diaries contain exchanges and notes that demonstrate frequent use of the Russian Orthodox rhetoric in his personal life.

The journal entry quoted above is particularly fascinating in the way Dostoevsky speaks of the sacrifice of self in love and the complete annihilation of "I" accomplished through giving it to others – both ideas representing the foundational principles of the Orthodox Christian philosophy. The death of his wife Maria prompted thoughts about (absent) happiness. For Dostoevsky, it means giving oneself fully to another, willingly, and with love. This giving process implies taking something of one's own and sacrificing it – giving it away without returns or compensations – to another human being, be it time, care, work, territory, ideological position, or something else. Let us imagine one is "full" of these things for oneself – we pay attention to our own emotions and needs, we work for ourselves, care for ourselves first and spend most of our time with ourselves doing what we think we need to be happy. Dostoevsky claims that one will not be happy till one gives the whole self to another human, thereby "emptying" oneself, and necessarily in love. That last component is the most essential for this scheme to work, and Dostoevsky leaves many clues in his novels that without love, reaching ideal human relations and the pinnacle of personal development is impossible.

[...] Христос весь вошел в человечество, и человек стремится преобразиться в я Христа как в свой идеал. [...] Когда человек не исполнил закона стремления к идеалу, то есть не приносил **ЛЮБОВЬЮ** в жертву своего я людям или другому существу (я и Маша), он чувствует страдание и называет это состояние грехом.⁹

[...] Christ entered entirely into humanity, and man strives to transform into the "I" of Christ or into his own ideal [...] When a man has not the law of striving towards the ideal, that is, has not

⁹ Dostoevsky, *PSS*, V. 20, 172-175.

through love sacrificed I to people or to another person (Masha and I), he suffers and calls this sin.¹⁰

All the suffering, says Dostoevsky, happens when the human ego prevents the self from giving, when “the law of I” is stronger than the law of moving towards the ideal – giving that “I” to another being, or as philosophy of dialogue terms it – the other. People’s actions that do not aim at giving oneself with love to others are identified by Dostoevsky as sin. The soul of this opposition can be reduced to the simple operation “to retain – to give.” Between filling up and emptying, the right ethical choice is the latter, but only if done with goodwill. Giving begrudgingly, with expectations of a return, causes suffering. It is worth noting that loving all is not an absolute requirement. Dostoevsky admits that humans cannot be as perfect as Christ, who is God and is able to love everybody. We love ourselves first, and therefore the law given to us from the transcendent – love the other like you love yourself – is only the way to convey the emotion necessary for humans to develop active empathy in the process of reflecting the other. To live the life of giving, which, according to many theistic and nontheistic philosophies, is necessary to be happy, the self must learn to see beauty and goodness in the other under any circumstances. Only this conceptual approach to alterity can genuinely motivate the emotions of acceptance, kindness and love. Any forced exchange between two selves necessarily involves domination and is never truly balanced. The only stable structure between the self and the other can be based on mutual giving, motivated by good will. Marriage as active love towards one other human is the wisest social configuration for the fulfillment of the law to practice self-minimization in love for the other. Upon losing his wife, Dostoevsky found himself intimately feeling the absence of the other to love and to live for. This suffering resulted in astute formulations of philosophy, both in novels and

¹⁰ Proffer, Berczynski, 39-43.

nonfictional documents, and in his second marital union that gave him four children, two of whom died. Becoming a father – a human creator – was especially significant for the writer, as his own childhood was overshadowed by a willful and abusive patriarch. He loved his children dearly, and genuinely believed that loving humanity was easier because of them.

I believe that in this journal entry, and many other places in his writing, Dostoevsky relays the idea of communal and personal happiness by drawing on the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*. The word “*kenosis*” (from the Greek κένωσις; meaning “emptying”) is an ancient Greek term that has entered theological language through Christian writings, primarily the Epistle to the Philippians 2:7 in the New Testament, where Jesus Christ is described as having “...emptied himself...”¹¹ to become a servant of mankind. In Philippians 2:5-8, St. Paul speaks of Christ’s “self-emptying”:

- ¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ,
any consolation from love,
any sharing in the Spirit,
any compassion and sympathy,
- ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.
- ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
- ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.
- ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
- ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
- ⁷ but **emptied himself**,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
- ⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.
- ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him

¹¹ *The Bible*, NRSV, Phil. 2:7.

and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.¹²

Modern Russian Synodal Translation reads:

¹ Итак, если есть какое утешение во Христе,
 если есть какая отрада любви,
 если есть какое общение духа,
 если есть какое милосердие и сострадательность,
² то дополните мою радость:
 имейте одни мысли,
 имейте ту же любовь,
 будьте единомысленны и единомысленны;
³ ничего не делайте по любопрению или по тщеславию,
 но по смиренномудрию почитайте один другого высшим себя.
⁴ Не о себе только каждый заботься,
 но каждый и о других.
⁵ Ибо в вас должны быть те же чувствования, какие и во Христе Иисусе:
⁶ Он, будучи образом Божиим,
 не почитал хищением быть равным Богу;
⁷ но **уничжил Себя Самого**,
 приняв образ раба,
 сделавшись подобным человекам и по виду став как человек;
⁸ смирил Себя, быв послушным даже до смерти, и смерти крестной.
⁹ Посему и Бог превознес Его и дал Ему имя выше всякого имени,
¹⁰ дабы пред именем Иисуса преклонилось всякое колено небесных,
 земных и преисподних,
¹¹ и всякий язык исповедал,
 что Господь Иисус Христос в славу Бога Отца.¹³

¹² Ibid, Phil. 2:1-11.

¹³ *The Bible*, Modern Russian Synodal Version, Filippiitsam 2:1-11.

The second chapter of Paul's letter, in which the verbal root of *kenosis* (ἐκένωσεν (*ekénōsen*) – to make empty or void) appears, became the foundation for the development of the Christian doctrine of kenosis around 5th century AD. The doctrine seeks to explain in a very narrow theological sense why the Son of God had given up his divine qualities or divinity so that he could be human. It refers, first and foremost, to the characteristics of God that are considered not compatible with being an actual person.¹⁴ For example, God's "omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience as well as His aseity, eternity, infinity, impassibility and immutability."¹⁵ According to the kenosis doctrine, since the incarnate Jesus Christ is a fully human and fully divine being, God has temporarily assumed these changes in his Incarnation, and when Christ returns to Heaven after his resurrection, he has fully restored all of his original attributes and divinity. The act of temporary self-emptying for the benefit of the other, known as kenosis, is seen by Christian thinkers as indicating the immanence that transcends the partition of individual existence into the dichotomous notions of self and other. There is one God, and before anything or anyone was created, part of Him had to be minimized to create space for the alterity. Immanence is the deity's focus on creation, the Divine Logos that dwells in material form. In order to coexist harmoniously with human nature, it is imperative to reassert the immanence of God in others, thereby attaining an understanding of this attribute within oneself. Kenotic self-minimizing movement is the conceptual direction that brings people closer not only to each other, but also to God. This idea is also prominently present in Judaic religious thought.

With regards to the Son of God, *kenosis* is a "condescension and self-sacrifice for the redemption and salvation of all mankind. Relative to human nature, *kenosis* denotes the continual

¹⁴ "Kenosis," *New World Encyclopedia*.

¹⁵ Maas, "Kenosis," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

self-denial of one's own human will and desire."¹⁶ At the same time, mankind can also participate in God's saving work through *theosis* – becoming holy by grace. Eastern Orthodox mystical theology has always encouraged people to follow the example of Christ. However, *theosis* never concerns becoming like God in nature or essence; instead, it concerns becoming united to God by grace, through his energies (Orthodox theology distinguishes between the divine essence and energies).¹⁷ *Kenosis* is a paradox and a mystery in that “emptying oneself” in fact “fills” the person with divine grace and results in approaching union with God.

Numerous theologians have expressed interest in the notion of God “emptying” Himself to become incarnate love for humanity and freely undergo death to provide others with redemption, which has influenced the growth of Christian theology and ethics. There is strong textual evidence to suggest that the doctrine of kenosis – in its Christological understanding – was inspiring Dostoevsky's writing efforts. His novel *The Idiot (1868-1869)* – an attempt to portray an ideal man – is built on the illustrations of the doctrine.¹⁸ The interpretation of Dostoevsky's artistic method as itself a type of kenosis is important to mention as well, although it can be argued whether it is appropriate to follow Holquist and Clark in using the concept of kenosis in this context. The argument in favor of such view is expressed by Paul Contino in his review of Rowan Williams's volume on Dostoevsky:

¹⁶ *New World Encyclopedia*.

¹⁷ Evans, ed. *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*.

¹⁸ John Givens notes in his 2011 article “A Narrow Escape into Faith? Dostoevsky's *Idiot* and the Christology of Comedy” that “one of the first places where kenosis and Myshkin were brought together was in the comment by R. P. Blackmur that ‘idiocy in the novel is the “condition of the great divestment.” It is thus, in Christological terms, a kenosis: a humiliation or emptying.’” The referenced essay by R. P. Blackmur, is “A Rage of Goodness: *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky,” 1956.

In a pattern analogous to Christ's kenosis, as described by Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-11), Dostoevsky does not loom above his characters like a puppet master. The author empties himself of any controlling omniscience, descends, and stands, in Mikhail Bakhtin's word – "alongside" his creations. He respects their freedom and gives them the open, indeterminate "space" to exercise that freedom over time.¹⁹

It would be a stretch to claim that Bakhtin really implied that Dostoyevskian method was a kenotic one, since he didn't use the exact term *kenosis*. Ivan Verch points out that in his works, Bakhtin didn't use the words "kenosis," or "emptying" or "emptiness."²⁰ He also notes Clark and Holquist's statement that "...it is difficult in the West to see the connection between Bakhtin's Christology and the major, apparently nonreligious concerns of his thought. This difficulty stems in part from Bakhtin's immersion in the Russian kenotic tradition."²¹ As a counterbalance, Verch quotes Jostein Børtnes, the Norwegian scholar who questions the validity of understanding Russian religious tradition as kenotic:

О русской якобы кенотической традиции Бертнес пишет, что «это скорее продукт либерального богословия на Западе», и ошибочному истолкованию кенозиса у Федотова противопоставляет Церковь, которая «учит, что уничтожение Христа – это Его временное освобождение от Своей божественной формы существования, ее временная замена формой раба.»²²

¹⁹ Contino, Paul. "Response to Susan McReynolds' Review of Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*," 2011.

²⁰ "В своих работах Бахтин не употреблял лексемы ни 'кенозис,' ни 'опоражнвание,' ни 'порожнее'." Verch, Ivan. "*O chiom kenozise idet rech?*" 4.

²¹ Clark, Katerina, Holquist, Michael. *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 84.

²² Børtnes, 1994, 65. Quoted in Verch, 3.

The objective of this dissertation is a closer look at the use of kenotic tropes in Dostoevsky's writing and the ways kenosis can help understand his literary heritage in a productive light. The majority of his literary works foreground the positive effects associated with the kenotic state of mind. A brief look at Dostoevsky's journal entry about Masha reveals undeniable references to the main message of the doctrine. Current project suggests that Dostoevsky's novels *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Demons*, and *The Idiot* highlight the relevance of kenosis for thinking about ethical conflict and outline productive ways of conflict resolution. I am particularly intrigued by Dostoevsky's artistic representation of the conversational practice of confession as seen through the prism of the kenotic principle, and investigate the role that kenosis plays in a truly successful confession.

This requires looking more closely into the origins of the doctrine of kenosis and its reinterpretations in modern times. The foundations of the doctrine of kenosis were created by Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth century, when he pondered the relationship of human and divine natures in Jesus Christ. The topic of kenosis was later revived in the nineteenth-century theology to reinterpret classical doctrines of the incarnation and has since added to the development of social ethics in Christian societies. Christians of all denominations have interpreted kenosis as describing God's sublime humility during the incarnation and complete sacrifice for all. It is also a call for people to be similarly humble and loving to others. In the Orthodox Christianity, the importance of the other is paramount in the ethical structure of life, and self-emptying is seen as a mode of existence rather than a single act. This idea exists outside of the Christian context as well, overlapping with other philosophical and ethical traditions, especially with contemporaneous Abrahamic religions.

Modern philosophers and ethical thinkers took a special interest in the idea of kenosis at the beginning of the 19th century. Hegel (1770 – 1831) wrote about *Entäußerung*, as a “model for an intellectual virtue that enables people to confront difference and disagreement without domination.”²³ According to Hegel, the concept of *Entäußerung* entails a conscious rejection of leveraging one’s own epistemic position as one among several mutually acknowledged centers of authority in order to subjugate others.²⁴ For Hegel, the logic of self-emptying subverts the process of seeing the subject as self-standing and affirms the transcendent immanent that precedes all differential relations between humans. Hegel’s use of the kenotic idea, albeit not strictly religious, points the reader in the direction of an abstract ideal that lies beyond human understanding and abilities. His *Entäußerung* explicates how the vision of kenosis as an intellectual virtue can empower individuals to effectively engage with diversity and opposing perspectives without resorting to domination. However, the development of the kenotic ideal in Christian religious philosophy undoubtedly preceded the affinities between Hegel’s idea of *Entäußerung* and Dostoevsky’s use of the kenotic motif in his oeuvre.

Prominent 20th century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas exemplifies more recent modern attempts to subvert any thinking that is concentrated on the self. In *Of God Who Comes to Mind* he wrote: “As a responsible I, I never finish emptying myself of myself.”²⁵ Seeing a trace of the infinite transcendent in any finite subject and interpreting it as a responsibility towards the other, he calls into question the self-constructed and self-enclosed philosophical subject. His *Totality and Infinity* presents the ethical relation of self with transcendence as part of a “teleological maturation

²³ Farneth, Molly. “The Power to Empty Oneself: Hegel, Kenosis, and Intellectual Virtue,” 2017.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 73.

of the subject from a self-enclosed spontaneity to an ethical responsibility toward the other.”²⁶ In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas claims that “subjectivity is structured as the other in the same.”²⁷ In all of these works, the subject is never truly self-enclosed, and ethics becomes the place where the self-identity is shattered in order to give rise to the God-like task of acceptance and responsibility for the other. Self alone is simply less than two selves relating to each other and to the transcendent God.

Simone Weil is another 20th century thinker who sees self-emptying as a process necessary to challenge the self-possessed subject into acceptance of the alterity. She notices that “the soul empties itself of its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, as he is, in all his truth.”²⁸ The subject here is presented in its ethical relation with the other and the transcendent, emphasizing that the states of responsibility and passivity play pivotal roles in enabling the formation of such a relation. Elsewhere, Weil formulates the idea of challenging the subject by employing distinctly Christian imagery: “He emptied himself of his divinity. We should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born.”²⁹ The false divinity Weil speaks about is the unjust feeling of superiority that lies at the foundation of passing judgement on others. The logic of self-emptying, or kenosis, subverts the process of understanding the subject as self-standing and affirms the transcendent that precedes all differential relations between humans. This equality in view of the higher unity has more significance for the human subject growth than growth and fortification of the ego.

²⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*.

²⁷ Lévinas. *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence*.

²⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 115.

²⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 34.

While a more comprehensive discussion of the idea of kenosis will follow, we can begin distilling it as an expression of the emotional stance and state of mind in people as they encounter conflicts during the existence of their self. In philosophy and ethics, kenotic thought has been used as an indicator of a social relations system that balances on the idea of voluntary acceptance of the opposing view absent emotional protest. This feat of mental and emotional discipline is not an easily comprehended, or readily occupied, stance towards the world of multiple selves. It requires seeing people as equal in value elements of the connected whole to hear the polyphony of personal truths without disaccord – an impossible task for the human self that is philosophically defined in separation from the others.

Let us now take this theological and philosophical insight and apply it back to Dostoevsky. When faced with the finality of human physical existence, with the death of the body and simultaneously the person he loved strongly enough to “become one flesh with” – Dostoevsky focuses on the immortality of the soul and the ultimate development goal for humanity, achieved, in his mind, when

... the law of the *I* merges with the law of humanism, and in the merging both, both the *I* and the *all* (in appearance two extreme opposites) mutually annihilated for each other, at the same time attain the highest goal of their individual development, each on their own. This is the heaven of Christ.³⁰

... закон я сливается с законом гуманизма, и в слитии, оба, и я и *все* (по-видимому, две крайние противоположности), взаимно уничтоженные друг для друга, в то же самое время достигают и высшей цели своего индивидуального развития каждый особо. [...] Это-то и есть рай Христов.³¹

³⁰ Proffer, 39.

³¹ Dostoevsky, *PSS*, V. 20, 172-175.

Here Dostoevsky pinpoints something that he believed was essential to life and has transformative powers for humanity. Acknowledging the perpetual struggle between self-sacrifice and egotism, in his diary, Dostoevsky speaks of the (seeming) annihilation of self as bringing man closer to the other and to the transcendent ideal of unconditional love. Uttered during the time of loss, these words bring forward the acute sense of the absence of the other, to whom one's being could be sacrificed *in love*. The fact of physical death underscores the missing component in the process of the "full development of "I"". It is only through the human other whose presence Dostoevsky finds himself mournfully lacking, that he feels one can approach the incarnate transcendent ideal in the trialogic, conversational existence of the human self. The ideas of self-emptying and communication with the other in the presence of an ideal third figure prominently in the foundations of Dostoevsky's thought. The behaviors of his literary characters often make sense only in the light of an ethical paradigm that implies a kenotic structure between the subject, the other and the external transcendent. This philosophical framework, viable before the times of Dostoevsky, remains relevant to the present day.

Appreciating Dostoevsky's oeuvre, where manifestations of kenosis are presented in an emotionally accessible and psychologically relevant form, is an excellent way to explore the qualities constituting the semantic field of the term kenosis. As a writer, he attempted to create literary representations of an ideal social behavior that would simplify, coordinate, and direct the beneficial development of humanity. Artistic appropriation of self-emptying as a trope allows Dostoevsky to portray the image of the Ideal in Man by writing the flow of energy ascribed to the divine into some of his characters. At the same time, Dostoevsky's polyphony engages with the idea that every voice, every stance is reasonable and right in its own way, and that people negatively react to the position of the other only due to the fear of the unknown. This philosophical

view suggests productive ways of peaceful social cooperation, even though the writer was keen on highlighting conflict as an inescapable attribute of human condition. Dostoevsky's characters invariably resonate with his readers across the variety of world cultures precisely because his reference point of human sameness lies in the transcendent. Of utmost importance is the fact that the writer understood the limitations of knowing God reasonably, with one's mind, and that he explicitly foregrounded the essential role of love in receiving grace.

In its theological meaning, the word *kenosis* essentially encapsulates Christianity, and is used with increasing frequency in modern discourse. However, the critical framework of self-emptying is not sufficiently developed yet as a tool for critical literary interpretation. One of my goals is to make the terms *kenosis* and *kenotic* more widely usable in critical literary discourse. A more extensive use of the term *kenosis* can facilitate a more appropriately balanced ethical and philosophical discussion of many types of human qualities and behaviors, both in literature and in real life. In order to incorporate a variety of critical perspectives, it is necessary to view Dostoevsky's oeuvre through the ethical prism of this doctrine in a way that would sometimes step away from a strictly theological context. Relying on the theological term *kenosis*, this study investigates the historical origins, development, and ethical implications of its underlying concepts – “greatness in smallness” and “strength in weakness.” Upon gathering the necessary instruments to discuss the doctrine, this dissertation analyzes a number of significant confessional exchanges in Dostoevsky's novels, foregrounding the processes of self-emptying, self-humiliation, self-depreciation, self-effacement and other *kenotic* manifestations. The guiding inquiry is to demonstrate how Dostoevsky incorporated the philosophy of *kenosis* into his texts, and to raise awareness of the ethical choices made by his characters in light of this doctrine. My other objectives include firmly placing the transcendent in the theoretical framework applied to interpret

the message of Dostoevsky's literary works, and normalizing the use of the term *kenotic* outside of theological context to indicate human beliefs and behaviors that are beneficial for communal living.

This study is deliberately attentive to the confession as the moment that encapsulates pure reason in the subjective existence of a separate self and has a major effect on personal decision-making and responsibility. I am particularly interested in Dostoevsky's rendering of confession as a psychological healing tool, aiming to illuminate positive, constructive ideas for ethical conflict resolution in Dostoevsky's most prominent texts. The writer incorporates a great number of confessional scenes into his novels, the vital importance of which Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes by claiming that

[...] confession is the object of his artistic vision and depiction. He depicts confession [...] in order to show the interdependence of consciousnesses that is revealed during confession. I cannot manage without another; I cannot become myself without another.³²

This act of complete dialogical giving cannot take place without an emptying of the self, needed both to give and to receive, which allows us to claim the act of confession as one of the manifestations of the kenotic principle. My study also suggests that in Dostoevsky's mind, *theosis* (*обожение*) is impossible without kenotic love, which facilitates the most meaningful kind of dialogue – a confessional triad. Dostoevsky uses this type of discourse in order to reveal the moment of grace that restores, transforms, and saves damaged individuals. In this mode of interpersonal communication, the abstract referent, invisibly present in the interactions of its believers, assumes the role of the universal other that all members of the community can refer to

³² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 287.

and empathize with. The interaction of two human beings then becomes a metaphorical triangle of references and provides common ground for interpersonal relations in the presence of the transcendent Third. A targeted analysis of Dostoevsky's writing demonstrates that a truly transformative confessional moment needs to be characterized by the kenotic stance of its participants, linking confession and kenosis as modes of existence imperative for peaceful human progress.

Hillier has pointed out that "the genius of Dostoevsky's confessional mode lies in his fulfillment of Christ's two commands or "double love" for fallen confessor and erring confessant, each made vulnerable before God and one another."³³ He further writes:

For a confessional moment to be possible both confessor and penitent must adopt a sacramental disposition, one of "openness towards mystery" or *Gelassenheit*. We retrieve this term from Heidegger's existential use of it to restore it to the Christian mystic Thomas Eckhardt's profoundly sacramental sense (from whom Heidegger derived it). The Divine Word must be present for such a dialogic action to occur. The gratuitous gift, that is, the grace of the other's coming to meet me, requires such a Presence; and in Dostoevsky's fiction we find that such a Presence exists.³⁴

Dostoevsky's confessional discourse hinges on the connection between two human individuals in spiritual love and in common understanding of the truth they are sharing. The ethos they both subscribe to, and a measure of divine presence is the unseen grace that is introduced into the situation by the Scriptural Word. During a confessional energy exchange, the confessor holds space in oneself, by emptying out one's preconceptions, feelings, expectations, and judgments for the confessant, who then delivers the negative truths, the admittance of errors, the weight of sin

³³ Hillier, *Literature and Theology*, 444.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 447.

onto the confessor's shoulders. In religious settings, it is implied that the Third, present invisibly in any human-to-human connection, is the one responsible for bearing the weight of that sin, not the confessor. The confessor, in a truly kenotic way, must let the judgment of the other's sin go, leaving it to God, and then embrace the confessant in true forgiveness and spiritual love.

The connection between kenosis and confessional language is essential, as are the emotional underpinnings of kenotic activity. The moment of true confession, when a genuine connection is established between two separate individuals in the presence of love, entails the same dynamic of energy as the self-emptying of God in the Word of the Scripture. A soul-transforming confessional moment is an example of a deeply kenotic event, consisting in verbal and emotional emptying of the subject. Speaking out the negative knowledge about self has the power of freeing the subject from negative feelings, judgments, history, opinions, and determinations. Without the contradiction of the hidden, unadmitted evil in self, the subject is able to retain unity (a person free of guilt feels good) and receives certainty in the knowledge of truth through the kenotic witnessing of the other.

It has been noted in modern psychology that confession heals fractured and damaged selves and functions as a working tool of personal and social growth.³⁵ One of the questions raised in this dissertation is what the doctrine of kenosis can add to our understanding of the mechanisms of confession and to the ethical message of Dostoevsky's works. How does self-judgment contribute to the possibility of people's peaceful coexistence? How is judgment related to humiliation and

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of the psychological effects of confession, see: Hymer, "Therapeutic and Redemptive Aspects of Religious Confession." Klenck, "The Psychological and Spiritual Efficacy of Confession." Rana, "Religious Confession and Symptom Severity: A Prospective Comparative Study." Worthen, "Psychotherapy and Catholic Confession."

insult? In an attempt to find answers, I use the philosophy of self-emptying to discuss psychological traumas and ways of verbally dealing with emotional pain as seen in Dostoevsky's novels, foregrounding kenosis as a unique approach to resolving deep-lying conflicts without force but not without effort. This project analyzes several significant encounters between Dostoevsky's characters to explore how his literary universe forwards certain verbal and behavioral models for dealing with emotional traumas of humanity. We will notice that in Dostoevsky, the moment of personal transformation and metaphorical return to innocence is connected with the admission of responsibility and love between the participants of a confessional act. Solovyov, whose philosophy is indebted to Dostoevsky's confessional discourse, gives a succinct summary for this healing process of the soul:

As an inner subjective force, evil will cannot be destroyed by any external action [...] For the divine principle actually to overcome evil human will, it must be revealed to the soul as a living personal force capable of *penetrating* into the soul and taking possession of it. The divine Logos must not only influence the soul externally; it must be born in the soul, not limiting, not enlightening, but regenerating it.³⁶

This moment of the birth of Logos in human being is the focal point of my dissertation on Dostoevsky, who shows how living in love for the other while confessing one's faith and transgressions can banish the load of secrets and mistakes along with the fear and guilt that linger long after the acts were committed.

Chapter Outlines

The variety of definitions of the kenotic idea in religious and secular philosophies forms the subject of the first chapter of the dissertation, which also discusses selected diary entries and

³⁶ Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 151.

letters that demonstrate Dostoevsky's personal thinking on this matter. I further connect kenosis with the act of religious confession and explore the interpersonal dynamic of the confessional existence of self with the help of the philosophy of dialogue developed in the first half of the 20th century by such religious philosophers as Mikhail Bakhtin, Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky, Vladimir Lossky, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and others. Levinas's idea of theosis possible only through the dialogically oriented other who shares in the same source of spiritual truth resonates deeply with Dostoevsky's philosophy and will provide support for the discussion of restorative powers of confessional interactions in conjunction with kenotic self-emptying.

Further in my dissertation, I look closely at several confessional scenes in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot* and *Demons* through the prism of the traditional structure of a religious confession. I am interested in how exactly Dostoevsky proposed humans interact to achieve the best possible version of existence without losing their self, and fortify it by inhabiting the right energy movement in between two selves – "I and Thou" in the terms suggested by the famous philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber.³⁷ I examine the roles of the confessor (the receiver of the negative truth) and the confessant (or the penitent) balanced in a trialogic spiritual dynamic with the ethical dimension possible specifically due to the presence of an implied transcendent third that serves as the etalon of truth and the ultimate measure of judgment in the face of the errors of human self. The moment "when a confession of sin becomes a confession of faith"³⁸ creates space for the existence of the ideal. A confessional triologue expands dialogic consciousness to embrace the Logos, which binds all elements together opposing separation. As a conceptual

³⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*.

³⁸ Hillier, 442-63.

movement that can prevent and reverse dissolution, such triangulation involving the transcendent Other merits particular attention.

The textual analysis of confessional moments forms the core of Chapters Two and Three and allows the reader to observe the mechanisms of opening, acceptance, forgiveness, trust and faith that make a confession into a practical implementation of the kenotic principle. Chapter Two demonstrates how Dostoevsky spells out living in a confessional mode in the ways that highlight the healing emotional effect of true confessions on both human parties – confessor and confessant. Here, we focus primarily on the transformational confessional encounters between Stepan Verkhovenskiï and Sofya Matveevna in *Demons*, Alesha and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Raskolnikov and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*. Sofya, Alyosha and Sonya serve as models of successful confessors. We will see that they display a number of kenotic characteristics which indicate making a willing choice to suffer together with their penitents and accept alterity in its complete truth while withholding judgment, but still stand their own ground firmly in the ultimate truth they believe in. Focusing on successful confessions, I will investigate the interconnection of emotional and verbal kenotic processes between the participants of a true confessional act. I define a true, successful, confession as one that is internally transformative for at least one of the human participants of the exchange and has long lasting healing effects on the mind and soul of the confessant. I also point out that in Dostoevsky's novels, the living Word that exists between penitent and confessor is not the only factor determining the success of a given confessional moment. My argument about the significance of unconditional love facilitated by the kenotic emotional acceptance of the other echoes Diane Oenning Thompson's assertion:

...in *Crime and Punishment*, the Word never enters Raskolnikov's consciousness as revealed truth through an open dialogic exchange. We may infer its influence when he asks Sonya

to read the Lazarus miracle. But it is Sonya's love and not the Word per se which is most decisive.³⁹

The third chapter of this dissertation concentrates on failed confessions that offer an understanding of the erroneous confessional moment setup. Here, I will examine some aberrations from the normal trialogic structure of a sacramental confession. The failed confessions analyzed in Chapter Three feature prominently the confession of Nikolai Stavrogin to Tikhon in *Demons*. A separate section is devoted to *The Idiot*, where Myshkin – the ideal confessor due to his kenotic personality – demonstrates apparent failure to perform healing confessions. *The Idiot* offers a wealth of examples of kenotic behavior, but this study only looks into the dramatic interactions involving Prince Myshkin, Nastasya Filippovna and Rogozhin. One of the goals of this chapter is to show that for Dostoevsky, without the confessant's acknowledgment of the presence of grace in the confessional moment, and without submitting to the hierarchy of truth, a confession cannot be truly transformative or successful. One of the important ways in which a confessor participates in the recognition and abdication of sin is sharing the weight of responsibility for what has been confessed. I will notice that the measure to which the confessor "takes on" the judgement of the wrongdoings delivered to them verbally can define the outcomes of confession. This part will conclude with the discussion of the metamorphosis of the confessant as an indicator of a true confession versus the corruption of one of the participants in failed confessions.

In the conclusion of my dissertation, I briefly discuss the philosophy of dialogue, the constructive significance of a kenotic stance towards alterity, and Dostoevsky's own polyphonic consciousness. Taking a bird's eye view of the contemporary interest in the idea of the charitable positioning of self towards the other, the conclusion foregrounds the notion of kenosis as an

³⁹ "Problems of the Biblical Word in Dostoevsky's Poetics," 69.

ontological principle for living advocated by Dostoevsky. His novels demonstrate the role of kenosis in facilitating harmonious social relationships and the healing effects of confession.

Chapter One

Self-Emptying: The Doctrine of Kenosis

A survey of modern theological literature on the subject of kenosis indicates that it is seen as a key theme in understanding many aspects of human life – in social action and ethics, in personal and group psychology, in literature and art.⁴⁰ When given a theological foundation, kenosis can be understood as more than just letting go or giving up; it can also mean being ready to do so in a constructive manner for a worthwhile cause, in line with the characteristics of the transcendent it describes. The term *kenosis* that derives from the verb *kenoo* in Philippians 2:7 – “he emptied himself,” is used theologically primarily in the doctrines of Christ, Trinity, and creation. The scale of uses does not stop at theological meanings, as by unwinding the strings of implications from the starting theological point, we can see that the theme of kenosis has profound importance for how we think about the nature of human freedom and social ethics.

This chapter argues that the conceptual movement of *самоуменьшение* (self-minimization) or *kenosis*, can be seen as the comprehensive core of Dostoevsky’s thought. In so doing, I will be answering several questions: what is the textual evidence of Dostoevsky’s fascination with kenosis? What philosophical conditions motivated Dostoevsky to challenge his reader to rethink the relationship of the self to the alterity? What is the scriptural basis for his formulations of self-minimization? What is the philosophical impetus for discussing kenosis as a relevant philosophical concept to the present day? The interpretation of texts in this chapter, and in the rest of the dissertation, will inevitably be moving from divine to human self-emptying, from the logic of

⁴⁰ See Ellis, “Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology” for a comprehensive list of modern theologians contributing to the integrated kenotic cosmological-theological-ethical view of existence.

external creation in the space created by self-diminishing to the movement of becoming nothing that can be observed within the self.

I. Kenosis in Western Christian Theology

For Dostoevsky as a Christian thinker, the emotional experience of God springs from the perception of the presence of God in Jesus Christ. The notion of kenosis holds a central place in explicating who the incarnate Word is in Christian theology. According to the hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians 2:5-8, Christ's history is understood as a kenosis for the sake of human redemption. Contemporary New Testament interpretive debates focus on understanding the reference of the emptying, as it is not clear what is being "emptied." In one reading, the emptying refers to the moment of incarnation and the humility of the divine act in becoming human. Another one reads emptying as parallel to the "humbled himself" and referring to the death on the cross rather than to the incarnation.⁴¹ Thusly stated, the matter of interpreting kenosis can theologially be focused on divine characteristics and the effect on them of the incarnation, resulting in actual, albeit temporary, loss of divine power, or on the moral matter of Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross.

For the patristic authors of the early church, God was omnipotent, immutable and omniscient, and the earliest understanding of kenosis, developed under the influence of the Alexandrian Cyril (d. 444), did not imply any loss of divine characteristics. The narrative involved a pre-existent Word coming among humans, taking flesh and incurring for Himself all the limitations of life in flesh without the abandonment of any aspects of divinity.⁴² In general, the

⁴¹ For a variety of interpretations in detail see Coakley, "Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations." Dunn, James D. G. *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*. United States, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.

⁴² Delio, Ilia. "Is Creation Eternal?" *Theological Studies*, 66, 2005.

patristic exegesis of Philippians 2 is more about appreciating the paradox than providing an account of how precisely the pre-existent Logos can also be a mortal human.⁴³

The 451 AD Chalcedonian definition of the nature of Christ – “one *hypostasis* (person) made known in two *physeis* (natures)” – was widely speculated upon in the post-Chalcedonian era in search of a coherent explanation of the divine self-emptying. The question of the mode of relation of the divine and the human (the so-called “communication of idioms”) in one *person* became more complicated in modern times, when “personhood” came to gather the connotations of subjective consciousness and psychological subjectivity. This turn found Reformation and post-Reformation Lutheran thought on kenosis focusing more on the theology of the cross than the moment of incarnation.⁴⁴ Early Lutheran theology tried to make room for Christ’s humanity during his earth life in the light of the Christological doctrine of his two natures. They saw Christ becoming “like another human being,” a limited being capable of encountering other humans in a human way, as a result of “renunciation” of certain divine attributes or “concealing” them. Christ as a human is not omnipresent, omniscient or almighty, as these divine attributes were “emptied” in his kenosis. The theologians of the seventeenth century didn’t yet talk about a kenosis of the *divinity* of the eternal Logos.

During the nineteenth century, Lutheran kenotics (Sartorius, Liebner, Hofmann, Thomasius, Frank and Gess) began to interpret the subject of Philippians 2, kenosis, as explaining the divine being of the eternal Logos, and not just a loss of certain divine attributes in incarnation. Thomasius, for instance, claimed that the Son of God as a human being proceeds out of a self-limitation of the

⁴³ Norris, “Christological Models in Cyril of Alexandria.”

⁴⁴ For an illuminating discussion of Lutheran kenotic theology see Moltmann, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World.” *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 137-152.

divine in an act of God's free love for men and women. The divine curbs attributes of majesty related to the world – omnipotence, omniscience, immortality, impassibility, immutability – those which derive from Aristotle's general metaphysics. The divine still retains other attributes of the Godhead's nature – truth, holiness and love. Such a separation of divine attributes was theologically unsatisfying, and Lutheran kenotics didn't find many followers, according to the studies of the modern theologian Jurgen Moltmann.⁴⁵

Steven Cassedy, in his 2005 volume *Dostoevsky's Religion*, speaks extensively on the influence of the kenotic tradition on Dostoevsky's literary work and summarizes the 19th century European kenotic thought in the way that foregrounds the humanity of Christ:

In the 1840s and 1850s, Germany produced a multitude of theological works that emphasized, to varying degrees, the earthly nature of Jesus. No theory of this period denies the divine *origin* of Christ; some insist the divine nature remains with him during his earthly ministry, while others assert that the kenosis resulted in a wholly human Son of God. But the lens is now clearly trained on the earthly ministry, as in the work of such biographers as David Strauss (and later, in France, Ernest Renan).⁴⁶

Cassedy quotes Claude Welch, a scholar of nineteenth-century Protestant theology, who described the state of kenotic thought in the 19th century Europe in the following way:

The idea of kenosis seemed a way to conserve the fundamental interests of the classical 'two-natures' Christology and yet to recognize (in a way that the traditional formulas had not) a genuinely human figure in Jesus of Nazareth, a person with actual human limitations of knowledge and power, with a 'gradually dawning

⁴⁵ Moltmann, 137-139.

⁴⁶ Cassedy, Steven. *Dostoevsky's Religion*, 155.

infant consciousness' and a real growth – a person for whom sleep and death were real.⁴⁷

As the most extreme example, Cassedy says, Welch presents Wolfgang Friedrich Gess, “a theologian who sees the final result of the kenosis not as a being possessing one person and two natures, according to a doctrine that has been the norm in Christianity since the fifth century, but as a being who is exclusively a man.”⁴⁸ Cassedy then points out that “humility and engagement in this world appear to be the emphasis that interests Dostoevsky (who did not know the word *kenosis* and who was not directly familiar with the German kenotic theologians) by the time he gets to *The Brothers Karamazov*.”

This is not to say that this novel or his other late works take a position specifically on the divinity or humanity of Jesus; it's simply to say that, like the German kenotic theologians, he focused on the world as a realm for religious activity and that for him a Christian (or for that matter non-Christian) ministry unashamedly takes place in this world.⁴⁹

An important Roman Catholic thinker of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, made another attempt at understanding Christ's kenosis circa the 1970s, this time in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. In his view, “it is the essential nature of the eternal Son of the eternal Father to be ‘obedient’ in complete love and self-surrender, just as it is the essential nature of the eternal Father to communicate himself to the Son in complete love. If the incarnate Son becomes obedient to the will of the eternal Father to the point of death on the cross, then what he does on

⁴⁷ Welch, Claude. *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2003. Quoted in Cassedy, 155.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

earth is no different from what he does in the transcendent, and what he does in time is no different from what he does in eternity.”⁵⁰ This stresses the timeless character of kenosis as a mechanism inherent to the triune relationship within the Divine. ““In the form of a servant” God is not denying, renouncing or concealing his divine form, he is revealing it.”⁵¹ For Balthasar, Moltmann writes,

kenosis is not a self-limitation or self-renunciation on God’s part, but the realization of the self-surrender of the Son to the Father in the trinitarian life of God. By virtue of limitless love, the inner life of the trinity takes its impress from the reciprocal kenosis of the divine persons in relation to one another. [...] Kenotic self-surrender is God’s trinitarian nature and is therefore the mark of all his works “outwards” (the creation, reconciliation and redemption of all things).⁵²

With such an acknowledgment of the radical otherness even within God, the trinitarian account of kenosis plays into the postmodern fascination with ‘difference,’ notes Sarah Coakley before laying out the map of the contemporary, 21st-century kenotic thought.⁵³ Currently, theologians studying kenosis concentrate on a few directions, including the creator’s relation to the creation, the balance between scientific and theological accounts of the cosmos, theology of love, and the protection of human freedom of will. Polkinghorne sees God’s kenosis as His willingness to be “a cause among causes” in creation, leaving space for human free will and creativity.⁵⁴ Ward’s approach sees God’s gift of free will “not just in the incarnation, but in the creation of conscious and rational beings,” both acts being kenotic. Accepting experiences of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Moltmann, 140-141.

⁵³ Coakley, Sarah. “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations.”

⁵⁴ Polkinghorne, John. “Kenotic creation and Divine Action,” 96-97.

human pain and suffering, giving up complete control and complete knowledge so that humans would have freedom of choice, means that the gain of entering into a relationship is impossible without kenosis, claims Ward.⁵⁵ Peacocke sees the example of Christ as evidence of God's creativity being "self-limiting, vulnerable, self-emptying and self-giving."⁵⁶ Barbour shares the process view on the metaphysics of creation and insists that kenosis is a "metaphysical necessity rather than... voluntary limitation."⁵⁷ Jeeves reflects on "kenotic behavior" in a "kenotic community," forgoing speculations about kenosis in God altogether. He sees this inclination towards self-giving and self-limiting as possibly having a genetic and neural explanation.⁵⁸ Ellis also primarily stresses the ethical significance of kenosis, with the processes of voluntary letting go of one's own desires and will for the greater good of others bringing the idea of sacrifice to the center of his vision of "kenotic love."⁵⁹ It is important to note that modern Western Christian theologians recognize that the ethical appeal to sacrifice can be complex and problematic, especially if we talk about death in battle, in wars of all kinds that presumably defend human freedom.⁶⁰ Looking for more connotations of the term kenosis, we turn to Rolston, who says that there is no altruism or kenosis in nature, and the "suffering love" as he defines kenosis should be

⁵⁵ Ward, Keith. "Cosmos and Kenosis." *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 158-159.

⁵⁶ Peacocke, Arthur. "The Cost of New Life." *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 41.

⁵⁷ Barbour, Ian G. "God's Power: A Process View." *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 12-13.

⁵⁸ Jeeves, Malcolm. "The Nature of Persons and the Emergence of Kenotic Behavior." *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 88.

⁵⁹ Ellis, George F. R. "Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology." *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 123.

⁶⁰ For information on kenosis as political engagement, see various works by Rowan Williams, Donald MacKinnon and Gillian Rose.

used only for human capacity to “limit ... human aggrandizement” for the sake of our common home – Earth.⁶¹

In totality, the works of modern theologians create a strong impression that kenosis is currently being connected with the humanity and humility of Christ, as well as God’s self-contracting operation that allows new creation and the expression of human free will. The question of why God does not eradicate evil and suffering if He is omnipotent, leads to thinking that leaving space for the freedom of choice, for free will and its consequences, is an intentional and indelible part of divine creation. Kenosis helps explain how God could have placed limitations on God’s own power to grant humans space to exercise freedom of will (good or evil). Here, the notion of freedom can be understood in a few major ways. The libertarian freedom the modern secular society is striving for implicates a certain limitation of God’s power and knowledge of the future. This view of freedom, however, is not the only one on offer philosophically, as there exists a number of forms of “compatibilism” – the views of freedom that do not try to ignore the conditioning and determining factors that are in effect even as the supposedly “free” human will is enacted.

Theistic philosophers create a picture where the self is most “free” when it is aligned with God’s will, meanwhile, secular thinkers focus on how much physiological and social neurolinguistic determinism can coexist with a truly “free” act of will. Overall, the impression produced by the contemporary Western Christian religious thought on kenosis seems to point in the direction that reverses the allegedly suffocating Divine influence. Ian Barbour, for instance, writes about the “maternal symbolism of a God conceived not as overpowering but as

⁶¹ Rolston, Holmes. “Kenosis and Nature.” *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 65.

empowering.”⁶² “The visual picture here is of a (very big) divine figure backing out of the scene, or restraining his influence, in order that other (little) figures may exercise completely independent thinking and acting,” notices Sarah Coakley.⁶³

This understanding of kenotic processes in the Divine answers several questions posed in the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov in “*The Grand Inquisitor*” and the preceding “*Rebellion*” chapters of Dostoevsky’s last novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In a spiritual confrontation with his younger brother Alyosha, Ivan famously refuses to accept any justification for a single tear of an innocent child, thereby questioning the idea of God’s love and the existence of universal harmony. He says:

Понимаешь ли ты это, когда маленькое существо, еще не умеющее даже осмыслить, что с ней делается, бьет себя в подлом месте, в темноте и в холоде, крошечным своим кулачком в надорванную грудку и плачет своими кровавыми, незлобивыми, кроткими слезками к «боженьке», чтобы тот защитил его, – понимаешь ли ты эту ахинею, друг мой и брат мой, послушник ты мой божий и смиренный, понимаешь ли ты, для чего эта ахинея так нужна и создана! Без нее, говорят, и пробыть бы не мог человек на земле, ибо не познал бы добра и зла. Для чего познавать это чертово добро и зло, когда это столького стоит? Да ведь весь мир познания не стоит тогда этих слезок ребеночка к «боженьке». [...] Мучаю я тебя, Алешка, ты как будто бы не в себе. Я перестану, если хочешь. – Ничего, я тоже хочу мучиться, – пробормотал Алеша.⁶⁴

Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this

⁶² Barbour, “God’s Power: A Process View.”

⁶³ Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations.”

⁶⁴ Dostoevsky, *Bratya Karamazovy*, 305-306.

infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! [...] I am making you suffer, Alyosha, you are not yourself. I'll leave off if you like." "Never mind. I want to suffer too," muttered Alyosha.⁶⁵

Very noticeable here is Alyosha's kenotic response, as a willing choice to co-suffer in love for his brother, accepting the pain of his words as he is hearing out the thoughts that torture the inconsolable Karamazov mind. Alyosha is quiet, often silent and receptive to the difficult truth, he is accepting Ivan's will to speak these painful feelings out and gives his conversational other exactly what he needs – the space to be heard without judgment, in compassion.⁶⁶

Ivan opens up to Alyosha as his brother and friend, and most importantly as someone who is obedient to God's will in humility. This kind of disposition of the listener encourages the confession of the deepest doubts and faltering faith Ivan is going through unbeknownst to other, less kenotic characters of the novel. Speaking of suffering as the inevitable cost of knowing the difference between good and evil, Ivan claims that all the knowledge in the world is not worth the tears of a suffering child, who does not know evil by choice yet. Ivan's mind cannot resolve the dilemma of the existence of unpunished evil in the world created by an almighty and benevolent God. This internal conflict brings him suffering, and while speaking it out he transfers part of it onto his listener Alyosha, who plays the role of a confessor.

⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

⁶⁶ Silence as kenosis in Dostoevsky has been researched and extensively commented on by Benjamin Jens, who writes that "...The use of molchanie signifies a renunciation of "a turn," a kenotic emptying of any assertion of the "selfish" ego in the communicative event." Jens, *Kenotic Silence: Communicative Strategies in 19th-century Russian Literature*.

Alyosha also suffers hearing these painful words, empathizing with the truth of his brother, even though his own personal truth is different, and allows him to exist in relative peace. He willingly accepts the burden of Ivan's mind and lets him put into words the desire to commit acts of evil that would punish the evildoers of this world. Alyosha, being *послушник* – not only a postulant in a monastery but also someone who willingly listens and obeys (from the words *слушать* and *послушание*) – knows and obeys the will of God: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”⁶⁷ For him, Ivan's desire feels sinful in its origin, and he later labels this train of thought as a rebellion (*бунт*). Nevertheless, Alyosha's imitation of God's kenosis allows him to create a space where the other can be received in his truth no matter what he says, and to remain his brother, friend, and confessor. Akin to God kenotically leaving space for His creation to exercise freedom of will, be it good or evil, Alyosha allows his brother to speak his mind and will, even though it is contradicting his own.

In fact, the power of Alyosha's kenotic self-emptying allows Ivan to feel for a moment that his truth is justified. Seeing the depth of Ivan's inner suffering, Alyosha withdraws his own monastic self and approves of mortal sin with a smile. In a moment, he calls it “nonsense” – *нелепость* – but the fact remains, and it is this fact that allows Ivan to feel the emotional support and love he needs to keep confessing his pain and keep believing in something beyond the obvious facts of human reality. Examining the following paragraph demonstrates how Alyosha's self-emptying and accepting the truth of the other serve to reaffirm the love that never ceases:

“Ату его!” – вопит генерал и бросает на него всю стаю борзых собак. Затравил в глазах матери, и псы растерзали ребенка в клочки!.. Генерала, кажется, в опеку взяли. Ну... что же его? Расстрелять? Для удовлетворения нравственного чувства расстрелять? Говори, Алешка!

⁶⁷ *The Bible*, KJV, Rom. 12:19.

- Расстрелять! – тихо проговорил Алеша, с бледною, перекосившеюся какою-то улыбкой подняв взор на брата.
- Bravo! – завопил Иван в каком-то восторге, – уж коли ты сказал, значит... Ай да схимник! Так вот какой у тебя бесенок в сердечке сидит, Алешка Карамазов!
- Я сказал нелепость, но...
- То-то и есть, что но... – кричал Иван. – Знай, послушник, что нелепости слишком нужны на земле. На нелепостях мир стоит, и без них, может быть, в нем совсем ничего бы и не произошло. Мы знаем, что знаем!
- Что ты знаешь?
- Я ничего не понимаю, – продолжал Иван как бы в бреду, – я и не хочу теперь ничего понимать. Я хочу оставаться при факте. Я давно решил не понимать. Если я захочу что-нибудь понимать, то тотчас же изменю факту, а я решил оставаться при факте...
- Для чего ты меня испытываешь? – с надрывом горестно воскликнул Алеша, – скажешь ли мне наконец?
- Конечно, скажу, к тому и вел, чтобы сказать. Ты мне дорог, я тебя упустить не хочу и не уступлю твоему Зосиме.
- Иван помолчал с минуту, лицо его стало вдруг очень грустно.⁶⁸

“‘At him!’ yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes!... I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well – what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings? Speak, Alyosha!”

“To be shot,” murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile.

“Bravo!” cried Ivan, delighted. “If even you say so.... You're a pretty monk! So there is a little devil sitting in your heart, Alyosha Karamazov!”

“What I said was absurd, but—”

“That's just the point, that ‘but’!” cried Ivan. “Let me tell you, novice, that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. We know what we know!”

“What do you know?”

“I understand nothing,” Ivan went on, as though in delirium. “I don't want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand

⁶⁸ *Bratya Karamazovy*, 307.

anything, I shall be false to the fact, and I have determined to stick to the fact.”

“Why are you trying me?” Alyosha cried, with sudden distress.

“Will you say what you mean at last?”

“Of course, I will; that's what I've been leading up to. You are dear to me, I don't want to let you go, and I won't give you up to your Zosima.”

Ivan for a minute was silent, his face became all at once very sad.⁶⁹

At the end of this exchange, Ivan openly confesses his love for Alyosha and his unwillingness to “lose” him to elder Zosima and monastic life. This spontaneous confession of faltering faith achieved its goal: Ivan the confessant found space to empty himself out of the negative and painful feelings by putting them into words, and Alyosha the confessor allowed him space to do so while affirming his truth without judgment of his will, in a truly kenotic manner. We notice that they both have a transcendent third in mind when having this dialogic exchange, thereby creating a triangle of references and meanings, essential for a true, healing confession. This particular conversation ends with Ivan’s own kenotic silence that contains both sadness and love for his brother. I will later pay more attention to love and its role in the kenotic emptying of self in confession, arguing that a truly transformative confessional experience in Dostoevsky’s perspective hinges on the presence of unconditional love more than on any other confessional setting.

The chapter that follows “*Rebellion*” – “*The Grand Inquisitor*” – is a stark example of kenosis in action, so much so that Ellis Sandoz’s chapter on Russian Orthodox Christianity interprets the entire Russian brand of Christianity as defined by kenotic features based solely on Dostoevsky’s depiction of Christ in this famous chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*:

⁶⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Revealed in the Christ of the legend [of the Grand Inquisitor] is the Russian Christ as mediated by contemplatives from the time of Boris and Gleb. It is the kenotic Christ of self-humiliation, suffering, love, humility, and voluntary sacrificial death... The picture of Christ, thus, weaves together the principal elements of Russian devotion.⁷⁰

No matter the nationality using the kenotic principle in their ethics, the idea of an omnipresent and omnipotent deity making space for the beloved created beings through self-limiting sounds optimistic in relation to respecting the unique nature of the other. The fact that a similar understanding of creation and interpersonal relations exists in several religious traditions is encouraging. Using the term *kenosis* can be fruitful for the discussion on how to recognize “otherness” without swallowing the other into a preconceived rational category.

II. Kenosis in Jewish Theology

The concept behind the term *kenosis* is not unique to Christianity and can be found in other major world religions. Many theologians have noticed that kenosis can be a common ground for meaningful conversations between Buddhism and Christianity.⁷¹ However, it shares the most notable semantic field with concepts from Judaism. For examples we can turn to Isaac Luria (1534 – 1572), a Jewish mystic in the Galilee region of Ottoman Syria, now Israel, who is considered the father of contemporary Kabbalah. Luria had the idea that creation is the result of divine self-contraction, as God withdrew into himself to make room for creation. He called this idea *tzimtzum*, contraction. According to the Kabbalah of Luria, the infinite Holy One, the One whose light primordially filled the whole universe, “withdrew his light and concentrated it wholly on his own

⁷⁰ Sandoz, *Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor*, 212-13.

⁷¹ Cobb, *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Buddhist Conversation*.

substance, thereby creating empty space.”⁷² The act of divine withdrawal was undertaken to make way for the emergence of creation within this vacated space. This kenotic process can be perceived in a more tangible manner as a divine contraction, where God condenses and harnesses His faculties, with the ultimate aim of new creation. As Moltmann points out in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, “some thinkers notice similar metaphors used in explaining the primal impetus (*Urschwung*) of the Big Bang (*Urknall*) in non-theistic theories of creation.”⁷³

Looking further back in time to the original Jewish writings, we can discover the premise for the concept of God’s kenosis in the Jewish Bible in the idea of the *Shekinah* – God’s “indwelling.”⁷⁴ “I will be your God and you shall be my people” was the covenant made with the people as they received God’s promise: “I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites.”⁷⁵ Thereafter, eternal God “comes down” (Exod. 3:8), so as “to dwell” amongst his people.⁷⁶ Shekinah is the glory of the divine material presence interpreted symbolically in Kabbalism as the divine feminine aspect – the feminine attributes of the presence of God. It is believed that after the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., God’s Shekinah was consigned to the Babylonian captivity with the captured Israelites who found themselves in a state of destitution, estranged from their ancestral homeland and facing a heightened susceptibility to oppression. The people suffered

⁷² Scholem, “Schopfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes.”

⁷³ Moltmann, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” 146.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁵ Janowski, “Ich will in eurer Mitte wohnen’ Struktur und Genese der exilischen Shekina-Theologie.”

⁷⁶ Moltmann, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” 142.

humiliation, and God's indwelling suffered with them. Theology of God's self-humiliation was formulated by rabbinic literature in light of these shared experiences of suffering.⁷⁷

The relationship between two subjectivities that hinges on minimizing the self to make space for the other also occupied a central position in Martin Buber's thought. In his classic work, *I and Thou*, Buber differentiates between the "I-Thou" relationship that is direct, mutual, present, and open, and the "I-It," or subject-object relation, in which one relates to the other only indirectly, utilizing the knowledge of the other to benefit the *I*.⁷⁸ Buber writes: "The inmost growth of the self takes place not, as people like to suppose today, through our relationship to ourselves, but through being made present by the other and knowing that we are made present."⁷⁹ What matters most isn't what goes on inside the minds of the people in a relationship, but what happens between them.

Emmanuel Levinas (1905 – 1995) is a Jewish scholar whose ethical philosophy describes and interprets the experience of coming into contact with another person. Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel are the three philosophers with whom he critically engages in his work. Interested in Levinas's view on the relationship of the self to the other and investigating the notion of "betweenness" (*Zwischen*) that he comments on, we find the following:

That a human spirituality might be possible which does not begin in knowledge, or in the psyche as experience, and that the relation to the you in its purity be the relation to the invisible God is in no doubt a new view on the human psyche. [...] The old Biblical theme of Man made in the image of God takes on a new meaning, but it is in

⁷⁷ See Kuhn, *Gottes Selbsterniedrigung in der Theologie der Rabbinen*, 84, for this line: "God carries Israel with its guilt "like a servant." Quoted in Moltmann, 143.

⁷⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*. Buber, *I and Thou*, 198.

⁷⁹ Buber, *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*.

the “you” and not in the “I” that this resemblance is announced. The very movement that leads to another leads to God.⁸⁰

This “movement leading to another” aligns with relinquishing one’s sense of self in favor of a path characterized by kenotic self-sacrifice, driven by love for others. Levinas notices that humans recognize God in or through the other when they learn to love the pure otherness and accept alterity in its complete truth. This resonates with Dostoevsky’s journal entry on his wife’s death, where we recognize a similar call for movement toward the ideal.⁸¹

III. Dostoevsky’s Kenotic Vision

Dostoevsky acknowledges the limitations of human nature – “the law of personality” – the *I* or *ego* standing in the way of self-emptying for the sake of love for the other. He states that the ideal of human development lies in the example of Christ’s kenosis. The task of loving the other with complete fullness of one’s self is seen by the writer as impossible due to the fear of losing one’s personality. He claims, however, that eliminating one’s personality should be done *metaphorically* (как бы – *as if*). Giving one’s self away fully in this manner has the power to bring the greatest happiness and, essentially, paradise on Earth. Dostoevsky continues:

Вся история, как человечества, так отчасти и каждого отдельно, есть только развитие, борьба, стремление и достижение этой цели.⁸²

⁸⁰ Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 148.

⁸¹ For more information on the connections between Levinas and Dostoevsky, see Val Vinokur, “The End of Consciousness and the Ends of Consciousness: A Reading of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and *Demons* after Levinas,” 2000. As well as his *The Trace of Judaism: Dostoevsky, Babel, Mandelstam, Levinas*, 2008 and “Levinas’s Dostoevsky,” 2003.

⁸² Dostoevsky, *PSS*, V. 20.

The whole history of humanity as well as every human is only development, struggle, striving and reaching this goal.⁸³

Only by giving the self to all and everyone, without reservations, expectations, and in love, do humans achieve the highest potential of their personal and social development. This would be the end of human earthly life, says Dostoevsky, as people would then reach the level of God. He concludes with the statement that the goal of unconditional love for the other proves the existence of life after physical death:

Но если эта цель окончательная человечества (достигнув которой ему не надо будет развиваться, то есть достигать, бороться, прозревать при всех падениях своих идеал и вечно стремиться к нему, – стало быть, не надо будет жить) – то, следственно, человек, достигая, оканчивает свое земное существование. [...] Но достигать такой великой цели, по моему рассуждению, совершенно бессмысленно, если при достижении цели всё угасает и исчезает, то есть если не будет жизни у человека и по достижении цели. Следственно, есть будущая, райская жизнь.⁸⁴

But if that is the final goal of the humanity (and having attained it, it would no longer be necessary to develop, that is, to attain, to struggle, to glimpse the ideal through all one's falls and eternally strive towards it, – consequently it would not be necessary to live) – then it follows that man attaining it would also end his earthly existence. [...] But in my judgment, it is completely senseless to attain such a great goal if upon attaining it everything is extinguished and disappears, that is, if man will no longer have life when he attains the goal. Consequently, there is a future, heavenly life.⁸⁵

⁸³ Proffer.

⁸⁴ PSS, V. 20.

⁸⁵ Proffer.

The fact that Christ's kenosis is an unattainable ideal for human beings is used in Dostoevsky's logic to confirm the transcendent where God's self-limitation is a necessary condition for creation. Striving to imitate divine free will to affirm and sustain alterity constitutes the ultimate struggle of humanity and the one that makes life meaningful. The path to God lies through the love for the pure "you" of the other, and walking this path is what makes up human spirituality for Dostoevsky as a religious thinker.

IV. Secular European Philosophy

The notion of kenotic self-abnegation may have been part of Russian secular philosophy during the 19th century, alongside religious philosophies. Hegel, for instance, used it with ethical connotations in conversations discussing the relationship to difference. At the beginning of the 19th century, he introduced the idea of *Entäußerung* as a major concept in German philosophy. Farneth writes about Hegel's understanding of this concept:

For Hegel, self-emptying, or *Entäußerung*, involves a refusal to use one's status of being one among many reciprocally recognized loci of authority as a basis for dominating others.⁸⁶

In *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern*, Alex Dubilet, a contemporary scholar of kenosis, notices extensive use of kenotic imagery in Hegel's philosophy:

In the "Absolute Knowledge" section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the term *Entäußerung* and its verbal forms create an entire semantic field of concepts associated with it, including *Entlassen* (release), *Ablassen* (give up) and *Verzicht tun* (relinquishing), among others.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Farneth, "The Power to Empty Oneself: Hegel, Kenosis, and Intellectual Virtue."

⁸⁷ Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern*, 94.

Summing up Dubilet's observations on *Entäußerung* in Hegel's thought, we can claim that Hegel refers to self-emptying as an ongoing movement that is never contained or overpowered – an existential mechanism of giving up and othering one's self. Notwithstanding Hegel's repudiation of absolute transcendent externality, there is an unmistakable association between his employment of the concept of *Entäußerung* and its contextual connection to Christology. The first time Hegel uses the term, it appears in the context where he discusses divine self-emptying in the definition of absolute religion. Dubilet quotes the following paragraph from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*:

This incarnation of the divine essence, that is, that it essentially and immediately has the shape of self-consciousness, is the simple content of absolute religion. Within absolute religion, the essence is known as spirit, that is that religion is the essence's consciousness of itself as being spirit, for spirit is knowledge of itself in its self-emptying (*der Geist ist das Wissen seiner selbst in seiner Entäußerung*).⁸⁸

He argues, however, that Hegel transforms the semantic and theoretical scope of the concept while reactivating kenosis in his philosophical system. The concept of transcendence is ordinarily denoted by a shift beyond a certain limit. However, within the paradigm of *Phenomenology*, the act of self-emptying is shown as a mechanism that supplants all forms of transcendence. This mechanism serves to illustrate that the relationship between a finite subject and the transcendent should not culminate in ascetical practices as a means of attaining it. For Hegel, writes Dubilet, "Spirit is the name for the process of thinking about non-difference between the divine and human, without falsely ascribing primacy to the external relation between subject

⁸⁸ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 552.

and substance, the finite and the infinite.”⁸⁹ The Hegelian term ‘Spirit’ essentially denotes a process of mutual self-abnegation, whereby the autonomous nature of each constituent entity is effectively relinquished:

Spirit has two aspects in it. [...] One is this, that substance empties itself of its own self and becomes self-consciousness; the other is the converse, that self-consciousness empties itself of itself and makes itself into thinghood, that is, into the universal self.⁹⁰

Dubilet phrases the essence of this statement as follows: “Spirit is, therefore, the generative process of reciprocal self-emptying, giving up and becoming other than oneself, a dissolution and transition into the opposite (*Ubergang ins Entgegensetzte*).”⁹¹ The process of mutual transformation involves alterations on both ends, prompting a reconsideration of their interconnection as intrinsic rather than extraneous and contrapositional. The concepts of self and other are articulated not as a dichotomy, but rather as constituent elements of a continuous and unending immanent progression. In his work on the unhappy consciousness in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alex Dubilet provides a valuable elucidation of the underlying mechanisms involved in this phenomenon:

To become other while remaining the same is not at all to reduce the other to the same, for this would negate the element of otherness. To remain selfsame in otherness through a process of self-emptying is to subvert both the self-standing nature of the self and of the other to which it is attached as the other. Spirit names a ceaseless movement of immanent self-emptying and self-othering (one that, in face, undoes the primacy of the difference between self and other), without allowing a reification of an outside to take place, and

⁸⁹ Dubilet, 97.

⁹⁰ Hegel, *Phanomenologie des Geistes*, 549. Quoted in Dubilet, 98.

⁹¹ Dubilet, 98.

thereby without instituting a point of transcendence or preserving a subjective enclosure against which it might be instituted.⁹²

Returning to Dostoevsky's 1864 journal entry about his deceased wife, we now can read it as ruminations about such a kind of existence of self and the other, where self-emptying becomes the path of mutual growth for humanity and the goal of any loving relationship. Preserving the moral integrity of the other by a deliberate act of making space and witnessing the other's difference without demands or attempts to control it, narrows the gap between two egos that can only be bridged in love. Dostoevsky underscores here the benefits of mutual kenosis both for a single self and for the relationship with others. For him, the willing self-surrender for each other creates a unity powerful enough to provide space for the best growth of individual selves much like Hegel's spirit of self-othering. The difference between their philosophies is in Dostoevsky's trialogic view on the energy exchange between self and the other. His logic invariably relies on a separate point of transcendence – the divine Other – the third who serves as the ideal, absolutely necessary for the healthy sustainable balance between the multitude of human selves.

V. Russian Orthodox Sources

Although the word *kenosis* did not appear in Russian Orthodox theological discourse till the end of the 19th century, the philosophy of greatness in smallness had been in practical use in Russian Orthodox Christianity for centuries before. The official theology of the Orthodox Church sees the self-humiliation of Christ as His temporary liberation from the divine form of existence and replacing it with the form of a slave. Self-humiliation of humans as modeling Christ is the way to their glorification.⁹³ According to the Russian Orthodox view, the theological term *kenosis* can

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *Tolkovaia Biblia, ili kommentarii na vse knigi Sv. Pisaniia Vetkhogo i Novogo Zaveta*, 3, 287-8.

only be used in relation to a human in its metaphorical meaning. God has humbled Himself to incarnation in human form and to death on the cross, but humans can only imitate God, positioning themselves “below” others. This kind of relation to others in the social order can bring grace and harmony to human souls and relationships.

Turning to holy Russian Orthodox texts, we find St. Isaac Sirin, who wrote in the 7th century: “Смирение собирает душу воедино” (“Humility gathers the soul together”).⁹⁴ This can be interpreted as a liberation of the soul from the worldly confines that cause fragmentation and entrapment in earthly desires. A humble soul is seen as being on an individual journey back to the innermost place of origin, situated at a metaphysical depth beyond the limits of physical or psychological human nature. To humble oneself completely means to “delve into one’s self, to become something as if not yet existent, something that has not yet come to be.”⁹⁵ Receiving God’s grace is the goal of imitating the kenotic image of Christ both in St. Nestor the Chronicler’s depiction of Boris and Gleb’s suffering, and in his vita of the Venerable Theodosius Pecherskii – *Life of Feodosii* (published in the 1080s). In the 18th century, St. Tikhon Zadonsky wrote:

Вода всегда с гор вниз течет, и Божия благодать с небесных гор в праздное, умаленное и низкое сердце нисходит.⁹⁶

Water always flows down the mountains, and God’s grace comes down from celestial mountains into the easeful, belittled and poor heart.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Sirin, *Slova podvizhnichek*.

⁹⁵ “...погрузиться от себя самого в себя, сделаться нечим, как бы не существующим, не пришедшим еще в бытие.” *Dobrotoliubie*, 681-2.

⁹⁶ Kunilskii, “Printsip ‘snizheniia’ v poetike Dostoevskogo: roman ‘Idiot.’” *Zhanr i kompozitsia literaturnogo proizvedeniia*, 15.

⁹⁷ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Margaret Ziolkowski noted that Dostoevsky displayed avid interest in the Russian Orthodox sources that focused on the kenotic tradition, i.e., St. Theodosius, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, and Dostoevsky's contemporary Amvrosy – the last of Optina Pustyn's elders.⁹⁸ Naturally, he brought this interest into his fiction. Cassedy observes that St. Theodosius “figures in Dostoevsky's writings, above all in his plans for *The Devils*.”⁹⁹ Tikhon of Zadonsk “is said to be a prototype for Father Zosima and for Bishop Tikhon in *The Devils*,”¹⁰⁰ Dostoevsky “read extensively in a five-volume edition of Tikhon's works that was published in the early 1860s.”¹⁰¹ Finally, Dostoevsky's meeting with the Optina Pustyn' elder Amvrosy during the writer's visit to the monastery became, together with the example of Tikhon of Zadonsk, crucial to the genesis of Father Zosima's character.¹⁰² Ziolkowski shows that in his portraits of Bishop Tikhon and Father Zosima, Dostoevsky utilized numerous traits that have been linked to the kenotic model over the course of several centuries.

One of the most extreme examples of living the idea of strength in weakness in Russian culture are the so-called “holy fools.”¹⁰³ The hagiographical archetype of the holy fool underscores the sanctity of individuals who are deemed inferior by those who perceive themselves as “normal”

⁹⁸ Ziolkowski, “Dostoevsky and the Kenotic Tradition,” *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, 34-35.

⁹⁹ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Ziolkowski, 34.

¹⁰³ For more in-depth information on this hagiographical tradition, see Ivanov, Kobets, Likhachev and Panchenko, and Thomson.

in comparison. The full name for a practitioner of such philosophy, “fool for Christ’s sake” (“юродивый Христа ради”), is a reference to Paul’s message to the Corinthians:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.¹⁰⁴

As can be gathered from Russian Orthodox hagiographical sources, holy fools are individuals who embody this interpretation of apostledom in a literal manner. As an archetype rooted in the Byzantine Empire, the holy fool is part of Russian hagiography, which reemerges in public discourse with the rise of Russian autocracy in the 16th and 17th centuries. In that time period, “society regarded holy foolery as a form of divine control over the state authorities.”¹⁰⁵ Modern scholars agree that “the whole of Russian culture as well as the Russian people’s collective sense of self has been markedly influenced by this phenomenon.”¹⁰⁶ Dostoevsky uses the holy fool imagery widely in his works, especially with Prince Myshkin, the “perfectly beautiful man,” as the most notable *юродивый*. The idea of the holiness of the rotten body also features prominently

¹⁰⁴ 1 Cor. 4:9-13. See also 1 Cor. 1:18: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” *The Bible*, NRSV.

¹⁰⁵ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 285.

¹⁰⁶ Kobets, “Lice in the Iron Cap: Holy Foolishness in Perspective,” *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, 16.

in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in Chapters One and Two of Part Seven – “Тлетворный дух” and “Такая минутка.”

VI. Humiliation of Zosima and Alyosha’s Crisis of Faith

“*The Breath of Corruption*” describes an event transformative for Alyosha Karamazov – the main hero of Dostoevsky’s tale. Dostoevsky points out that the situation surrounding the passing of Zosima was a breaking and turning point for Alyosha’s soul, which not only shook up, but also cemented his mind for the rest of his life on a path towards a known goal:

Тут прибавлю еще раз от себя лично: мне почти противно вспоминать об этом суетном и соблазнительном событии, в сущности же самом пустом и естественном, и я, конечно, выпустил бы его в рассказе моем вовсе без упоминования, если бы не повлияло оно сильнейшим и известным образом на душу и сердце главного, *хотя и будущего* героя рассказа моего, Алеши, составив в душе его как бы перелом и переворот, потрясший, но и укрепивший его разум уже окончательно, на всю жизнь и к известной цели.¹⁰⁷

I may add here, for myself personally, that I feel it almost repulsive to recall that event which caused such frivolous agitation and was such a stumbling-block to many, though in reality it was the most natural and trivial matter. I should, of course, have omitted all mention of it in my story, if it had not exerted a very strong influence on the heart and soul of the chief, though future, hero of my story, Alyosha, forming a crisis and turning point in his spiritual development, giving a shock to his intellect, which finally strengthened it for the rest of his life and gave it a definite aim.¹⁰⁸

The first chapter pictures Alyosha walking away from the hermitage in a troubled state of mind after he realized that the death of his spiritual mentor, Father Zosima, was not the miracle

¹⁰⁷ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 8.

¹⁰⁸ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

that everyone awaited: "...the anticipation of decay and corruption from the body of such a saint was an actual absurdity, calling for compassion (if not a smile) for the lack of faith and the frivolity it implied. For they expected something quite different," – wrote Dostoevsky.¹⁰⁹ The miracle of a non-decaying body was a simple, natural consequence in the "if... then..." paradigm of Alyosha's faith without doubt.

Of course, there had been, in former times, saints in the monastery whose memory was carefully preserved and whose relics, according to tradition, showed no signs of corruption. This fact was regarded by the monks as touching and mysterious, and the tradition of it was cherished as something blessed and miraculous, and as a promise, by God's grace, of still greater glory from their tombs in the future.¹¹⁰

The decay of Zosima's body signaled the absence of the miracle. Dostoevsky shows that it was interpreted as a withdrawal of Divine grace, and Father Zosima was essentially deemed unworthy of the veneration he had gathered through the years of loving service in the hermitage:

But at last the murmurs, first subdued but gradually louder and more confident, reached even him. "It shows God's judgment is not as man's," Father Païssy heard suddenly. The first to give utterance to this sentiment was a layman, an elderly official from the town, known to be a man of great piety. But he only repeated aloud what the monks had long been whispering.¹¹¹

The posthumous humiliation of Father Zosima continues throughout the chapter, demonstrating the crystallization of a message based on the personal truths and emotions of those

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 365.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 366.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 368.

involved. Dostoevsky points out two most typical reactions to Zosima's death: unlimited happiness or personal offense. In contrast to these highly verbalized emotions based on anger and jealousy towards the sainthood of the elder (an expression of the opposition to the institute of elders in the Russian Orthodox church), it is silence and tears that constitute the unique reaction from Alyosha. No one loved Zosima the way the young hero did. And although the troubled thoughts clouded Alyosha's mind as well, the state of inner unrest and oscillation between faith in the ultimate truth of God's judgment and suffering the seeming absence of "higher justice" in the moment, was a sign of a pure, true love only a young and honestly passionate heart is capable of, says Dostoevsky. The contradictory feeling caused by failed expectations finds a kenotic expression in Alyosha Karamazov's character. Through his spiritual love for Zosima, he is able to actively empathize with the elder's posthumous humiliation, and through the silent tears, he empties out the pain of unfulfilled expectations.

In Chapter Two, titled "*A Critical Moment*," Dostoevsky delves deep into the reasons for Alyosha's dismay. Even in this humble and kind character, the reader sees the desire for justice, the need to be righteous, the drive to set boundaries for one's own self and say "no" even to the transcendent Other, and the inner conflict that results from a wrong judgment. The grief Dostoevsky describes in Alyosha comes from the loss of the ideal he created of Father Zosima – "...the figure of his beloved elder, the figure of that holy man whom he revered with such adoration."¹¹² His reaction to the absence of the miracle is disbelief in the ultimate justice of God. Just like the unbelievers in his brother Ivan's poem *The Grand Inquisitor*, part of Alyosha's self requires a miracle to have faith in God. Based on how big of a spiritual miracle Father Zosima was in life, Alyosha expects him to be a miracle even after death – God's miracle in the traditional

¹¹² Ibid., 440.

Eastern Orthodox way, passed on with the narratives of sainthood and martyrdom. Anything less would not be fair from Alyosha's point of view. He could not accept that the humiliation of Father Zosima was part of God's loving will, because to him it was so obviously undeserved and unjust:

Но справедливости жаждал, справедливости, а не токмо лишь чудес! И вот тот, который должен бы был, по упованиям его, быть вознесен превыше всех в целом мире, – тот самый вместо славы, ему подобавшей, вдруг низвержен и опозорен! За что? Кто судил? Кто мог так рассудить? – вот вопросы, которые тотчас же измучили неопытное и девственное сердце его. Не мог он вынести без оскорбления, без озлобления даже сердечного, что праведнейший из праведных предан на такое насмешливое и злобное глумление столь легкомысленной и столь ниже его стоявшей толпе.¹¹³

But it was justice, justice, he thirsted for, not simply miracles. And now the man who should, he believed, have been exalted above everyone in the whole world, that man, instead of receiving the glory that was his due, was suddenly degraded and dishonored! What for? Who had judged him? Who could have decreed this? Those were the questions that wrung his inexperienced and virginal heart. He could not endure without mortification, without resentment even, that the holiest of holy men should have been exposed to the jeering and spiteful mockery of the frivolous crowd so inferior to him.¹¹⁴

Alyosha's reaction mirrors Ivan's appeal to the ultimate justice for the death of innocent children. Both brothers want to see the "right" reaction from God as a condition of continued faith in the ideal Other. Here, Dostoevsky pins down the moment of rebellion that is deeply anti-kenotic in nature, and details the emotional suffering linked to the self-claimed right to pass judgment.

– Да неужель ты только оттого, что твой старик провонял? Да неужели же ты верил серьезно, что он чудеса отмачивать

¹¹³ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 19.

¹¹⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*, 337.

начнет? – воскликнул Ракитин, опять переходя в самое искреннее изумление.

– Верил, верую, и хочу веровать, и буду веровать, ну чего тебе еще! – раздражительно прокричал Алеша.

– Да ничего ровно, голубчик. Фу черт, да этому тринадцатилетний школьник теперь не верит. А впрочем, черт... Так ты вот и рассердился теперь на бога-то своего, взбунтовался: чином, дескать, обошли, к празднику ордена не дали! Эх вы!

Алеша длинно и как-то прищурив глаза посмотрел на Ракитина, и в глазах его что-то вдруг сверкнуло... но не озлобление на Ракитина.

– Я против бога моего не бунтуюсь, я только «мира его не принимаю», – криво усмехнулся вдруг Алеша.¹¹⁵

“Can you really be so upset simply because your old man has begun to stink? You don't mean to say you seriously believed that he was going to work miracles?” exclaimed Rakitin, genuinely surprised again.

“I believed, I believe, I want to believe, and I will believe, what more do you want?” cried Alyosha irritably.

“Nothing at all, my boy. Damn it all! why, no schoolboy of thirteen believes in that now. But there.... So now you are in a temper with your God, you are rebelling against Him; He hasn't given promotion, He hasn't bestowed the order of merit! Eh, you are a set!”

Alyosha gazed a long while with his eyes half closed at Rakitin, and there was a sudden gleam in his eyes ... but not of anger with Rakitin.

“I am not rebelling against my God; I simply ‘don't accept His world.’” Alyosha suddenly smiled a forced smile.¹¹⁶

The moment of the loss of the other, in whom one's self had been invested in love, often triggers thoughts on the possibility of transcendent encounters and on the very existence of a fair, all-loving creator. Alyosha, who did not doubt God's existence, experiences in this moment a feeling of rejection that sets a limit even to his kenotic obedience: “I am not rebelling against my God; I simply ‘don't accept His world.’” Alyosha's words echo his conversation with Ivan

¹¹⁵ *Bratya Karamazovy*. V. 2, 21-22.

¹¹⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Karamazov, who was intent on “returning the ticket” based on the injustice of the world that God had created. The questions that Dostoevsky has Alyosha voice the inquiries that many believers have about God’s choice to incarnate on Earth. Why did the omnipotent deity choose self-emptying into a most humble human being to save humanity? Why did God suffer humiliation and death on the cross instead of destroying all human carriers of sin based on His just and fair judgment? Despite years of practicing faith as a true believer, Alyosha seems to have missed the message of *kenosis* – God’s self-humiliation for the benefit of humanity as an act of love. The young hero now needs to face his own truth to determine whether the God he believes in is as just, loving and fair as he felt before.

In the end, Zosima’s decaying body saves Alyosha as a true believer, refining his faith. The absence of the expected miracle shattered Alyosha’s naive beliefs that bordered on idolatry, and brought back into focus his own humanity, weakness and vulnerability. Embracing Zosima’s imperfection allowed Alyosha to be more steadfast in his humility and the resolve to withhold judgment of the other. Discussing virtue in Dostoevsky’s literary world, we see this motif – the paradoxical strength of weakness and giving judgment-free space for the other – permeate his fictional and non-fictional writing and point the reader to the Christological ideal of humanity.

VII. Kenosis in Russian Religious Thought

In 1892, an Orthodox theologian Mikhail Mikhailovich Tareev introduced the word *kenosis* into Russian religious discourse in his book *The Temptation of the Godman as the Unique Redemptive Act of the Whole Earthly Life of Christ, in Connection with the History of Pre-Christian Religions and of the Christian Church*.¹¹⁷ In this comprehensive guide to Russian Orthodox theology published in 1908, Tareev writes extensively about *kenosis* and also about the

¹¹⁷ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, 11.

subsequent glory as an essential element of the kenotic practice, also stressing the point that “уничижение необходимо сопровождается прославлением, как свой существенный элемент. Поэтому апостол присоединяет к описанию самоуничижения и смирения Христа описание прославления Его” (“humiliation is invariably accompanied by glorification as one of its essential elements. Therefore, the apostle adds the description of Christ’s glorification to the depiction of His self-humiliation and humility”).¹¹⁸ Paul Valliere suggests that Tareev’s views of Christ’s kenosis were inspired to some degree by Dostoevsky.”¹¹⁹

The idea termed *kenosis* subsequently played an important role in the works of Sergei Bulgakov,¹²⁰ Nikolai Losskii,¹²¹ Georges Florovsky, Nadezhda Gorodetzky, and George Fedotov. In his 1933 theological study, Georges Florovsky wrote about kenosis as the basis for the Russian culture of self-offering (дарение себя).¹²² Nadezhda Gorodetzky’s 1938 study *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought* defines kenotic “humiliation” as a Russian national ideal.¹²³ The author claims that “...in the case of Russia, the “kenotic” type of life, thought and character, far from being a result of intellectual investigation, precedes it.” She describes her study as “an account of a devotional attitude, of a life lived in a “kenotic” frame of mind” rather than an account

¹¹⁸ Tareev, “Christos,” *Osnovy christianstva*. V. I, 34.

¹¹⁹ Valliere, *M. M. Tareev: A Study in Russian Ethics and Mysticism*, 64.

¹²⁰ For the discussion of the role the notion of kenosis plays in the works of Sergei Bulgakov, see Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, 337-44.

¹²¹ Losskii, *The World as an Organic Whole*. Losskii, *Kharakter russkogo Naroda*.

¹²² Florovsky, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky: Ways of Russian Theology*.

¹²³ Nadejda Gorodetzky wrote: The young men and women of the seventies who joined the ranks of the revolutionaries put into practice their ideas of poverty, of social self-abasement, of voluntary suffering. We had thus to classify the movement as one of “kenotic” inspiration. Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought*, 176.

of the doctrine itself. Gorodetzky explains her choice of emphasis by saying that “long before Russian thought was mature enough to face the doctrine of kenosis, the attention of the Russian people was struck by the evangelical call to meekness, poverty, humility, and obedience.”¹²⁴

The Western understanding of Russian religious mentality and Russian holiness being “kenotic” primarily stems from Fedotov’s *The Russian Religious Mind*, published in 1946 in the United States.¹²⁵ Fedotov bases his understanding on the works of Western kenotics and the writings of M. M. Tareev, suggesting that kenosis is the key to the Russian religious mind and the great discovery of the first Christian generation in Russia. He compares the attitude of the newly converted Russian people to that of the “ossified” Christian societies of Byzantium and the Western Dark Ages, who “turned away with fear and discomfort from the face of the humiliated God.”¹²⁶ Among those who readily adopted the kenotic ideal and put it into practice, Fedotov lists Boris and Gleb, “the greatest among the ancient Russian saints and the first canonized by the Church.” From Fedotov’s point of view, the fact that Russia’s first and most beloved saints are canonized on the basis of their suffering alone – a phenomenon unique to Russian Orthodoxy – demonstrates the special role of kenosis in Russian religion: “Through the lives of the holy sufferers as through the Gospels, the image of the meek and suffering Savior entered the heart of the Russian nation as the most holy of its spiritual treasures.”¹²⁷

It needs to be mentioned, that, like Jostein Børtnes, Steven Cassedy talks extensively about the validity of applying the term “kenotic” to the Russian Orthodox religious tradition:

¹²⁴ Ibid., vii.

¹²⁵ Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 104.

But the point in Fedotov is to tell us about the alleged cult of suffering in Russian Christianity, so how does it advance our understanding to call the cult kenotic and thereby to associate it with a virtue (humility) that practically every Christian sect in the world would embrace? ¹²⁸

In his *Dostoevsky's Religion*, Cassedy explicitly warns about the dangers of circular logic when we talk about kenosis in Dostoevsky.

First, we posit a pair of traits (humility and voluntary suffering) as constituting and defining Russian kenoticism. Then we measure characters in Dostoevsky's novels against these traits for the purpose of determining whether these saints and characters are kenotic. Then we determine that the saints and characters are or are not kenotic, because . . . well, they possess or do not possess the traits we listed at the beginning. But our authority for saying that these are the traits that constitute and define kenoticism is usually, directly or indirectly, George Fedotov, who didn't do a particularly good job of establishing historical credibility for the tradition that in his own eyes is so fundamental to the Russian religious mind. ¹²⁹

Cassedy then admits the following – but the dangers are still obvious:

One thing, however, is clear: whether or not there was a kenotic tradition in Russia like the one Fedotov described, there is no doubt that Dostoevsky was interested in the two topics of suffering and humility. ¹³⁰

For Vladimir Lossky, a Russian Orthodox theologian of the 20th century exiled in Paris, kenosis is “the Incarnation in its aspect of humiliation,” when “Christ's exinanition is voluntary:

¹²⁸ Cassedy, 153.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

though remaining God, He accepts becoming mortal, for the only way to conquer death was to allow it to penetrate God Himself where it could find no place.”¹³¹ We make notice of the voluntary nature of this behavior and the subsequent victory over the demise.

VIII. Conclusion

As a theistic thinker, Dostoevsky contributed to the promotion of the kenotic idea in Russian religious philosophy. The textual richness of instances of self-limitation, self-abnegation, self-emptying, humility, poverty, suffering, sacrifice, and obedience found in his works, as well as the ethically positive light in which these phenomena are presented,¹³² foregrounds the role of *kenosis* in the ethical system of Dostoevsky’s narratives. Sacrificing one’s self and every material benefit is seen by Dostoevsky not as a moral or an external imperative, but rather as a free inner intention that makes itself known at the pinnacle of human personality development. More than an obligation at that point, the giving up of self is a wonder:

...пожертвовать этим я, отдать его – всем [...] есть нечто неотразимо-прекрасное, сладостное, неизбежное и даже необъяснимое.¹³³

...sacrificing this I, giving it – to all [...] is something irresistibly wonderful, delightful, inevitable and even inexplicable.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 243.

¹³² Достоевский приходит к кенотической антропологии: как бесконечное истощание Бога в человеческой природе, безущербное для божественного начала и спасительное для тварного, раскрывает он личность в ее движении к истине, благу и красоте. Ступени такого движения отчетливо обрисованы у него – это кенотические ступени «бедности», «страдания», «жертвы», «самоуничтожения», «смирения», «благодатного идиотизма», «безумия», «косноязычия», «юродства» и пр... Kotelnikov, *Dostoevskii. Materialy i issledovaniia*, 195.

¹³³ PSS, V. 20, 172-175.

¹³⁴ Proffer.

This sentiment from the journal entry on Masha's death echoes a central idea of *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* published the year before. A crucial text for understanding Dostoevsky's position on kenosis, *Winter Notes* portrays willing self-emptying and self-sacrifice as a natural feature of highly developed personalities:

Самовольное, совершенно сознательное и никем не принужденное самопожертвование всего себя в пользу всех есть, по-моему, признак высочайшего ее [личности] могущества, высочайшего самообладания, высочайшей свободы собственной воли. Добровольно положить свой живот за всех, пойти за всех на крест, на костер, можно только сделать при самом сильном развитии личности.¹³⁵

The willing, absolutely conscious self-sacrifice, not forced by anyone, the sacrifice of self for the benefit of all is, in my opinion, a sign of its [personality's] highest power, the highest self-possession, the highest freedom of will. To give up, willingly, one's life for all, to go to the cross, into the fire – it is possible to do so only out of the highest development of one's personality.¹³⁶

Dostoevsky claims that kenotic behavior is a natural human inclination:

Сильно развитая личность, вполне уверенная в своем праве быть личностью, уже не имеющая за себя никакого страха, ничего не может сделать другого из своей личности, то есть никакого более употребления, как **отдать ее всю всем**, чтоб и другие все были точно такими же самоправными и счастливыми личностями. Это закон природы; к этому тянет нормального человека.¹³⁷

A well-developed personality, thoroughly confident in its right to be a personality, having no more fears for itself, can make nothing other

¹³⁵ Dostoevsky, *Zimnie zapiski o letnikh vpechatleniakh*.

¹³⁶ Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*.

¹³⁷ *Zimnie zapiski o letnikh vpechatleniakh*.

of its personality – that is, it cannot apply it in any way other than to give it away to all, so that all others were equally independent and happy personalities. This is the law of nature; a man has a normal inclination for that.¹³⁸

In his early journalism, in the *Articles on Russian Literature*, Dostoevsky urges his readers to sacrifice the “giantism” of the self and become “like a boy”:

Вы желаете исполинской деятельности; хотите ли, мы вам дадим такую, которая выше всех ожиданий ваших? [...] Вот она: пожертвуйте для всеобщего блага всем вашим великанством... Пожертвуйте всем – и великой природой вашей и великими идеями, помня, что все это для всеобщего блага; снизойдите, снизойдите до мальчика. Это будет колоссальная жертва! Мало того: вы люди умные, талантливые, и если пожертвуете собой, снизойдете до обыденного, до маленького, то, может быть, тут же, с первого же шага отыщете еще какую-нибудь деятельность, более сильную, а потом еще и еще. [...] Но виноваты, может быть, это не по вашим силам. Вы, пожалуй, можете пожертвовать и жизнь; но на такие усилия вы не способны.¹³⁹

You want grand-scale action; do you want us to offer action that will exceed all your expectations? [...] Here it is: **sacrifice your grandeur for the common good**... Sacrifice all – your grand nature and your grand ideas, knowing that all this is for the common good; descend, descend to a boy. This will be a colossal sacrifice! Moreover: you are clever, talented people, and if you sacrifice yourself and descend to the ordinary, to the small, then, maybe, right there and then, from the very first step, you will find some other action, more powerful, and then, more and more. [...] Although, we are sorry; this, maybe, is beyond your power. You, probably, are capable of sacrificing even your life; but such efforts are beyond your capacities.

¹³⁸ *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*.

¹³⁹ *PSS*, V. 18, 68.

Dostoevsky conveys that there is a transformative potential in diminishing oneself and emptying out all individual desires for grandeur. Kenotic self-minimization, in Dostoevsky's view, can have a positive, constructive effect both on the personal and the societal levels. While working on *The Idiot* he writes: “Смирение – самая страшная сила, какая только может на свете быть.” (“Humility is the most terrifying force that can exist in the world.”)¹⁴⁰ Translated as “humility,” *смирение* can be morphologically parsed into “с миром” (at peace), and “с миром” (with people). Human experience proves that humility is the type of attitude to the reality that can indeed facilitate peaceful communal existence if achieved collectively. “Humility is an essential skill of accepting one's inner and outer circumstances at any given moment as the only ones possible and therefore the best for the development of self and creation of one's fate.”¹⁴¹ *Смириться* is, in fact, one of the Russian translations of the verb ἐκένωσεν (*ekénōsen*): “Он смирил Себя, быв послушным даже до смерти, и смерти крестной.”¹⁴² For Dostoevsky, humility and obedience are the foundation of future life, much like death is necessary for rebirth. The epitaph on Dostoevsky's tomb is John 12:24:

Истинно, истинно говорю вам: если пшеничное зерно, пав в землю, не умрет, то останется одно; а если умрет, то принесет много плода.¹⁴³

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Kotelnikov, 197.

¹⁴¹ Schaffner, *What Is Humility & Why Is It Important?*

¹⁴² *The Bible*, Russian Synodal Version, Phil., 2:8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Ot Ioanna, 12:24.

¹⁴⁴ *The Bible*, NRSV, John, 12:24.

In the 19th century, Theophan the Recluse expounded upon the aforementioned verses, drawing a connection between creativity and the capacity to recognize the finite nature of human existence:

Итак, если хочешь быть плодоносным, – умри; умри настоящим образом, чтобы в сердце носить чувство, что ты уже умер. [...] Какой же, скажете, плод от этого, когда тут все замрет? Нет, не замрет, а явится энергия, да еще какая. Одна минутка осталась, скажешь себе, – сейчас приговор; дай поспешу сделать что-нибудь, – и сделаешь. Так и в каждую минуту.¹⁴⁵

So, if you want to bear fruit – die, die for real, so that your heart carries the feeling that you are already dead. [...] You'll ask, what kind of fruit can be born when everything is dead? No, it won't be dead, instead, energy will appear, and what kind of energy! You'll tell yourself: I have one minute left, the judgment is close, I should hurry to do something – and you'll do it. Every single minute.

Dostoevsky fully embodied this sentiment after the transformational moment of pardon just a few moments before the execution. His literary work is an illustration of the message of extreme humility and kenotic self-emptying for the sake of new creation. Minimization and critical evaluation of self in the dialogic relationship with the other in the common view of the transcendent Third constitutes the trialogic discursive model which Dostoevsky promoted through his most wholesome characters. Confession as a foundational kenotic act features prominently in Dostoevsky's discourse as a speech genre and a self-orienting philosophy best summarized in the Scriptural verses that follow his epitaph:

¹⁴⁵ *Mysli na kazhdyi den goda po tserkovnym chteniiam iz Slova Bozhiia*, 196.

Любящий душу свою погубит ее; а ненавидящий душу свою в мире сем сохранит ее в жизнь вечную.¹⁴⁶

Those who love their soul will lose it, and those who hate their soul in this world will keep it for eternal life.¹⁴⁷

In Chapter Two, I will contemplate Dostoevsky's fascination with confession and examine the ways in which confessional exchanges function in his major novels. Concentrating on the conditions of a truly transformative confessional experience, we will observe how the doctrine of kenosis becomes the guide for this often-overlooked act of mutual healing that combines thought and word with love.

¹⁴⁶ *The Bible*, RSV, Ot Ioanna, 12:25.

¹⁴⁷ *The Bible*, NRSV, John 12:25.

Chapter Two

Kenotic Principles in Dostoevsky's Literary Confessions

Tracing the roots of Dostoevsky's ethical thought and writing philosophy, this chapter argues that Dostoevsky's confessional discourse offers the most concise presentation of the ethical model that he considered beneficial for the development of humanity. Dostoevsky's own fluctuating beliefs led him to mistakes from which he learned and applied to his writings. Having suffered significant tribulations in life, he chose to align his personal truth with the transcendent as it is understood in the Russian Orthodox religious tradition, relating this vision to the world through his oftentimes prophetic literary work. Philosophically opposed to positivism, Dostoevsky espoused the philosophy that recognizes faith as a valid instrument of cognition, and the existence of the transcendent as the necessary precondition for human existence and evolution. In his literary confessions, Dostoevsky created the environment for the words of his characters to live in agreement or opposition to one another, and to the Word incarnate. Within this chapter, we explore his writing to notice how the presence of the scriptural word affects the participants and the outcomes of conversational interactions.

Kenosis, observed necessarily during every effective confession of wrongs, appears in Dostoevsky's literary descriptions in a wide variety of manifestations, consistent with the ones discussed in Chapter One. Kenotic stance towards the other, and the acknowledgment of the transcendent Truth, create the space for binding energy to connect two discrete selves into a new, unmerged but undivided whole. In addition to the necessary recognition of the transcendent Third, Dostoevsky places love for the other in the center of his most liberating confessional moments. It is important to notice that such positioning of conversational participants inevitably points not to a dialogic, but to a trialogic consciousness and involves the word in its most final, unchangeable,

true meaning. The transforming energy of grace that can be recognized in dialogic confessional discourse plays a most important role in the miracle of peaceful human coexistence in Dostoevsky's world. We will examine several confessions of this kind, as well as ideas that appear significant in Dostoevsky's philosophical position and the form of their literary expression.

I. Dostoevsky's Religious Revolution

Recalling Dostoevsky's own ideological and spiritual maturation allows us to see the roots of his literary fascination with kenotic tropes pursuant to his personal interactions with Russian state law and his negotiation with the ethical norms of the Russian Orthodox faith. In his early years, says Victor Terras, "Dostoevsky certainly was not a model of prudence, or, one may suspect, of virtue."¹⁴⁸ Bad habits aside, Dostoevsky's personality combined undeniable talents and virtues with a few socially unpleasant, egotistic traits:

Dostoevsky in his twenties is a nervous, irritable, self-conscious hypochondriac. He quarrels with most of his friends at one time or other.¹⁴⁹

Prone to a nervous disorder of an unknown etiology and harboring multiple fears about his illnesses, Dostoevsky was still extremely far from being a "mental patient," as his mind was strong enough to withstand interrogations, solitary confinement, and a mock execution with courage, strength, and dignity.

During his interrogation he never once lost his head, yielded only as much information as he had to; never gave himself up for lost; but was, one may say, an excellent advocate for himself and for his friends. What is more, he never took to groveling before the examining magistrate, retained his dignity without antagonizing the

¹⁴⁸ Terras, *The Young Dostoevsky (1846 – 1849). A Critical Study*, 269.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

interrogators and, as much as he ever could, tried to protect his fellow prisoners even at the expense of his own safety. He gained the respect of his interrogators.¹⁵⁰

Victor Terras points out that “through his whole life Dostoevsky could “reach back” for some more energy when it was necessary. His resources seem to have been inexhaustible.”¹⁵¹ These words suggest a source of unending strength in Dostoevsky’s mind, a mental reserve that he went to for support in times of life trials. Placing the transcendent in the position of the “power supply” for the young Dostoevsky is a challenging assumption of faith to prove, although Fyodor Mikhailovich claimed he “knew Russian monastery since childhood.”¹⁵² In his lifetime, the writer went through various degrees of distancing himself from the framework of a religious worldview, as he was opening his mind to the truth contained in the philosophies of materialism and humanism. His own way to approach and embody religious thinking became a source of inspiration for the literary cycle of major novels now known as Dostoevsky’s Gospel or “Пятикнижие Достоевского.”¹⁵³

In addition to the literary work that was published in his lifetime, since 1867, Dostoevsky’s plans also included a “huge novel” titled *Житие великого грешника* (*Vita of a Great Sinner*). A multivolume, poly-novel literary form, this never finished project was conceptualized by Dostoevsky as an attempt to show the whole spectrum of human existence without God, to discuss all kinds of obstacles to embracing theistic consciousness, and in the end to confirm the idea of the

¹⁵⁰ Belchikov, *Dostoevsky v protsesse petrashevtsev*, 50-52.

¹⁵¹ Terras, 272.

¹⁵² Tikhomirov, “Zhitie velikogo greshnika,” *Dostoevsky: Sochineniia, pisma, dokumenty: Slovar-spravochnik*, 291-298.

¹⁵³ *Преступление и наказание, Идиот, Подросток, Бесы, Братья Карамазовы.*

Absolute Other as the only possible and solid foundation for a happy human life. In his letter to Maikov, in March of 1870, Dostoevsky writes:

[Роман этот] ... вся надежда моей жизни. Главный вопрос, который проведется во всех частях, – тот самый, которым я мучился сознательно и бессознательно всю мою жизнь, – существование Божие.¹⁵⁴

[This novel] ... is the whole hope of my life. The fundamental idea, which will run through each of the parts, is one that has tormented me, consciously and unconsciously, all my life: it is the question of the existence of God.

Dostoevsky's plan for this work was to immerse the reader in the depths of an atheistic worldview. The spiritual wanderings of his protagonist essentially encapsulate Dostoevsky's own experience of searching for the meaning of life and the goal of human existence.

Герой, русский человек, нашего общества, и в годах, не очень образованный, но и не необразованный, вдруг ... теряет веру в Бога. [...] Потеря веры в Бога действует на него колоссально. Он шныряет по новым поколениям, по атеистам, по славянам и европейцам, по русским изуверам и пустынножителям, по священникам; сильно, между прочим, попадает на крючок иезуиту, пропагатору, поляку; спускается от него в глубину хлыстовщины... Но в конце обретает и Христа, и русскую землю, русского Христа и русского Бога.¹⁵⁵

The protagonist, a Russian man from our society and of many years, not very educated, but not uneducated either, suddenly... loses faith in God. [...] The loss of faith in God affects him tremendously. He snoops around new generations, atheists, Slavs and Europeans, Russian fanatics and desert dwellers, priests; becomes deeply enamored, by the way, with Jesuits, propagators, and Poles;

¹⁵⁴ *Zapisnye tetradi Dostoevskogo*, 96-108.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

descends into the depths of the Khlysts... But in the end reaches Christ and Russian land, Russian Christ and Russian God.

This loss of faith is an emotional experience undoubtedly familiar to Dostoevsky, who wandered away from church teachings before his arrest and the four-year prison sentence at the end of 1840s. Being an active member of the Petrashevskii circle, Dostoevsky was condemned as a political conspirator and sent to prison. Interestingly, he not only survived Siberian labor camps, but came back a healthier man, having been “cured” from his nervous disorder by the shock of his arrest and imprisonment. Later, in 1874, he wrote to Vsevolod Solovyov:

When I found myself in prison, I thought that this was the end of me, that I wouldn't stand it if it lasted for more than three days. But then suddenly I found myself quite calm. [...] And my dreams while in prison were so peaceful, so good, so mellow, the longer I was there, the better I felt.¹⁵⁶

What exactly contributed to this change of mind that turned the writer from a neurotic – prone to contradiction, fights and a wide range of wrongdoings – into an ardent true believer in his own vision of Christian Orthodoxy and the ideal of Christ? In a letter to Fonvizina, soon after his release from prison camp in 1854, he writes:

I'll tell you of myself that I have been a child of the age, a child of disbelief and doubt up until now and will be even (I know this) to the grave. What horrible torment this thirst to believe has cost me and continues to cost me, a thirst that is all the stronger in my soul the more negative arguments there are in me.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *F.M. Dostoevskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov, pis'makh i zametkakh*, 124.

¹⁵⁷ *Complete Letters*, 1, 194.

In the same letter the writer concludes that he has found in himself a “symbol of faith” in which all is clear, and that symbol is

to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more attractive, more wise, more courageous and more perfect than Christ [...] Moreover, if someone proved to me that Christ were outside the truth, and it *really* were that the truth lay outside Christ, I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.¹⁵⁸

Dostoevsky saw the miracle of his pardon as another chance to live a more honest life. He later writes about the most decisive event of his life in *The Idiot*, where Prince Myshkin recounts a story about the man reprieved from execution. Most dreadful of all in those last moments, Myshkin says, was the regret of the poor victim over a wasted life and the frantic desire to be given another chance. “What if I were not to die? ... I would turn every minute into an age; ... I would not waste one!” Upon being asked about the fate of the aforementioned individual, Myshkin remorsefully acknowledges that his passionate decision was not executed in reality: “So it seems it’s impossible really to live ‘counting each moment,’” says Alexandra Epanchina. “Yes, for some reason it’s impossible,” repeated Myshkin. “So it seemed to me also ... and yet somehow I can’t believe it.”¹⁵⁹

The New Testament was the only allowed reading during the prison term. An obedient servant during his term in *ostrog*, Dostoevsky read his copy of the Scripture every day and put it under his pillow at night for four years, gaining a deeper understanding of the joy of life, even under the hardest of circumstances. Having realized the power of contrition, Dostoevsky began seeking humility and self-abnegation through a deeper sense of his own sins and a minimized self-

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 195.

¹⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, *Idiot. Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh*. V 6, 579.

importance – all kenotic manifestations. Russell Hillier, who explored Dostoevsky on the intersection of literature and theology, established that after the punishment in prison, confession became the moment that informed Dostoevsky’s fictional discourse. “For Dostoevsky, the secret of a person’s virtue is disclosed in their inclination to repent,” notices Hillier in his study of the confessional moment in Dostoevsky’s life and fiction.¹⁶⁰ Isolated from his normal social setting, Dostoevsky seems to have realized why there is no communion without confession in the Russian Orthodox worldview.

His literary art thereupon embodies the search for the literary expression of *Sobornost* – unity in freedom, communion in one faith, “dying in each other’s life, living in each other’s death.”¹⁶¹ This is the vision of the world where “only everything together is real,”¹⁶² with the reality being the all-encompassing reality of the many, not the reality from one point of view. This is the world where everyone’s conversational voice is an honest to God confession. Viacheslav Ivanov was one of the first Russian philosophers who stressed the importance of this reality of one truth and of the idea of synthetic universe for Dostoevsky. Ivanov writes:

Dostoevsky’s prose was only a medium for the polymorphous development of the idea of *Sobornost* that he had carried within him as a comprehensive vision and a morphological principle of his spiritual growth.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Hillier, 445.

¹⁶¹ Williams, “The Founding of the Company,” *The Region of Summer Stars*, 38.

¹⁶² Ivanov, *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky*, 116.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

Our contemporary Dostoyevskian scholar Tatiana Kasatkina stresses the idea that in his veneration of the ideal of Christ, Dostoevsky hails the vision of the complete synthesis of all human selves on Earth:

Достоевский говорит, что Христос, будучи отражением Бога на земле, есть еще и синтез всех человеческих лиц; что синтез всех человеческих лиц только и может быть отражением Бога на земле.¹⁶⁴

Dostoevsky says that Christ, being the reflection of God on earth, is also the synthesis of all human selves; that only the synthesis of all human selves can be a reflection of God on earth.

She then quotes Dostoevsky's thoughts on the future of the resurrected humanity, where we find his vision of *Sobornost* – an endless merging of every self with everything – the entirety that reflects God:

Как воскреснет тогда каждое я – в общем Синтезе – трудно представить. Но живое, не умершее даже до самого достижения и отразившееся в окончательном идеале – должно ожить в жизнь окончательную, синтетическую, бесконечную. [...] Мы будем – лица, не переставая сливаться со всем.¹⁶⁵

How every self will resurrect then – in total Synthesis – is hard to imagine. But the living that has not died till reaching and reflecting the ultimate ideal – has to resurrect into a final, synthetic, endless life. [...] We will be – selves, endlessly merging with everything.

In Dostoevsky's logic, which represents a Russian Orthodox religious mind, collective guilt does exist, and the sins of one affect the whole body of humanity. Living without confession

¹⁶⁴ Kasatkina, "Notes from Underground and "Masha is lying on the table..." Experience of "close reading" in a close context," 143.

¹⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, PSS, V. 20, 174.

is equivalent to being away from the collective Church body, unable to receive Communion and participate in *Sobornost* as the ideal version of reality for all. Only after reconciliation with the body of the Church, upon confession and penance, can one reunite with the community through the mystery and grace of the Eucharist. Dostoevsky's understanding of sin¹⁶⁶ is aligned with that of the New Testament, where it is defined as the refusal of humanity to accept the Gospel of Christ and to live in peace as a member of His Church. Dostoevsky's definition essentially stresses the absence of kenosis in human behavior. In it, he refers to the voluntary humiliation of Christ, redemptive for the whole of humanity. After the pardoned execution, four years in prison and four years of serving as a soldier, Dostoevsky fully embraces the faith of his ancestors – Russian Orthodox Christianity.¹⁶⁷ As a writer, he attempts to direct his readership towards the behaviors he thought most conducive to reaching the kenotic ideal of coexistence in truth and in peace. Dostoevsky's writing becomes an exploration of his contemporary reality through the lens of dialogic discourse.

II. Kenosis in Confession

Reaffirming the significance of confession in Dostoevsky's texts, it seems useful to recall the works of a few Dostoyevskian scholars who had very recently explored this theme. The 2011 article "Confession and Theodicy in Dostoevsky's Oeuvre: The Reception of St. Augustine" by Kantor provides an analysis of Dostoevsky's engagement with confession and theodicy, while also delving into the manner in which it was shaped by the influences of Vladimir Solovyov and St.

¹⁶⁶ [...] Christ entered entirely into humanity, and man strives to transform into the "I" of Christ or into his own ideal [...] When a man has not the law of striving towards the ideal, that is, has not through love sacrificed I to people or to another person (Masha and I), he suffers and calls this sin. *PSS*, V. 20, 172-175.

¹⁶⁷ "Tver station, *profession de foi*," he wrote right after his diary entry on Masha's death. From French "*profession of faith, policy statement, declaration of principles*." Ibid.

Augustine.¹⁶⁸ Tom Dolack's "Dostoevsky, Confession, and the Evolutionary Origins of Conscience" (2020) posits that based on the portrayal of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and a selection of characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's literary works promote the idea that confession is best directed towards the collective as opposed to an individual since a transgression is committed against the collective as well.¹⁶⁹ Zhernokleyev's 2021 piece "Dostoevskii, the Feuilleton and the Confession" investigates the correlation between the confession and the literary form of feuilleton in Dostoevsky's oeuvre, with specific emphasis on *Notes from Underground* and *Demons*.¹⁷⁰ In addition to these, Paul Contino's "'Descend That You May Ascend': Augustine, Dostoevsky, and the Confessions of Ivan Karamazov" (2006) and a number of earlier articles on Stavrogin's confession demonstrate that Dostoevsky's confessional discourse remains a productive area of literary analysis. Since this dissertation explores Dostoevsky's literary confessions as examples of kenotic practice, let's turn to the discussion of the role that kenosis plays in the speech act of confession.

To emphasize the essential connection between kenosis and the practice of confession we need to address several areas related to the confessional process. Kenosis can be identified in the inner self-humiliation needed to feel, think and announce a negative trait about the self, as well as to enact the outward self-minimization before the other who acts as a witness of the verbally actuated confession. Humility (смирение) is an explicitly kenotic feature that makes confession possible. The penitent is accepting and quoting the words of the ultimate Other (from the Scripture)

¹⁶⁸ Kantor, Vladimir K. "Confession and Theodicy in Dostoevsky's Oeuvre: The Reception of St. Augustine," 10-23.

¹⁶⁹ Dolack, Tom. "Dostoevsky, Confession, and the Evolutionary Origins of Conscience," 19-32.

¹⁷⁰ Zhernokleyev, Denis A. "Dostoevskii, the Feuilleton and the Confession," 71-97.

as the truth about the self and confesses this fact by speaking these words before a human witness. The witness – the confessor – is also engaging in kenotic behavior, providing space for the existence of the confessed content in a non-judgmental, loving environment. Willingly accepting the words of the other and empathizing with the sinner’s suffering, the human addressee of a confession assists the penitent in guilt relief by the simple act of sharing the painful, poisonous truth, offered voluntarily.

Contemporary research in psychology shows that the act of “speaking out” the knowledge of the negative aspects of the self with true contrition leads to emptying one’s conscience of the guilt for the very phenomena one utters and alleviates the feeling of fear of retribution that can misdirect one’s life.¹⁷¹ Akin to catharsis – the purification and purgation of emotions through dramatic acts using words as a teaser for a certain emotional reaction, a true confession also results in renewal and restoration.¹⁷² A true, sacramental confession can be an effective way of resolving inner moral conflicts and facilitating a more cooperative mode of human behavior. Additionally, this chapter presents evidence that in Dostoevsky’s mind, kenotic behavior towards the other alone does not provide a sufficient effect on the human psyche. Without faith in the absolute Other as the ultimate addressee of the confession, and without the feeling of spiritual love between the human participants of the confessional dialogue, a confession, in Dostoevsky’s eyes, cannot be healing.

III. Bakhtin and Dostoevsky’s Confessional Discourse

¹⁷¹ Hymer.

¹⁷² Vygotsky, for instance, understood catharsis as an antithetically acting principle of purification, affecting transformation of humanity.

Although most of Dostoevsky's literary confessions deviate from the official confessional practices of the Orthodox church in one aspect or another, they all belong to the confessional genre, and their poetics invariably employ the philosophy of dialogue and the logic of kenosis. Dostoevsky's confessional discourse has been most prominently showcased in the 20th century by Mikhail Bakhtin. The "philosophy for the other" of the Orthodox Christian worldview, featured in Dostoevsky's fiction, made its way into Bakhtin's writing. Ivan Verch gives this definition to the poetic appropriation of the kenotic principle by Bakhtin:

Подражая теологическому истолкованию, бахтинский поэтологический "кенозис" мог бы прозвучать более или менее так: автор, творческий субъект, словесно изображает своего героя, но, Богоподобным образом, отказывается от своих абсолютных свойств с целью предоставить герою возможность быть субъектом собственного слова, а не только объектным проявлением своего абсолютного слова.¹⁷³

Emulating the theological interpretation, Bakhtin's poetological "kenosis" can be formulated more or less like this: the author, the creative subject, depicts the hero verbally, but, in a Godlike manner, gives up his absolute attributes with the goal to provide the hero with a possibility to be the subject of his own word, and not only the objective manifestation of the absolute word.

A theistic thinker like Dostoevsky, he claimed that the ultimate act of altruism lies in the admission that "*I am you.*" The kenotic act of self-contraction to create space for the other is seen by the philosopher as the moral act of being able to create ideal conditions for human peaceful coexistence.

Passive empathizing, being-possessed, losing oneself – these have nothing to do with the answerable act of self-abstracting or self-

¹⁷³ Verch, 3.

renunciation. [...] Self-renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses Being-as-event.¹⁷⁴

It is important that Bakhtin underscores the significance of not losing one's self in the process of self-renunciation for the sake of the other. The kenotic stance of giving space for the other to exist in their own right does not presuppose the loss of self or abdication of responsibility before the divine authority. There is no annihilation of one human self for the sake of the other precisely because of the three-person dynamic in the philosophical setup of the trialogic speech model. In the moment of a trialogic exchange, the self partakes of the human other and the divine Other, and is able to *exist* sharing moral, spiritual, physical space with an equally right, strong and good self of the other.

Bakhtin's trialogic model allows one to sketch what transpires in a communicative situation without kenotic self-minimization, when the counteraction between the self and the other becomes a contest regarding righteousness, strength, and being "better" or "worse." The questions that arise in such interactions touch upon the relative value of sacrifice that one bears for an idea. One might wonder why the other receives more love and forgiveness instead of the pain of punishment. The perceived injustice of these "checks and balances" is handled differently by theistic vs. secular moral consciousness. The two ways of handling internal conflict differ in the number of participants, in the direction and quality of verbal energy exchange and the results of interactions. In the paradigm of the secular moral mind, there is only the self and the other, and no transcendent third. Truth is not universal, it is individual. In the conflict of truths, the judgment mostly comes down to localized measurement of strength between the self and the other, taking into account a variety of social, physical, emotional, national, and religious characteristics to

¹⁷⁴ Bakhtin, *Towards A Philosophy of the Act*, 16.

determine the winner. The flow of energy is “I against you,” or “us against them.” Victory in this model is about domination.

Dealing with conflict without domination can be performed by a well-formed religious consciousness that exists kenotically in the triangle of references: Self-Other-God. In this model, the Truth is universal for any self and any other, removing the need for ethical altercations. It just needs to be accepted and believed in. In this setup there is a need for a regular confession – an honest emotional admission of one’s wrongs as determined by the Word, before a similarly oriented other. Although emotionally this might be a feat beyond the weakness of one’s will and the strength of one’s ego, the truly felt contrition expressed in verbal form towards the right confessor does have a chance to be a healing miracle (sacrament). All ruptures are concerned with secrets. People try to hide the negative and be “right” by condemning the other and passing their judgment. This behavior causes splits between ourselves and others, as well as splits within our own psyches. The practice of confession allows us to cease the isolation from the community and meet our collective and individual needs. A quote from Bakhtin’s lecture on Max Scheler (1874-1928), a German philosopher who occupied himself with phenomenology, ethics, and philosophical anthropology, explicates confession as the process of preventing an evil deed in the kenotic act of “speaking out” the bad that is foreign to our inner peace:

Исповедь есть раскрытие себя перед другим, делающее социальным [словом] то, что стремится к своему внесловесному пределу (грех) и прежде было изолированным, неизжитым, чужеродным телом во внутренней жизни человека.¹⁷⁵

Confession is opening up oneself before the other, turning into a social [word] that which gravitates towards its nonverbal limit (sin)

¹⁷⁵ Savkin, “Delo o voskresenii,” *Bakhtin i filosofskaia kultura XX veka*, 111-115.

and used to be an isolated, inextinguishable, foreign body in the inner life of man.

This view of language as redemption presents confession as a process that allows self to overcome estrangement and, in the words of Toni Morrison, “fend off the scariness of things with no names.”¹⁷⁶ In our quest for intimacy, confession empowers us to find words for our secrets as we try to express the negative experiences of our lives. Jung (1875 – 1961), too, often spoke of therapy as a “cure of the soul,” and believed that confession was essential in healing. He saw the main value of confession as releasing us from our moral isolation by enabling us to rejoin the human community.¹⁷⁷

Sylvia Sasse postulates that a true confession cannot be rhetorical: the confessant’s speech needs to be authentic and emotional, which can only occur with the right conversational partner. She claims that Dostoevsky turns confessional addresses into the central theme of his art.¹⁷⁸ His confessing subjects suffer because they cannot find the right – the absolute – addressee for their confessions. Sasse sees this issue as the foundation of Dostoevsky’s “poetics of address” that makes use of erroneous addressing and a variety of verbal transgressions against the other or the ultimate Other. She recognizes that confession works as a form of accepting responsibility and acknowledges the freedom of knowing the difference between good and evil. This freedom in view of the all-knowing Other who acts as the absolute norm, goodness and truth, is for Dostoevsky the only kind of freedom that can facilitate a fair and honest relationship between people, a relationship

¹⁷⁶ *The New York Times*, December 8, 1993, 17.

¹⁷⁷ Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*.

¹⁷⁸ Sasse, *Wortsunden. Beichten und Gestehen in der russischen Literatur. Zasse, Iad v ukho. Isповed i priznanie v russkoi literature*, 67.

based on responsibility. Confessions to false authorities only misdirect the confessional speech and its subject.

Sasse argues that in his literary texts, Dostoevsky *demonstrates* what happens when the confessional word is addressed exclusively in a “horizontal,” secular plane of interpretation without application of Christian ethics.¹⁷⁹ Dostoevsky thinks as a Christian, seeing real freedom and independence in voluntary acceptance of responsibility. Justifying human mistakes and transgressions by replacing individual responsibility with biological and social predetermination results, in Dostoevsky’s mind, in oppression and dependency. An individual loses individuality when they do not recognize moral duty. Elder Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* acts as the spokesperson for these views when he proclaims that a criminal can experience real guilt and have a true transforming confession only in a relationship to the Church. Being outside of the “vertical” relationship with the transcendent Other, one cannot receive the only kind of punishment that has a potential to heal – recognizing one’s own conscience:

...все эти ссылки в работы, а прежде с битьем, никого не исправляют, а главное почти никакого преступника и не устрашают, и число преступлений не только не уменьшается, а чем далее, тем более нарастает. Ведь вы с этим должны же согласиться. И выходит, что общество таким образом совсем не охранено, ибо хоть и отсекается вредный член механически и ссылается далеко, с глаз долой, но на его место тотчас же появляется другой преступник, а может и два другие. Если что и охраняет общество даже в наше время, и даже самого преступника исправляет и в другого человека перерождает, то это опять-таки единственно лишь закон Христов, сказывающийся в сознании собственной совести. Только сознав свою вину как сын Христова общества, то-есть церкви, он сознает и вину свою пред самим обществом, то-есть пред церковью. Таким образом, пред одною только церковью

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 91.

современный преступник и способен сознать вину свою, а не то что пред государством.¹⁸⁰

...all these sentences to exile with hard labor, and formerly with flogging also, reform no one, and what's more, deter hardly a single criminal, and the number of crimes does not diminish but is continually on the increase. You must admit that. Consequently, the security of society is not preserved, for, although the obnoxious member is mechanically cut off and sent far away out of sight, another criminal always comes to take his place at once, and often two of them. If anything does preserve society, even in our time, and does regenerate and transform the criminal, it is only the law of Christ speaking in his conscience. It is only by recognizing his wrongdoing as a son of a Christian society – that is, of the Church – that he recognizes his sin against society – that is, against the Church. So that it is only against the Church, and not against the State, that the criminal of to-day can recognize that he has sinned.¹⁸¹

These views are still relevant a century and a half later, as we struggle with the collapse of the penal system and its ability to rehabilitate traumatized people. Their ability to regain coherent positive self-perception and recover their conscience as a self-management tool is tied only to their ability to have faith in their innate goodness. For Bakhtin too, confession is linked to the question of moral self-evaluation: is there a self being able to act as both the subject and the object of an ethical judgment? Bakhtin's research of the genre of confession was instrumental in his work on the theory of dialogic discourse. He developed his ideas of a word's dialogic nature based on Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Sylvia Sasse writes about Bakhtin in her study of confession:

Мой тезис состоит в том, что исповедь как самоотчёт для Бахтина, в особенности способ исповедования в “Записках из подполья” Достоевского, воплощает как раз ту ситуацию

¹⁸⁰ *Bratya Karamazovy*. Chapter II, Part 5.

¹⁸¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

адресации, которую Бахтин использует в качестве модели для развития своей идеи диалогического характера слова: борьбу с возможной ценностной позицией другого, запечатлевающуюся в каждом высказывании, даже в “уединённом” высказывании о себе самом.¹⁸²

My thesis is that for Bakhtin, confession as a self-report, especially the confessional method in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, embodies the situation of address which he uses as a model to develop his idea of the dialogic character of the word: the struggle with the possible value judgment of the other, imprinted in every utterance, even in the “loneliest” utterance about oneself.

In his “*Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*” (1924) Bakhtin views confession as the genre most suitable for offering data on the subject’s self-expression in relation to the other.

Confession implies a certain understanding of the self, and Bakhtin writes:

Там, где является попытка зафиксировать себя самого в покаянных тонах в свете нравственного долженствования, возникает первая существенная форма словесной объективации жизни и личности (словесная объективация личной жизни, которая происходит без выделения судящего и судимого субъекта) – самоотчёт-исповедь.¹⁸³

The first significant form of verbal objectification of life and personality (a verbal objectification of self that happens without separating the judging and penitent subjects) – confessional self-accounting – appears with the first attempt to define oneself in penitential tones in light of ethical obligation.

Although confession relates only what the subject can say about one’s self, the presence of a morally judging other is always there too. “Человек сам может только каяться, отпустить

¹⁸² Sasse, 122.

¹⁸³ Bakhtin, *Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatelnosti*, 208.

может только другой” (“One can only repent, the sins are forgiven by the other”).¹⁸⁴ A “lonely” confession doesn’t exist, and Bakhtin uses this thought to develop his principle of the Other as the ultimate judging authority, immanent to any self-examination, self-objectivation and self-description. For Bakhtin, as for Dostoevsky, God is the ultimate loving Other, in relation to whom the self exists in its truest form:

Вне Бога, вне доверия к абсолютной другости невозможно самопознание и самовысказывание, и не потому, конечно, что оно было бы практически бессмысленно, но доверие к Богу – имманентный момент чистого самопознания и самовыражения.¹⁸⁵

Outside of God, outside of the trust for, the absolute Other, self-cognition and self-statement is impossible, not because it would be virtually meaningless, but trust towards God is the immanent moment of pure self-cognition and self-expression.

It is important to notice that Bakhtin essentially speaks of a trialogic confessional structure, with the self, the other and the absolute “Other as such” (“Другой как таковой”) participating in the confessional speech act. One of the goals of confession before the transcendent Other is to reach the feeling of a “justified peace” that has to do with the self-esteem of the confessant and with the relief from guilt and fear. The self implies the existence of the ultimate Other and directs words of confession to the otherworldly authority. This kenotic process helps create the sensation that the weight of the ultimate judgment on the self has been alleviated and virtually removes the fear of human judgment:

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 210.

Другой в своей судейской функции используется для того, чтобы разрушить его возможное влияние на мою самооценку, чтобы путём **самоунижения** перед ним освободить себя от этого влияния его оценивающей позиции и связанных с этой вненаходимостью возможностей (не бояться мнения людей, преодолеть стыд).¹⁸⁶

The other in his judicial function is used to eliminate his possible influence on my self-esteem, to free myself via self-abasement from the impact of his evaluating position and possibilities linked to its externality (to not be afraid of people's opinion, to overcome shame).

In his *Notes (Заметки)*, in 1961, Bakhtin again discusses the trialogic structure that gives meaning to any utterance in his mind:

Всякое высказывание всегда имеет адресата (разного характера, разных степеней близости, конкретности, осознанности и т. п.), ответное понимание которого автор речевого поведения ищет и предвосхищает. Это – “второй” (опять же, не в арифметическом смысле). Но кроме этого адресата (второго), автор высказывания с большей или меньшей осознанностью предполагает высшего нададресата (третьего). **Абсолютно справедливое ответное понимание** предполагается либо в метафизической дали, либо в далёком историческом времени (лазеечный адресат).¹⁸⁷

Any utterance always has an addressee (of a varying character, degree of proximity, concreteness, awareness, etc.), whose reciprocal understanding the author of the speech act is looking for and anticipates. This is “the second” (again, not in the arithmetic sense). But besides this addressee (the second), the author of the utterance implies with higher or lower awareness a superaddressee (the third). An absolutely just, equitable reciprocal understanding is implied either in the metaphysical distance or in a remote historical time (a loophole addressee).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 211.

¹⁸⁷ Bakhtin, “1961 god. Zametki,” 337.

The main characteristic of the ultimate addressee of any verbal appellation is, according to Bakhtin, an absolutely just and justifying understanding – the most genuine meeting of the self and the other:

В понятии наадресата предполагается установка на Абсолютного Другого, на Его **справедливое и оправдывающее** понимание, то есть на встречу <я> и <другого> в последней диалогической субстанции.¹⁸⁸

The notion of superaddressee implies reference to the Absolute Other, His justifying and exculpatory understanding, the meeting between “I” and “the other” in the ultimate dialogic situation.

Interpreting this statement, we focus on the essential attributes of the emotionally and essentially desirable kind of interaction, where one’s utterance or being is received “with understanding” that acknowledges the goodness of the self. There is no guilt, fear or uncertainty associated with being in an interaction of this kind, the self receives the grace of full acceptance and the eternal space to be, fully, one’s self in a positive light. This is the conversational and relational model that allows the “meeting of I and the other” in a dialogic situation with maximal semantic stability and finality. There is no need to negotiate or fight for the truth of one’s self versus the other’s. There is no conflict of interests because of the kenotic attitude assumed between the self and the other in their relationship to the ultimate Third. Accepting the optimal validity of this configuration, the human participants of the dialogue empty themselves of their preconceptions towards the truth and minimize themselves in relation to a bigger Truth beyond one’s comprehension and, therefore, judgment. Turning one’s self into a “slave” in relation to the will of the transcendent modelled by the kenosis of Christ creates an equally potent and positive

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

space for the other to exist in the same right as the self. The horizontal conflict which arises from the clashing truths in a dialogue of wills is resolved without domination only through the vertically dominant universal transcendent Other that exists beyond the scope of human consciousness and binds people in faith. For Dostoevsky, the faith in the ideal of beauty that Christ represents becomes the driving force of conviction in the importance of the Word.

IV. The Scriptural Word in Dostoevsky's Transformational Confessions

In the Russian Orthodox confession ritual, the penitent acts as a quoting subject by naming the sins using the words from the Holy Scripture. All human transgressions have their names, and the confessant merely utilizes the given definitions in the same way that scholars quote a literary source. In the act of quoting the Scripture and defining the ethical quality of one's deeds and motives, the language performs the illocutionary function. The manner of pronouncing the confessional word is meant to make the confessant's contrition visible and audible, bringing the Scriptural Word alive in the emotional self-emptying. A kenotic disposition, a humble heart and faith in the transcendent are all required to accept the Scriptural definition of sin and internalize it, thereby making the word of the Other one's own. At the same time, while pronouncing the strictly formulated sins, one rejects them with the intent to let them go and never repeat evil again. The sinner, minimized physically and emotionally before the confessor who witnesses and hears out the negative, is then forgiven in the performative deliverance of the purifying God's grace through the confessor's jussive utterance. It is paramount that the confessor appeals to God's mercy from the same moral level as the penitent, reserving one's judgment in a kenotic withdrawal of self. At the end of the Orthodox confession ritual, the priest pronounces a prayer, a plea for forgiveness from both himself and the confessant: "Мы просим Тебя..." ("We are pleading Thee...").

Utilizing the lens of the speech act theory developed by J.L. Austin, the action contained in admitting the wrongs of the self allows us to view confession as a speech-act. In Dostoevsky's works, the word of confessional discourse is a powerful act even when used outside of the confines of a strictly religious, institutionalized sacramental confession. His confessional passages are shown to not only present information, but also perform an action, and thereby change reality. Just as in other speech acts (promises, warnings, agreements), one can distinguish three different aspects of a confession: locution (what was said, what was meant), illocution (what was done) and perlocution (what happened as a result).¹⁸⁹ The locution of Dostoevsky's literary confessions is an intricate interplay between the words uttered and the variety of possible meanings potentially contained within. He crafted confessions to be emotionally uplifting and healing in a particular linguistic fashion. In them, the presence of the transcendent is always acknowledged and confirmed. The shared understanding of faith has an immense impact on the degree of trust and openness towards an honest vision of one's true self in the confessant.

V. A Truly Repentant Sinner in *Demons*

Vyacheslav Ivanov, a representative of the Russian Orthodox philosophy of dialogue along with Solovyov and Bakhtin, noticed that the world of another self can only be entered through the Presence of God – “a reality more real than all these absolutely real beings, to each of whom He said with all His will and with all His conviction, “*Thou art [Ты еси].*””¹⁹⁰ Ivanov saw the attempt to enter the ego of another through the transcendent as the effort needed to overcome the self's individualism. Dostoevsky shows himself to be of a similar mind as he is experimenting with

¹⁸⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

¹⁹⁰ Seduro, *Dostoevsky in Russian Literary Criticism*, 62-63.

literary confessions in his writing; the moment of shared ultimate Truth is definitive for a successful, healing confessional experience. Hillier notes:

In all except one of Dostoevsky's four great confessional moments, the common tie that binds, is the presence of, the allusion to, or the interaction with Scripture. It is this single factor – the Scriptural Word – that provides the conditions for the success of a given confessional moment, the living Word that rests between penitent and confessor.¹⁹¹

He speaks here of the confessional conversations between Raskolnikov and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*, between Stavrogin and Tikhon in *Demons*, and between Ivan and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In these confessional encounters, the third party's presence in an interaction between two selves is evoked by the confirmation of faith as absolute cognition using the Word from the Scriptures. An example of a confessional encounter mediated by the presence of the Scriptural Word is found in the fourth confession briefly mentioned by Hillier: between Stepan Trofimovich and Sofya Matveevna in *Demons*.¹⁹²

At the end of the novel, Stepan Trofimovich leaves town on foot and ventures off into the unknown. Wandering along the “big road” with no destination, he is offered a lift by passing peasants, who take him to the village where he meets Sofya, a travelling Gospel seller. After a brief confession of faith, he insists on staying close to her. Together they set off, but Stepan's health rapidly declines and they find a room to pause from traveling. There, in a spontaneous confessional speech upon quoting the Bible, Stepan tells Sofya a confessional version of his life story and pleads not to leave him. Sofya abides in a self-giving manner and stays by his side until

¹⁹¹ Hillier, 447.

¹⁹² In Constance Garnett's translation, *The Possessed Or, The Devils*.

the end. Painful events from Stepan's past are recalled and admitted in several informal confessions of sin. It becomes apparent that Stepan Trofimovich is dying, and a priest is summoned to perform the final rites of the sacramental Confession and Holy Unction (a ceremonial anointing with blessed oil) to remove the weight of all sins, known and unknown to the dying penitent, from his immortal soul about to leave his mortal body. During his final conscious hours, Stepan recognizes the untruth of his life, forgives others, and utters a speech expressing his rediscovered love for God. A whole sequence of confessions happens within a short amount of time, expunging the pain of the past and alleviating the emotional load of the human at the end of his life. Within a few days, Stepan Trofimovich goes from being a lost, emotionally scattered, disoriented being to a self-aware, generous, joyous soul despite his physical ailments. The catalyst of this transformation is the kenotic presence of Sofya and the Scriptural word she carries with her.

Dostoevsky begins Chapter Seven, Part III, "*Последнее странствование Степана Трофимовича*" ("*The Last Wandering of Stepan Trofimovich*") describing the state of fear Stepan was in, having made the decision to leave his home of twenty years in the protest of being called a "simple sycophant." His goal, says Dostoevsky, was to willfully refuse accepting indulgences from his benefactor, "raise the banner of a great idea and die for it on the big road." Despite the utter terror of feeling suddenly alone, Stepan Trofimovich executes his "insane" plan that in some strange way excites him and fortifies his pride.

Я убежден, что Степан Трофимович очень боялся, чувствуя приближение срока его безумного предприятия. Я убежден, что он очень страдал от страха, особенно в ночь накануне, в ту ужасную ночь. [...] Тут было нечто гордое и его восхищавшее, несмотря ни на что. О, он бы мог принять роскошные условия Варвары Петровны и остаться при ее милостях "comme un простой приживальщик"! Но он не принял милости и не

остался. И вот он сам оставляет ее и подымает “знамя великой идеи” и идет умереть за него на большой дороге!¹⁹³

I am persuaded that Stepan Trofimovitch was terribly frightened as he felt the time fixed for his insane enterprise drawing near. I am convinced that he suffered dreadfully from terror, especially on the night before he started—that awful night. [...] There was something proud in the undertaking which allured him in spite of everything. Oh, he might have accepted Varvara Petrovna’s luxurious provision and have remained living on her charity, “*comme un humble dependent*.” But he had not accepted her charity and was not remaining! And here he was leaving her of himself, and holding aloft the “standard of a great idea, and going to die for it on the open road.”¹⁹⁴

Stepan’s fear and unhappiness could have been prevented if his response to Varvara’s utterance had involved acknowledging the “smallness” of his social position vis-à-vis the other. Accepting the label of a sycophant in kenotic silence would have created space for her opinion to exist side by side with his self, in no way diminished in absolute value. Obedience in love and self-surrender would have preserved their relationship. Instead, the liberal thinker’s self, suffering the discomfort of vulnerability and loss of power, reverted to fortifying positions in the personal confrontation with his benevolent friend by affirming his own will and defying hers. Choosing to enact his will as dominant, Stepan Trofimovich exacerbates the conflict and causes emotional and physical rupture in the fabric of his own life, throwing himself into the depths of fear, uncertainty and guilt for his unreasonable behavior. Thinking about his actions scares Stepan so much that he is ready to deny and avoid his own thoughts and emotions and run away in self-forgetfulness:

Нет, уж лучше просто большая дорога, так просто выйти на нее и пойти, и ни о чем не думать, пока только можно не думать.

¹⁹³ Dostoevsky, *Besy*, 183.

¹⁹⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

Большая дорога – это есть нечто длинное-длинное, чему не видно конца – точно жизнь человеческая, точно мечта человеческая. [...] Основательно рассуждать или хоть отчетливо сознавать было для него в ту минуту невыносимо.¹⁹⁵

No, better simply the high road, better simply to set off for it, and walk along it and to think of nothing so long as he could put off thinking. The high road is something very-very long, of which one cannot see the end – like human life, like human dreams. [...] But to think about that was the greatest agony to him at that moment; he was utterly unable to fix upon a place.¹⁹⁶

In this passage as well, Dostoevsky shows how a human mind adopts a kenotic disposition to manage the intolerable emotional upheaval, even if in a roundabout way. Stepan Trofimovich is not a religious thinker by choice, and the absence of the divine leaves him feeling lost and alone as he decides to stop his contacts with the other. The suffering caused by this rupture is so strong, that despite bowing his head before the endless “great road” as a metaphor for life, Stepan Verkhovenskii acknowledges God’s will beyond it. Unable to make sense of the reality otherwise, Stepan’s consciousness fluctuates between forgetfulness, fear, guilt and weakness of mind, until he surrenders to the comfort and warmth of a peasant house in a childlike state of joy:

От страха он неизвестно почему закрыл зонтик и положил его подле себя. Вдали, по дороге от города, показалась какая-то телега; он с беспокойством начал всматриваться: “Grace a Dieu это телега, и – едет шагом; это не может быть опасно.”

In his panic he for some reason shut up the umbrella and laid it down beside him. A cart came into sight on the high road in the distance coming from the town. “*Grace à Dieu*, that’s a cart and it’s coming at a walking pace; that can’t be dangerous.

¹⁹⁵ *Besy*, 184.

¹⁹⁶ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

[...] “Любопытная какая бабенка, злился про себя Степан Трофимович, и как они меня рассматривают... *mais enfin*... Одним словом, странно, что я точно виноват пред ними, а я ничего не виноват пред ними.”

[...] “What an inquisitive woman!” Stepan Trofimovich mused with vexation. “And how they stare at me ... *mais enfin*. In fact, it’s strange that I feel, as it were, conscience-stricken before them, and yet I’ve done them no harm.”

[...] Порой он сам ощущал про себя, что как-то ужасно рассеян и думает совсем не о том, о чем надо, и дивился тому. Это сознание в болезненной слабости ума мгновениями становилось ему очень тяжело и даже обидно.

[...] Sometimes he was aware himself that he was terribly absent-minded, and that he was not thinking of what he ought to be thinking of and wondered at it. This consciousness of abnormal weakness of mind became at moments very painful and even humiliating to him.

[...] Он поднял, голову, и сладостный запах горячих блинов, над которыми старалась у печки хозяйка, защекотал его обоняние. Улыбаясь ребячьей улыбкой, он потянулся к хозяйке и вдруг залепетал: – Это что ж? Это блины? *Mais... c'est charmant.*¹⁹⁷

He raised his head and the delicious fragrance of the hot pancakes with which the woman of the house was busy at the stove tickled his nostrils. With a childlike smile he leaned towards the woman and suddenly said: “What’s that? Are they pancakes? *Mais ... c'est charmant.*”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ *Besy*, 185-190.

¹⁹⁸ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

Babbling like a child, with a smile of happiness on his face at the smell of hot crepes, Stepan Trofimovich meets the bookseller Sofya. Dostoevsky's choice of words in this new character's description is noticeably positive and reveals the bookseller's humble and honest stance, which affects Stepan's state of mind:

– Не пожелаете ли приобрести? - раздался подле него тихий женский голос. Он поднял глаза и, к удивлению, увидел перед собою одну даму – *une dame et elle en avait l'air* – лет уже за тридцать, очень скромную на вид, одетую по-городскому, в темненькое платье и с большим серым платком на плечах. В лице ее было нечто очень приветливое, немедленно понравившееся Степану Трофимовичу. [...] она вынула две красиво переплетенные книжки с вытесненными крестами на переплетах и поднесла их к Степану Трофимовичу. [...] У него мелькнуло в ту минуту, что он не читал Евангелия по крайней мере лет тридцать и только разве лет семь назад припомнил из него капельку лишь по Ренановой книге *Vie de Jesus*.¹⁹⁹

“Would you care to purchase?” a gentle feminine voice asked close by him. He raised his eyes and to his surprise saw a lady – *une dame et elle en avait l'air*, somewhat over thirty, very modest in appearance, dressed not like a peasant, in a dark gown with a grey shawl on her shoulders. There was something very kindly in her face which attracted Stepan Trofimovich immediately. [...] she took out two nicely bound books with a cross engraved on the cover, and offered them to Stepan Trofimovich. [...] The idea occurred to him at the moment that he had not read the gospel for thirty years at least, and at most had recalled some passages of it, seven years before, when reading Renan's “*Vie de Jésus*.”²⁰⁰

Quiet sounds, muted colors, humble style, welcoming face and the beauty of the book that turned out to be the Holy Scripture, create a presence that immediately appeals to Stepan Trofimovich. He is not only gaining a conversation partner, this particular other he encounters

¹⁹⁹ *Besy*, 191-192.

²⁰⁰ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

brings in the ultimate Other as well, in the most solid, material undeniable form – the printed Testament. In a moment of truth, Stepan realizes that he hasn't read the Holy book for at least thirty years, which is not surprising considering his aesthetic consciousness and liberal views on religion's value in human life. Ernest Renan's publication "*Life of Jesus*" (1863) is famous for its concentration on the historic personality of Christ and in part denying the divinity of Jesus while heralding him as a gifted spiritual human. Stepan's interest in Renan's ideas of positivism is indicative of his own stance on faith, grace and miracles. It also attests to Dostoevsky's awareness and acceptance of the ideas of the 19th century Lutheran kenoticism that foregrounded the humanity of Christ as the ideal of human development.

Sofya's soft, quiet and attentive presence along with the books she is selling creates around her a space of faith that is inviting and is meant to be shared. Stepan's first meaningful reaction after seeing the books for sale is: "I am not against the Gospel. I have meant to reread it for a while now." We do not know how long this statement can hold true for Stepan Trofimovich, but it is clearly his truth at the moment, when he is connecting in a dialogic confessional exchange with the person who managed to win his trust within moments without saying much at all. Sofya's subsequent self-limitation, willingness to listen to Stepan's confessions and take care of him are acts of spiritual love for a man in need, and her kenotic efforts are not wasted. The appearance of the Scriptural word allows the reader to observe the change of disposition towards mystical and religious happen in Stepan's mind.

He starts with admitting his willingness to join Sofya in her New Testament sales, with the goal of relating the Holy Scripture to the ignorant simple people whom he had been struggling to love. Fully utilizing the people's religiosity in imagining a new scenario of his great life idea, Stepan intends to "fix the mistakes of this wonderful book" in his future oral explanations:

В изложении устном можно исправить ошибки этой замечательной книги, к которой я, разумеется, готов отнестись с чрезвычайным уважением. Я буду полезен и на большой дороге.²⁰¹

By verbal explanation one might correct the mistakes in that remarkable book, which I am of course prepared to treat with the utmost respect. I will be of service even on the high road.²⁰²

These words show he is thinking outside the framework of religious consciousness. A believer would never position oneself above the truth of the Scriptural Word, especially not taking up the right to judge the errors in the Holy Book. Stepan immediately recognizes his guilt and confesses it to Sofya, but the way he phrases it is telling:

О простим, простим, прежде всего простим всем и всегда... Будем надеяться, что и нам простят. Да, потому что все и каждый один перед другим виноваты. Все виноваты!²⁰³

Oh, we will forgive, we will forgive, first of all we will forgive all and always.... We will hope that we too shall be forgiven. Yes, for all, every one of us, have wronged one another, all are guilty!²⁰⁴

Albeit an expression of the need to forgive and be forgiven, these words cannot indicate a true confession in Dostoevsky. The absolute Other is absent from the ideations of Stepan Trofimovich, who sees guilt only dialogically, between people, and stresses everyone's fault

²⁰¹ *Besy*, 197.

²⁰² *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

²⁰³ *Besy*, 197.

²⁰⁴ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

without feeling genuine remorse for his own. His confession at this point is false, the attribution of guilt is misdirected, and he doesn't truly recognize the evil in himself. However, this moment starts the journey towards the real sacramental confession that Stepan goes through before passing away within a week.

“Наконец мы отдельно, и мы никого не пустим! Я хочу вам всё, всё рассказать с самого начала” (“At last, we are by ourselves and we will admit no one! I want to tell you everything, everything from the very beginning”), says Stepan Trofimovich as soon as they arrive at a new place to settle for the night. Babbling feverishly about his past life and plans for living the big idea on the road, he realizes that Sofya doesn't understand him. However, knowing that she has faith, Stepan counts on their connection through “presentiment” – through the emotional openness and acceptance of the truth in the way typical for a religious consciousness:

Он сам ясно видел, что она совсем почти его не понимает, и даже самого капитального. [...] а пока она может понять предчувствием...²⁰⁵

He saw clearly from her face that she hardly understood him, and could not grasp even the most essential part. [...] and meanwhile she can feel it intuitively...²⁰⁶

Sofya's disposition, as she listens to Stepan diligently and reacts in a way that shows acceptance, portrays her as another exemplary confessor. Though it is not easy for Sofya to understand and approve the ideas Stepan Trofimovich is liberally pouring into her ear, she maintains a firm kenotic position, giving her confessant the space needed to relate himself to

²⁰⁵ *Besy*, 201.

²⁰⁶ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

another human who is able to feel his goodness. Stepan feels more at ease and free to be honest because of Sofya's non-judgmental stance. "Моя тихая, моя христианка" ("My quiet, my Christian"), he addresses her, stressing her kenotic silence and her religious identity as the qualities that make her "his." After she spends a sleepless night taking care of his failing body, Stepan Trofimovich collapses at her feet in the morning with another, even deeper confession of sins. Dostoevsky labels this fit of honesty "истерический припадок самоосуждения" ("an attack of hysterical remorse"). At the end of it, seeing that Sofya is not leaving him alone, he finally asks her to read the New Testament to him. After she reads the Sermon on the Mount, Stepan enters another confessional loop, admitting to lying his whole life:

Друг мой, я всю жизнь мою лгал. Даже когда говорил правду. Я никогда не говорил для истины, а только для себя, я это и прежде знал, но теперь только вижу. [...] Всего труднее в жизни жить, и не лгать... и... и собственной лжи не верить, да, да, вот это именно... Мы вместе, мы вместе! Прибавил он с энтузиазмом.²⁰⁷

"My friend, I've been telling lies all my life. Even when I told the truth I never spoke for the sake of the truth, but always for my own sake. I knew it before, but I only see it now. [...] The hardest thing in life is to live without telling lies ... and without believing in one's lies. Yes, yes, that's just it. ... We'll be together, together," he added enthusiastically.²⁰⁸

"I never spoke for the Truth, only for myself," says Stepan Trofimovich. It is not news to him, but he admits to seeing it only now when he is united in a confessional relationship with someone he sees as a true believer. This thought gives him enthusiasm, hope and desire to be

²⁰⁷ *Besy*, 205.

²⁰⁸ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts*.

honest in his words, investing them with the ultimate meaning. Dostoevsky writes: “Тут было для него действительно нечто высшее и, говоря новейшим языком, почти борьба за существование” (“There was indeed something of a higher order for him here and, using the latest language, almost a struggle for existence”).²⁰⁹ The next random page Scriptural reading is from the Apocalypses, the same words that are quoted from memory by Father Tikhon during Stavrogin’s censored confession:

– “И Ангелу Лаодикийской церкви напиши: так говорит Аминь, свидетель верный и истинный, начало создания божия. Знаю твои дела; ты ни холоден, ни горяч; о, если б ты был холоден или горяч! Но поелику ты тепл, а не горяч и не холоден, то извергну тебя из уст моих. Ибо ты говоришь: я богат, разбогател, и ни в чем не имею нужды, а не знаешь, что ты несчастен, и жалок, и нищ, и слеп, и наг.”

– Это... и это в вашей книге! – воскликнул он, сверкая глазами и приподнимаясь с изголовья. – Я никогда не знал этого великого места! Слышите: скорее холодного, холодного, чем теплого, чем *только* теплого. О, я докажу. Только не оставляйте, не оставляйте меня одного! Мы докажем, мы докажем!

– Да не оставлю же я вас, Степан Трофимович, никогда не оставлю-с! – схватила она его руки и сжала в своих, поднося их к сердцу, со слезами на глазах смотря на него. (“Жалко уж очень мне их стало в ту минуту,” – передавала она).²¹⁰

‘And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing: and thou knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.’

“That too ... and that’s in your book too!” he exclaimed, with flashing eyes and raising his head from the pillow. “I never knew

²⁰⁹ *Besy*, 201.

²¹⁰ *Besy*, 206.

that grand passage! You hear, better be cold, better be cold than lukewarm, than only lukewarm. Oh, I'll prove it! Only don't leave me, don't leave me alone! We'll prove it, we'll prove it!" "I won't leave you, Stepan Trofimovich. I'll never leave you!" She took his hand, pressed it in both of hers, and laid it against her heart, looking at him with tears in her eyes. ("I felt very sorry for him at that moment," she said, describing it afterwards.)²¹¹

Sofya had been entrusted with seeing a man off on his last days and bringing him to the true confessional faith he had been avoiding his whole life. She subjugates her own will to the part she is supposed to play in this man's life despite her own suffering. "Для Софьи Матвеевны наступили два страшные дня её жизни; она и теперь припоминает о них с содроганием" ("The two days that followed were among the most terrible in Sofya Matveyevna's life; she remembers them with a shudder to this day"), writes Dostoevsky. However, through her faith and her kenotic acceptance of goodness in the other, she is able to connect Stepan Trofimovich to God in his final days and inadvertently brings him to sincere admittance of his sins. In the episode above, Dostoevsky is quoting a significant paragraph from Scripture, where an ardent faith is compared to being hot, and the worst sin is seen as being "warm," not cold. This is indicative of Dostoevsky's opinion that an atheist is closer to God than someone who rationally accepts the idea of God but remains godless in their belief. The latter stance was viewed by Dostoevsky as dishonest and the most destructive conceptual stance a human can assume. Outwardly respectful of the existence of the transcendent, this philosophical position allows its bearer to avoid the Truth and vary the meaning of the word based on the situation and the individual other they interact with. Dostoevsky is warning his reader about the transgression against language when what is being said does not coincide with the reality.

²¹¹ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts.*

Stepan Trofimovich vouches to prove that he is not a “warm” one, but only if Sofya accompanies him. Alone, he does not feel able to uphold the strength of his faith and assume a kenotic position in relation to the Word of the Other. Getting weaker by the minute, he requests Sofya to read another passage from the New Testament, and this time it is the one that Dostoevsky placed in one of the epigraphs of *Demons*:

– Друг мой, – произнес Степан Трофимович в большом волнении, – *savez-vous*, это чудесное и... необыкновенное место было мне всю жизнь камнем преткновения [...] так что я это место еще с детства упомянул. Теперь же мне пришла одна мысль; *une comparaison*. Мне ужасно много приходит теперь мыслей: видите, это точь-в-точь как наша Россия. Эти бесы, выходящие из больного и входящие в свиней, – это все язвы, все миазмы, вся нечистота, все бесы и все бесенята, накопившиеся в великом и милом нашем больном, в нашей России, за века, за века! *Oui, cette Russie, que j’aimais toujours*. Но великая мысль и великая воля осенят ее свыше, как и того безумного бесноватого, и выйдут все эти бесы, вся нечистота, вся эта мерзость, загноившаяся на поверхности... и сами будут проситься войти в свиней. Да и вошли уже, может быть! Это мы, мы и те, и Петруша... *et les autres avec lui*, и я, может быть, первый, во главе, и мы бросимся, безумные и взбесившиеся, со скалы в море и все потонем, и туда нам дорога, потому что нас только на это ведь и хватит. Но больной исцелится и “сядет у ног Иисусовых” ...²¹²

“My friend,” said Stepan Trofimovitch in great excitement “*savez-vous*, that wonderful and ... extraordinary passage has been a stumbling-block to me all my life [...] so much so that I remembered those verses from childhood. Now an idea has occurred to me; *une comparaison*. A great number of ideas keep coming into my mind now. You see, that’s exactly like our Russia, those devils that come out of the sick man and enter into the swine. They are all the sores, all the foul contagions, all the impurities, all the devils great and small that have multiplied in that great invalid, our beloved Russia, in the course of ages and ages. But a great idea and a great Will will encompass it from on high, as with that lunatic possessed of devils ... and all those devils will come forth, all the impurity, all

²¹² *Besy*, 208.

the rottenness that was putrefying on the surface ... and they will beg of themselves to enter into swine; and indeed maybe they have entered into them already! They are we, we and those ... and Petrusha and *les autres avec lui* ... and I perhaps at the head of them, and we shall cast ourselves down, possessed and raving, from the rocks into the sea, and we shall all be drowned – and a good thing too, for that is all we are fit for. But the sick man will be healed and ‘will sit at the feet of Jesus,’ and all will look upon him with astonishment...²¹³

Here, Stepan admits to being possessed by demons, realizing the depth of his sin. After this, Stepan Trofimovich changes his mind towards religion. In a few days, he underwent the sacramental confession and received communion from an ordained priest with expressed will (“весьма охотно”). In the end, he arrived at such a peaceful feeling about himself, that he was no longer afraid of death. He seemed to have also realized the necessity of faith:

– Друзья мои, – проговорил он, – Бог уже потому мне необходим, что это единственное существо, которое можно вечно любить...

В самом ли деле он уверовал, или величественная церемония совершенного таинства потрясла его и возбудила художественную восприимчивость его натуры, но он твердо и, говорят, с большим чувством произнес несколько слов прямо вразрез многому из его прежних убеждений.

– Мое бессмертие уже потому необходимо, что Бог не захочет сделать неправды и погасить совсем огонь раз возгоревшейся к нему любви в моем сердце. И что дороже любви? Любовь выше бытия, любовь венец бытия, и как же возможно, чтобы бытие было ей неподклонно? Если я полюбил Его и обрадовался любви моей – возможно ли, чтоб Он погасил и меня и радость мою и обратил нас в нуль? Если есть Бог, то и я бессмертен! Voilà ma profession de foi.²¹⁴

“My friends,” he said, “God is necessary to me, if only because He is the only being whom one can love eternally.”

²¹³ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts.*

²¹⁴ *Besy*, 216.

Whether he was really converted, or whether the stately ceremony of the administration of the sacrament had impressed him and stirred the artistic responsiveness of his temperament or not, he firmly and, I am told, with great feeling uttered some words which were in flat contradiction with many of his former convictions.

“My immortality is necessary if only because God will not be guilty of injustice and extinguish altogether the flame of love for Him once kindled in my heart. And what is more precious than love? Love is higher than existence, love is the crown of existence; and how is it possible that existence should not be under its dominance? If I have once loved Him and rejoiced in my love, is it possible that He should extinguish me and my joy and bring me to nothingness again? If there is a God, then I am immortal. *Voilà ma profession de foi.*”²¹⁵

Stepan’s confession of faith echoes Dostoevsky’s own, as the writer demonstrates how the material presence of the Divine Other in the Word of the Scripture allows two humans to connect to the transcendent in a confessional dialogue that proves transformative for the confessant.

VI. Love as a Mediator in Dostoevsky’s Confessions

Analysis of Dostoevsky’s transformative confessional scenes allows us to claim that for him, love is an equally essential element of a successful transformative confession on par with kenotic faith in the Scriptural Word.²¹⁶ The presence of unconditional love is a prerequisite for many positive, mind-altering experiences in Dostoevsky’s novels. In *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, Raskolnikov confesses his crime to many people, but only his confession to Sonya Marmeladova turns out to be truly transformational. The love she gives him is not just her personal offering, it exists in the dialogic context of the biblical Truth that validates her feelings in relation

²¹⁵ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts.*

²¹⁶ Diane Oenning Thompson: “...in *Crime and Punishment* the Word never enters Raskolnikov’s consciousness as revealed truth through an open dialogic exchange. We may infer its influence when he asks Sonya to read the Lazarus miracle, but it is Sonya’s love and not the Word per se which is most decisive.” “Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition,” 539.

to Raskolnikov as the kenotic, self-sacrificial love modeled by the incarnate Word. Sonya's love performs the heroic feat of defining Raskolnikov's sin in a way that gives him internal strength to subjugate his will to the law and face the fear of admitting the evil in his deeds, thoughts and words. The way she empties her mind of any concerns for her own life in order to save the life of a killer, creates space for him to be a good person even in the light of his immoral choices. Raskolnikov knows that, at least in Sonya's eyes, he is a creature of God who can repent and heal towards happiness. As a true believer who bases her faith on the Scriptural Word, she provides him with firm ethical ground based in the transcendent and therefore uniting all human subjects on equal footing. Her view of Raskolnikov is inclusive, and her love is deeply kenotic, rooted in humility and self-abnegation. No other could have done by force what Sonya achieved in a most meek and gentle manner – she led a sinner to public confession and repentance by her willingness to participate in his suffering and her miraculous acceptance of him without judgment. Leaving judgment of his wrongs to God and civil authorities, Sonya connects to Raskolnikov through reading the Bible and asking for forgiveness and salvation on par with him. She never positions herself above him, always minimizing herself and welcoming the emotionally purifying suffering and the pain of shared responsibility and contrition. Though the love Sonya offers is not a subject of her conversations with Rodion, it is nevertheless an active participant of their interactions, and can be visualized as a process, a reenactment of the ideal kenotic principle – the Love exemplified in the figure of Christ.

Looking to define the love that acts as a catalyst and the environment of change in Dostoevsky's confessional exchanges, we turn to the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853 – 1900). Indebted to Dostoyevskian confessional discourse, he was amongst those 19th century thinkers who stressed the “betweenness” of self and the other. Ninety years before the

Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber published his two most significant words *I and Thou*, Solovyov tried to develop an understanding of a genuinely altruistic morality in his *Lectures on Divine Humanity* (*Chteniia o bogochelovechestve*, 1878 – 1880). He defined true love as

that which not only affirms in subjective feeling the unconditional significance of human individuality in another and in oneself, but also justifies this unconditional significance in actuality.²¹⁷

Solovyov also asserted that the absolute significance of a given person can only be acknowledged by “affirming him in God” while practicing self-renunciation both towards the other and in God for true answerability.²¹⁸

Formulating the idea of *sobornost* so significant for Dostoevsky’s perception of reality, Solovyov speaks of the transcendent, the Absolute, in Lecture Seven of his cycle, seeing it as “both as “divine” and “Universal organism” that is at once the most universal and the most individual of all organisms, for it is the All.”²¹⁹ Judith Kornblatt, in her volume on Solovyov’s religious philosophy, summarizes his cosmology and highlights the role of the principle that transforms individuality into unity:

“Multiplicity reduced to unity,” he tells us, “is wholeness.” [...] He calls the individual entity, or the actualized expression of the absolutely existent God, by the name Christ. But just as the Absolute, which is one, can be looked at in two ways, as universal (the Absolute) or an individual (Christ), we see [in Solovyov] that Christ, too, can be looked at in two ways. Christ is both Logos and Sophia. These are not two different names for Christ, nor are they two different, discrete manifestations. Insofar as Christ is the

²¹⁷ Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 45.

²¹⁸ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, 59.

²¹⁹ Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia. The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, 8.

“acting, unifying principle,” he is the Word. But insofar as he is, at the same time, that which is produced by the action, he is Sophia.²²⁰

Kornblatt is referring to the abstract from Solovyov’s presentation where he introduces the concept of Sophia for the first time publicly, at one of the lectures that Dostoevsky attended himself. Solovyov’s Sophia is essential to the process of dialogic (or trialogic) communication as a “force or action that enables the potential for wholeness to emerge from the interaction of two opposing beings, things, or states.” According to Kornblatt, Solovyov was convinced that this “third member of the triad makes possible the interpenetration and transformation of the first two.”²²¹

In the divine organism of Christ, the acting, unifying principle, the principle that expresses the unity of that which absolutely is, is obviously the Word, or Logos. The second kind of unity, the produced unity, is called Sophia in Christian theosophy. If we distinguish in the Absolute in general between the Absolute as such (that which absolutely is) and its content, essence or idea, we will find the former directly expressed in the Logos and the latter directly expressed in Sophia, which is thus the expressed or actualized idea. And just as an existent being is distinct from its own idea but is at the same time one with it, so the Logos too, is distinct from Sophia but inwardly united with her.²²²

Though, as Kornblatt points out, we “cannot find one single consistent use of the word Sophia or Wisdom, even in the writings of Solovyov, who is credited with being the first Russian philosopher to develop the subject,”²²³ we can affirm that for Solovyov, who was born and raised

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 41.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy: Selected Aspects*, 82.

Russian Orthodox like Dostoevsky, Sophia was the principle that allowed the incorporation of positivism into the ideal reality.

It is this role of mediation that most marks Sophia. For Solovyov, the world is not binary or dualistic, but profoundly triadic. Sophia is the third, uniting or completing side of a triad, not simply equivalent to the other two but a transfiguring force that makes of the union a new whole, undivided, yet unmerged.²²⁴

Kornblatt observes that Solovyov associated Sophia with both the divine and the created worlds, calling her the Eternal Soul of the world. “As such she is *bogochelovechestvo*, the name for the very concept he is introducing into Russian culture through his Lectures on Divine Humanity: the real interaction of God and humanity that is variously translated as Godmanhood, Divine-Humanity, or the Humanity of God.”²²⁵ In his lectures from the 1870s, Solovyov connects Sophia to Hebrew scriptures using the word for wisdom used in the original Hebrew text of Proverbs, *hokhmah* (in Cyrillic transliteration – Хохма). Although the term *hokhmah*, and the female personification of wisdom, did not develop in postbiblical Judaism as such, according to Kornblatt, in the Talmud one can find another feminine term with similar function to Sophia: *Shekinah*. This is a curious connection, as we have already discussed *Shekinah* as God’s indwelling in the context of God’s kenosis. In the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, *Shekinah* is the manifestation of the Divine in the material world.

Another possible source for Solovyov’s mediating figure that facilitates the creation of a new whole at the intersection of the divine and material worlds, is Platonic Eros, whom Solovyov sees as light mediating between spirit and matter. In one of the poems attributed to Plato, Solovyov

²²⁴ Kornblatt, 27.

²²⁵ Ibid., 9.

discovers an understanding of erotic love as a mediating force between the world of the ideas and the matter around him. Subsequently, Solovyov writes of “love as a mediating force that can bridge alienating dualism and create a new whole, as he says, “in beauty.” Love allows the “I” and the “you” [...] to embrace, allowing a new whole...”²²⁶ To describe this process of waking the potential for wholeness between two opposing beings, “Solovyov uses the term *podvig* (heroic feat); a word that typically refers to the action of saints and martyrs in Russian Orthodox culture,” says Kornblatt.²²⁷

This kind of mediating energy that allows acceptance in the interactions between the multitude of selves as living entities and the absolute unity of Divinity is of interest as we are looking to describe the processes in a truly transfiguring confessional dialogue. Solovyov’s Sophia, as something that “affects the interpenetration of opposites, transforming them through her own third agency into a new whole,” allowed the philosopher to approach the ideal of *vseedinstvo* or *sobornost* through a “triadic and ultimately mystical operation of faith.” There seems to be an undeniable connection between this uniting female principle and the transformational potential it holds in the interpenetration of opposites. In his essay *The Meaning of Love*, Solovyov explicates:

The meaning and value of love, as a feeling, consists in the fact that it causes us truly, with all our being, to recognize in another that unconditional, central significance that, due to egoism, we sense only in ourselves. Love is important not as one of our feelings, but as the transference of all of our life’s interest out of ourselves and into another, as the relocation of the very center of our personal lives.²²⁸

²²⁶ Ibid., 40.

²²⁷ Ibid., 41.

²²⁸ Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*.

The fullness of dialogic existence of self through the “central significance” of the other, while giving up “all of one’s interest” in a kenotic self-emptying stance towards extralocality, is exactly what Solovyov foregrounds as the value of unconditional love. For him, love becomes the energy that binds together not only the three hypostases of God but integrates discrete and separate human selves into a united whole that allows a “current of unearthly joy” to enter the earthly life to the delight of people and to the mutual benefit of all creation.²²⁹ Continuing to read the “Masha on the Table” entry, we find Dostoevsky’s description of such ultimate unity of human selves, merged into oneness, feeling and knowing itself forever:

Мы будем – лица, не переставая сливаться со всем, не посягая и не женьясь, и в различных разрядах (в доме Отца Моего обители многи суть). Всё себя тогда почувствует и познает навечно.²³⁰

We will be – selves, endlessly merging with everything, without marrying or being given in marriage, in different ranks (in My Father’s house there are many abodes). Everything will then feel and know itself eternally.

Kasatkina interprets Dostoevsky’s vision by applying to it the analogies with the unity of the three hypostases of God and the initial oneness of Adam and Eve. She highlights the ultimate level of empathy between the ideal self and the ideal other – the feeling that allows to *know*, i.e. to *love* the other like oneself:

По замыслу, человек должен был начать существовать по типу своего Создателя, по типу Троицы – неслиянно и нераздельно. Потому что первое разделение Адама и Евы – вернее, единого

²²⁹ Solovyov, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists*, 46.

²³⁰ Dostoevsky, PSS, Vol. 20, 174-175.

человека на Адама и Еву, – это то разделение, которое не достигает их основ. Они первоначально существуют неслиянно и нераздельно. Каждый из них чувствует все то, что чувствует другой так же, как он чувствует себя. Вот это Достоевский и имеет в виду. “Все себя тогда почувствует и познает навечно,” – то есть каждое лицо будет ощущать уже не только то, что ощущает оно одно, но ощущает всё, всех, кто в этом слиянии находится, так же, как себя.²³¹

According to the design, human existence was to be modeled after the triune nature of the Creator – unmerged yet undivided. The initial separation of Man into Adam and Eve does not reach the foundations of their existence. Originally, they exist unmerged yet undivided. Each of them feels everything that the other feels, they feel the same way as the other. This is what Dostoevsky implies. “Everything will then *feel and know* itself eternally,” – means that everyone will feel not only what their self alone feels, but will feel everything and everyone who exists in this merger the same way as one feels their own self.

VII. Recognition as Love in *The Brothers Karamazov*

This understanding of love as knowledge works well in our interpretation of Dostoevsky’s confessional encounters. Love as the process of recognizing the central importance of the other and the act of performing deeds that foreground this significance features profoundly in his transformative, exemplary confessions. The power contained in small acts of love fortified by faith in the transcendent and the accompanying kenotic behavior is shown beautifully in the confessional interactions between Grushenka and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Alyosha Karamazov’s kenotic personality characterized by openness, childlike faith, forgiveness, and undying hope is a literary image created over the span of the whole novel. In Book Seven, appropriately titled “*Alyosha*,” he becomes the full center of Dostoevsky’s artistic vision. The

²³¹ Kasatkina, “Notes from Underground and “Masha is lying on the table...” Experience of “close reading” in a close context,” 144.

following reading concentrates on a particular confessional moment between Alyosha and Grushenka in Chapter Three – “*An Onion*” (“*Луковка*”). It is of special interest to this project, holding many keys to understanding the transforming and healing power of love and kenotic behavior.

In this chapter, the reader sees Alyosha in a state of personal grief, and emotional pain, dealing with his own fractured self. He is picked up by Rakitin, who takes him to Grushenka, a woman whom the novel first presents, by the societal standards of the time, as fallen beyond grace in her lustful and greedy ways. The fateful encounter happens in Chapter Three, but the confessional moment that has the power to change lives and transform pain into happiness is foreshadowed by the last paragraph of Chapter Two. “*An Onion*” starts with a detailed background story for Grushenka, where it becomes known that

Были только слухи, что семнадцатилетнею еще девочкой была она кем-то обманута, каким-то будто бы офицером, и затем тотчас же им брошена. Офицер-де уехал и где-то потом женился, а Грушенька осталась в позоре и нищете. Говорили, впрочем, что хотя Грушенька и действительно была взята своим стариком из нищеты, но что семейства была честного и происходила как-то из духовного звания, была дочь какого-то заштатного дьякона или что-то в этом роде.²³²

There were rumors that she had been at seventeen betrayed by someone, some sort of officer, and immediately afterwards abandoned by him. The officer had gone away and afterwards married, while Grushenka had been left in poverty and disgrace. It was said, however, that though Grushenka had been raised from destitution by the old man, Samsonov, she came of a respectable family belonging to the clerical class, that she was the daughter of a deacon or something of the sort.²³³

²³² *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 24.

²³³ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

This authorial characteristic is a key to empathizing with her personality. A daughter of a clerical worker, a *popovna*, Grushenka was raised in a very specific set of ideological circumstances compared to the rest of Russia's population. *Popovichi* as a class, consisting of the children of Orthodox parish clergymen and comprising only about one percent of the country's population, regardless of being religious or irreligious, remained remarkably homogenous in their spiritual values. Laurie Manchester, a scholar who has dedicated her book to the study of *popovichi* as a social group, writes:

... modernism blurred the boundary between secular and religious spheres, and the irreligious continued to exhibit what Eliade called "degenerated religious behavior," unconsciously espousing vestiges of an exemplary religious upbringing that began with their births.²³⁴

This contextualizes and defines the ethos that was instilled in Grushenka from her childhood with the "master narratives" she absorbed growing up as a member of a clerical estate. As Manchester points out, "Because *popovichi* were defining themselves according to a tradition, [...] their ethos remained relatively static and homogenous."²³⁵ Based on the Russian Orthodox tradition, the ethical models *popovichi* drew from to conceptualize their selves were relatively stable throughout the course of several centuries. For this very narrow stratum of Russian intelligentsia, religious background provided a sense of common identity even after *popovichi* left the clerical estate and became involved in secular occupations, sharing philosophies and observing models provided by other *intelligenty*. When we consider that Grushenka was raised within the

²³⁴ Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and The Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia*, 7.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

clerical estate appropriating the Russian Orthodox ethos, and that Alyosha, albeit not a popovich, was a true believer, the coinciding world conception of these characters becomes more clearly defined. The reader understands that they had at least one thing in common – the faith in the Scriptural Word phrased in Old Church Slavonic.

During the meeting between Alyosha and Grushenka, we observe a complicated confessional interaction, which starts with an expression of genuine joy and admiration from the least likely party – Grushenka, a welcome that in return opens up Alyosha's heart as he notices a different, unexpected part of her personality:

Она резво подседа к Алеше на диван, с ним рядом, и глядела на него решительно с восхищением. И действительно была рада, не лгала, говоря это. Глаза ее горели, губы смеялись, но добродушно, весело смеялись. Алеша даже и не ожидал от нее такого доброго выражения в лице... Он встречал ее до вчерашнего дня мало, составил об ней устрашающее понятие, а вчера так страшно был потрясен ее злобною и коварною выходкой против Катерины Ивановны и был очень удивлен, что теперь вдруг увидал в ней совсем как бы иное и неожиданное существо. И как ни был он придавлен своим собственным горем, но глаза его невольно остановились на ней со вниманием. Все манеры ее как бы изменились тоже со вчерашнего дня совсем к лучшему: не было этой вчерашней слащавости в выговоре почти вовсе, этих изнеженных и манерных движений... всё было просто, простодушно, движения ее были скорые, прямые, доверчивые, но была она очень возбуждена. – Господи, экие всё вещи сегодня сбываются, право, – залепетала она опять. – И чего я тебе так рада, Алеша, сама не знаю. Вот спроси, а я не знаю.²³⁶

She gayly sat down beside Alyosha on the sofa, looking at him with positive delight. And she really was glad, she was not lying when she said so. Her eyes glowed, her lips laughed, but it was a good-hearted merry laugh. Alyosha had not expected to see such a kind expression in her face.... He had hardly met her till the day before, he had formed an alarming idea of her, and had been horribly

²³⁶ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 29.

distressed the day before by the spiteful and treacherous trick she had played on Katerina Ivanovna. He was greatly surprised to find her now altogether different from what he had expected. And, crushed as he was by his own sorrow, his eyes involuntarily rested on her with attention. Her whole manner seemed changed for the better since yesterday, there was scarcely any trace of that mawkish sweetness in her speech, of that voluptuous softness in her movements. Everything was simple and good-natured, her gestures were rapid, direct, confiding, but she was greatly excited. “Dear me, how everything comes together to-day!” she chattered on again. “And why I am so glad to see you, Alyosha, I couldn't say myself! If you ask me, I couldn't tell you.”²³⁷

Even though Grushenka says she does not know why she is so happy to see Alyosha, the reader suspects that this emotional upheaval could have been due to the recognition of the familiar, a sense of belonging that Alyosha evoked in her and other people due to his own kenotic personality that was revealed mostly in humility, sincere expressions of love towards the transcendent God, openness towards people and forgiveness of their wild and sorrowful words. Grushenka views Alyosha as an authority, and his acceptance sends her a personal message of unconditional love. The feeling of security prompts Grushenka to see him as a trustworthy confessor and to liberally admit to her transgressions towards Katerina, Dmitry, and Rakitin. The kenotic emptying out of her sins leaves a feeling of unadulterated love, as Grushenka suddenly realizes that she loves Alyosha “with all of her soul:”

– Это для тебя, Ракитка, он цыпленок, вот что... потому что у тебя совести нет, вот что! Я, видишь, я люблю его душой, вот что! Веришь, Алеша, что я люблю тебя всею душой? [...] Да ведь я низкая, я ведь неистовая, ну, а в другую минуту я, бывало, Алеша, на тебя как на совесть мою смотрю. Веришь ли, иной раз, право, Алеша, смотрю на тебя и стыжусь, всё себя стыжусь...²³⁸

²³⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²³⁸ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 31-32.

“He is a chicken to you, Rakitin ... because you've no conscience, that's what it is! You see, I love him with all my soul, that's how it is! Alyosha, do you believe I love you with all my soul? [...] I am a horrid, violent creature. But at other times I've looked upon you, Alyosha, as my conscience. Would you believe it, I sometimes look at you and feel ashamed, utterly ashamed of myself...”²³⁹

Grushenka sees Alyosha as her conscience precisely because they are both true believers and she knows it. However, it takes an act of confession on her part to show Alyosha that he is indeed seen for who he is by someone else who shares in his paradigm of values. When Grushenka finds out about the death of Father Zosima and understands Alyosha’s silence, she immediately gets off his lap, having crossed herself devoutly. This act is the very confessional moment that changes Alyosha’s soul too:

– Старец его помер сегодня, старец Зосима, святой.
 – Так умер старец Зосима! – воскликнула Грушенька. – Господи, а я того и не знала! – Она набожно перекрестилась. – Господи, да что же я, а я-то у него на коленках теперь сижу! – вскинулась она вдруг как в испуге, мигом соскочила с колен и пересела на диван. Алеша длинно с удивлением поглядел на нее, и на лице его как будто что засветилось.
 – Ракитин, – проговорил он вдруг громко и твердо, – не дразни ты меня, что я против бога моего взбунтовался. Не хочу я злобы против тебя иметь, а потому будь и ты добрее. Я потерял такое сокровище, какого ты никогда не имел, и ты теперь не можешь судить меня. Посмотри лучше сюда на нее: видел, как она меня пощадила? Я шел сюда злую душу найти – так влекло меня самого к тому, потому что я был подл и зол, а нашел сестру искреннюю, нашел сокровище – душу любящую... Она сейчас пощадила меня... Аграфена Александровна, я про тебя говорю. Ты мою душу сейчас восстановила.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov.*

²⁴⁰ *Bratya Karamazovy.*

“So Father Zosima is dead,” cried Grushenka. “Good God, I did not know!” She crossed herself devoutly. “Goodness, what have I been doing, sitting on his knee like this at such a moment!” She started up as though in dismay, instantly slipped off his knee and sat down on the sofa. Alyosha bent a long wondering look upon her and a light seemed to dawn in his face. “Rakitin,” he said suddenly, in a firm and loud voice; “don’t taunt me with having rebelled against God. I don’t want to feel angry with you, so you must be kinder, too, I’ve lost a treasure such as you have never had, and you cannot judge me now. You had much better look at her – do you see how she has pity on me? I came here to find a wicked soul – I felt drawn to evil because I was base and evil myself, and I’ve found a true sister, I have found a treasure – a loving heart. She had pity on me just now... Agrafena Alexandrovna, I am speaking of you. You’ve raised my soul from the depths.”²⁴¹

Shaken by the act of recognition, respect and love, Alyosha regains his ability to speak and from this point on, adds his voice to the narrative, protecting Grushenka, pleading for empathy towards her and asking for her forgiveness. Grushenka empathizes with Alyosha’s grief over the loss of a loved one and reacts with solemn respect and veneration. She immediately stops teasing Alyosha and acts in a way that confirms her knowledge of good and evil is the ethical system that involves God, the transcendent. She crosses herself piously and seems to be afraid to be “bad” in such a grave moment, when in a kenotic movement her own troubles give way and provide space for her to feel the depth of Alyosha’s despair.

Alan Jacobs, a Christian scholar and critic, in his recent essay “*Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love*,” says:

First, God’s “I-for-myself” and “I-for-the-other” finds its perfect expression in the *kenosis* of Christ: the Word become flesh (John 1:14) is God’s signature, in Bakhtin’s sense, upon his love for us. But second, that divine signature, once recognized by me, provides

²⁴¹ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

the ground for, or source of, my own determination to act answerably, to “undersign” and “incarnate” my love for the other.²⁴²

Alyosha recognizes that Grushenka just gave him the gift of mercy because of her deeply loving soul who believes in the same truth as he does and “undersigns that belief with loving behavior. This moment of mutual recognition in the light of a shared third restores Alyosha’s soul. His kind words to Grushenka trigger a revolution in her self as well: “Он меня сестрой своей назвал, и я никогда того впредь не забуду!” (“He called me his sister, and I will never forget it!”)²⁴³ A brief confessional moment produces a miracle: Alyosha is convinced that Grushenka saved him, and she is honored beyond measure to be seen as worthy of being called a sister by someone she loves spiritually. The simultaneous acknowledgment of unity in the transcendent God creates a sense of belonging, safety and love able to shake up the hurting self and regenerate it with an inflow of divine grace. Dostoevsky writes:

Ракитин удивлялся на их восторженность и обидчиво злился, хотя и мог бы сообразить, что у обоих как раз сошлось всё, что могло потрясти их души так, как случается это нечасто в жизни.²⁴⁴

Rakitin wondered at their enthusiasm. He was aggrieved and annoyed, though he might have reflected that each of them was just passing through a spiritual crisis such as does not come often in a lifetime.²⁴⁵

²⁴² Jacobs, Alan. “Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love,” 39-40.

²⁴³ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 33.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

An additional confessional moment between these two characters happens when Grushenka relates the Parable of the Onion – a story that shows how a selfless kind deed in love for the other can have a life-saving effect not only on the recipient of such kindness, but also on the giver. Grushenka uses the metaphorical little onion to define the act of mercy she extended to Alyosha just minutes ago. Diminishing her own goodness, calling herself a wicked, bad woman in the continued kenotic effort to speak the bad out and purify her soul with truth, she says:

Ракитке я похвалилась, что луковку подала, а тебе иначе скажу: *всего-то* я луковку какую-нибудь во всю жизнь мою подала, всего только на мне и есть добродетели. И не хвали ты меня после того, Алеша, не почитай меня доброю, злая я, злющая-презлющая, а будешь хвалить, в стыд введешь. Эх, да уж покаюсь совсем. Слушай, Алеша...²⁴⁶

I boasted to Rakitin that I had given away an onion, but to you I'll say: "I've done nothing but give away one onion all my life, that's the only good deed I've done." So don't praise me, Alyosha, don't think me good, I am bad, I am a wicked woman, and you make me ashamed if you praise me. Eh, I must confess everything. Listen, Alyosha.²⁴⁷

From there, the flow of confessions does not stop till the end of the chapter. Grushenka's emotional pain pours out into the willing and loving ears of Alyosha, until his confessant is reduced to tears for lack of words to express how little she thinks of herself. Alyosha's reaction to the information received in such a highly emotive way is one of empathy, kindness, and sincere admiration. He calls on Rakitin to have mercy on Grushenka's tortured soul, but if Rakitin had not

²⁴⁶ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 34.

²⁴⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

been there, Alyosha would be exclaiming to God, begging for Grushenka from the same level with her to be forgiven and comforted:

– Миша, – проговорил он, – не сердись. Ты обижен ею, но не сердись. Слышал ты ее сейчас? Нельзя с души человека столько спрашивать, надо быть милосерднее... Алеша проговорил это в неудержимом порыве сердца. Ему надо было высказаться, и он обратился к Ракитину. Если б не было Ракитина, он стал бы восклицать один.²⁴⁸

“Misha,” he said, “don’t be angry. She wounded you, but don’t be angry. You heard what she said just now? You mustn’t ask too much of human endurance, one must be merciful.” Alyosha said this at the instinctive prompting of his heart. He felt obliged to speak and he turned to Rakitin. If Rakitin had not been there, he would have spoken to the air.²⁴⁹

Rakitin instinctively recognizes the strength hidden in Alyosha’s apparent weakness, and mockingly likens him to the Man of God, which is the attributive phrase traditionally used in Russian Orthodox religious canon along with the name of Aleksei.²⁵⁰ He purposefully diminishes the greatness of Alyosha’s ideal and hates his devout faith in human goodness:

Это тебя твоим старцем давеча зарядили, и теперь ты своим старцем в меня и выпалил, Алешенька, божий человек, – с ненавистною улыбкой проговорил Ракитин.²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 37.

²⁴⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁵⁰ Note the reference to “Алексий, человек Божий” from *Четьи-Минеи*.

²⁵¹ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 37.

“You were so primed up with your elder's teaching last night that now you have to let it off on me, Alexey, man of God!” said Rakitin, with a smile of hatred.²⁵²

But even to insults like this, Alyosha reacts with a call to recognize the greatness of Grushenka's love and to see the treasure hidden in her troubled soul. He compares himself to her and realizes that she is above him in her ability to empathize with suffering and to forgive:

Я шел сюда, чтобы погибнуть, и говорил: «Пусть, пусть!» – и это из-за моего малодушия, а она через пять лет муки, только что кто-то первый пришел и ей искреннее слово сказал, – всё простила, всё забыла и плачет! Обидчик ее воротился, зовет ее, и она всё прощает ему, и спешит к нему в радости, и не возьмет ножа, не возьмет! Нет, я не таков. Я не знаю, таков ли ты, Миша, но я не таков! Я сегодня, сейчас этот урок получил... Она выше любовью, чем мы... Слышал ли ты от нее прежде то, что она рассказала теперь? Нет, не слышал; если бы слышал, то давно бы всё понял... и другая, обиженная третьего дня, и та пусть простит ее! И простит, коль узнает... и узнает... Эта душа еще не примиренная, надо щадить ее... в душе этой может быть сокровище...²⁵³

I came here seeking my ruin, and said to myself, ‘What does it matter?’ in my cowardliness, but she, after five years in torment, as soon as any one says a word from the heart to her – it makes her forget everything, forgive everything, in her tears! The man who has wronged her has come back, he sends for her, and she forgives him everything, and hastens joyfully to meet him and she won't take a knife with her. She won't! No, I am not like that. I don't know whether you are, Misha, but I am not like that. It's a lesson to me... She is more loving than we... Have you heard her speak before of what she has just told us? No, you haven't; if you had, you'd have understood her long ago... and the person insulted the day before yesterday must forgive her, too! She will, when she knows... and she

²⁵² *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁵³ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 37.

shall know... This soul is not yet at peace with itself, one must be tender with it... there may be a treasure in that soul...²⁵⁴

Gasping for breath as if short of air because of the emotional fullness, Alyosha smiles. He sees that good has conquered evil in Grushenka's soul, and that she has forgiven the one person who hurt her the most. Even though she is not able to admit to this forgiveness without feeling as a bad person yet, Alyosha knows that her ability to love is greater than her pain, and this recognition transforms and uplifts Grushenka in the way no one has been able to do prior to Alyosha. With the degree of kenotic love increasing by the minute, the two participants of the confession join each other in tears:

– Не знаю я, не ведаю, ничего не ведаю, что он мне такое сказал, сердцу сказалося, сердце он мне перевернул... Пожалел он меня первый, единственный, вот что! Зачем ты, херувим, не приходил прежде, – упала вдруг она пред ним на колени, как бы в иступлении. – Я всю жизнь такого, как ты, ждала, знала, что кто-то такой придет и меня простит. Верила, что и меня кто-то полюбит, гадкую, не за один только срам!.. – Что я тебе такого сделал? – умиленно улыбаясь, отвечал Алеша, нагнувшись к ней и нежно взяв ее за руки, – луковку я тебе подал, одну самую малую луковку, только, только! ... И, проговорив, сам заплакал.²⁵⁵

“I don't know what he said to me, it went straight to my heart; he has wrung my heart.... He is the first, the only one who has pitied me, that's what it is. Why did you not come before, you angel?” She fell on her knees before him as though in a sudden frenzy. “I've been waiting all my life for someone like you, I knew that someone like you would come and forgive me. I believed that, nasty as I am, someone would really love me, not only with a shameful love!” “What have I done to you?” answered Alyosha, bending over her with a tender smile, and gently taking her by the hands; “I only gave

²⁵⁴ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁵⁵ *Bratya Karamazovy*, V. 2, 39.

you an onion, nothing but a tiny little onion, that was all!” He was moved to tears himself as he said it.²⁵⁶

This transformation of two discrete selves into an emotional whole happens in the active confession of love seen within the framework involving the transcendent. The reader witnesses kenotic principles at work: the verbal and emotional emptying of two people’s minds connected in a confessional interaction that is mediated by the faith in the absolute Other. The “heroic deed” of love – speaking without judgment and joining in pleas for forgiveness – produces the miracle of alleviated guilt and binds two separate selves in reconciliation with the Truth. In this abstract, we witness the resolutions of inner personal conflicts in Grushenka as well as in Alyosha. This encounter also serves as a positive contribution to resolving the social conflict between Grushenka and other people, who are used to seeing her in a judgmental way. The trialogic nature of Dostoevsky’s transformative, successful confessional moments is seen clearly in the passages recounted above.

VIII. Conclusion

The presence or absence of the absolute Other affects the meaning carried by particular verbal expressions employed in confessional encounters. I see this interpenetration of personal truths and their correlation to a higher, transcendent truth, as the trialogic discursive structure that Dostoevsky runs through the interactions of characters in all of his literary works. For Dostoevsky, the meaning of an utterance that is limited merely to the interpersonal, dialogic, “horizontal” plane of understanding lacks the depth of the connection to the ideal Third, and therefore the “vertical” perspective, equidistant from all of the participants of a human interaction. The purely dialogic meaning is bound to be imbalanced, erroneous, and as such – sinful. A mistruth, an error, a lie –

²⁵⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

all are transgressions against language and the One Truth that Dostoevsky kept in sight. In his writing, he was searching for the ultimate Truth, for the final meaning of the word, or, in Bakhtin's terms, for the "word without escape" (слово без лазейки). The sincerity of a confessional statement is a necessary indicator of a true, successful, emotionally liberating confession in Dostoevsky's oeuvre. What I term in this study as kenosis, is one of the relational principles that Dostoevsky foregrounded in his artistic interpretations of confessional process and his search for honesty. Self-minimization, giving up one's dominant position and the right to judge, abstracting one's will to allow space for the other to exist in their own right – all these kenotic manifestations create optimal conditions for a peaceful outcome of any conflict. Dostoevsky shows that the kind of energy that arises from such a stance between self and the other allows communication to happen in a way that is based on favorable understanding and acceptance. This binding energy of love facilitates interpenetration and reconciliation – the processes creative of a more wholesome entity – be it an inner self, a social self, or the entirety of One living Being that lies outside of human perception and cognition, in the transcendent.

True sacramental confession makes incredibly careful use of language, reproducing the word of the divine Other, repeating the names of sins as quotes from the Scripture. Confessions that deviate from this model may not have their full healing effect, or even fail completely. Sasse states that it was Dostoevsky's intention to create protagonists who fail their attempts at confession to another human or to their own self as they doubt the existence of the transcendent Other and do not know exactly where they are addressing their confessions.²⁵⁷ In the next chapter, we will turn to such "erroneous" confessions to offer a view of the interpersonal relationship mistakes that Dostoevsky intended his readers to learn from.

²⁵⁷ Sasse, 89.

Chapter Three

Dostoevsky's Failed Confessions: The Loss of Self

The previous chapter argued that Dostoevsky's novels promote a way of relating to the other that can preclude losing the goodness, harmony, and happiness of the individual self under the negative impact of the evil communicated by the environment. The key to resisting the judgment of other people's wrongdoings is in the concept of kenosis. Informed by millennia of religious texts, this philosophy exists in many religious traditions and appeals to the feeling of love to motivate a voluntary self-minimizing stance. Such withdrawal of self makes space both for the human free will and the transcendent Other recognized as the source of the universal law. Dostoevsky's novels indicate that both in the delivering and the accepting role in an interaction, the self is fortified, not weakened, by inhabiting the self-emptying and self-withdrawing energy movement in between *I* and *Thou*.²⁵⁸

Dostoevsky's confessions examined thus far show that confessors experience no damage to their inner mental state under the condition of kenotically stepping away from feeling superior while witnessing the mistakes of the confessing other. Acknowledging and affirming the eternal goodness of their confessants despite their transgressions, characters like Sonya Marmeladova, Alyosha Karamazov, and elder Zosima do not change for the worst even though they constantly serve as depositories for the negativity of others. None of them are "infested" with the confessed sin. Instead, Dostoevsky's reader sees such kenotic characters' sense of self reinforced through the acknowledgment of truth and accountability that they share with their confessants. Such is Alyosha's emotional reaction to seeing Grushenka recognize her indecent behavior, such is Sonya's joy and decision to follow Raskolnikov in repentance, and such is Zosima's unwavering

²⁵⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*.

acceptance of God in sinners. The self of these confessors is not only preserved but actively participates in the energy exchange that allows them to free the other's conscience from the constraints of guilt. The energy of grace received through the acceptance of joint responsibility before the transcendent Third acts as an agent of healing and rebirth. Kenosis presupposes voluntary self-minimization, and Dostoevsky writes this philosophical approach into the characters of his most successful confessors, pointing to the responsible way of dealing with the individual feeling of righteousness.

This chapter argues that Dostoevsky also realized the impossibility of humans fully achieving kenosis. When taken to the extreme, kenotic self-surrender can lead to a complete disregard of the self with its boundaries, responsibilities and needs – an approach that would lose sight of the significance of every “I” and may lead to the disintegration of self. It is ethically and existentially impossible for a wholesome human to give a complete *carte blanche* to the surrounding reality. The boundaries between good and evil become fluid unless upheld by everyone for their own self, both in the interactions with others and in one's own relationship with what one knows as truth. This view echoes Jacobs, who argues that *complete* self-emptying – the *elimination* of one's self for the benefit of the other – would be equal to “the abdication of answerability.”²⁵⁹ Jacobs, in his turn, mentions Bakhtin's insistence on “not merging with another but preserving one's own position of extralocality and the surplus of vision and understanding connected with it.”²⁶⁰ It is this position of extralocality that is on offer from the transcendent Other at any given moment for a carrier of dialogic consciousness. From this point of view, all humans are equal, both in their goodness and in their mistakes, which disallows any judgment of

²⁵⁹ Jacobs, Alan. “Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love.”

²⁶⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 299.

righteousness. Because self and the other being reflections of each other for each other, any negative judgment will be amplified till the physical eruption of conflict. The law of individuality, viewed by Dostoevsky as an obstacle to the ideal of absolute love, is one of the laws that allow the development of every person as a unique entity, and it cannot be ignored by a healthy, balanced human consciousness. Faith in the honest judgment by the ultimate Other, combined with this understanding of self and personal responsibility, can preclude vilifying the human other, thereby preventing conflict.

Dostoevsky's exact wording of the sentiment regarding the voluntary giving position of self in relation to the other is curious in that it acknowledges the *seeming*, illusory nature of the "annihilation of the "I"." Going back to his notes on Masha's death, we read:

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. [...] The highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his "I," is to **seemingly** annihilate that "I," to give it wholly to each and every one, wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness.²⁶¹

Noticing the fullness of giving one's self to the other ("wholeheartedly") and the complete investment in the well-being of the other ("selflessly"), we see that in Dostoevsky's vision, the intensity of the kenotic self-emptying does not **really** harm or destroy the self. The self is not in danger. The individual is extremely happy as a result of such behavioral choices. "Seemingly" here refers, of course, to perception. In this case, it is the "I," the Ego, that feels like the self will be annihilated if minimized. This sentiment is normal in human psychology, stemming from the

²⁶¹ Proffer, 39-43.

absolute vulnerability of children, who are forced by the “law of individuality”²⁶² to establish and widen their own boundaries during the process of relational self-formation and growth while being completely dependent on the surrounding adults. Alina Wyman’s 2016 volume claims that

Bakhtin on Dostoevsky is problematic. On the level of character, a constant privileging of the other in dialogue and the ‘coexistence-and-interaction’ mandate in polyphony ignore a hero’s growth over time and discourage cultivation of a private zone.²⁶³

Wyman thinks that Bakhtin’s early ruminations on the relations where ‘I’ is obligated to consummate the other do not coincide with his Dostoevsky study, which promotes radical incompleteness and shared being. But balance can be restored if we recall Bakhtin’s early concept of *вживание* or ‘live entering’: an ‘active empathy.’ Caryl Emerson summarizes Wyman’s argument:

This is not Nietzsche’s despised pity, reactive and duplicative. ‘Active’ here means morally potent. The empathizer does not collapse into the other’s pain. Rather, my ‘I’ briefly steps in to your space (the mechanism here is unclear), our horizons momentarily coincide and are mutually enriched, after which we return to our separate selves. Such compassionate, temporary consummation of ‘I’ and ‘other’ is never a finalization, never a fusion, always a possible way out.²⁶⁴

Wyman’s description of a momentary merging of selves in a common space is worth noticing, although we would describe it as happening not on the territory of the polemical other,

²⁶² PSS, V. 20, 172-175.

²⁶³ Wyman, “The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky,” *Studies in Russian Literature and Theory*.

²⁶⁴ Emerson, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 340-342.

but on the territory of the self that temporarily cedes its boundaries in a kenotic self-withdrawal to create space for the suffering that has to leave the other. It is encouraging to see scholars who attest that the “way out” lies through the compassionate understanding of the empathizing self. It is not always clear, however, how a self can have endless resources of empathy for the immeasurable pain of the surrounding world. To be properly understood, Wyman claims, “Dostoevsky’s positive heroes need both Bakhtin and Scheler. Scheler’s personality model permits a self to retain a private ‘surplus’, its own ‘individual ineffable’, which gives it the dignity, traction for change, and trust in the wholeness of its own embodied image that Bakhtin withholds.”²⁶⁵ In order to preserve stability and healthy boundaries of self when the other is faltering, the moral potency and wholeness of self need to be rooted in a locus not coinciding with the other. This postulates the need for an ideal of self-giving – a self with an increased, endless capacity to create space for the ontological other. Further in his diary, Dostoevsky formulates this development goal for humanity – the highest degree of happiness and fullness of life, achieved when

... the law of the *I* merges with the law of humanism, and in the merging both, both the *I* and the *all* (in appearance two extreme opposites) **mutually annihilated for each other**, at the same time attain the highest goal of their individual development, each on their own. [...] This is the heaven of Christ. The whole history of humanity as well as every human is only development, struggle, striving and reaching this goal.²⁶⁶

Keeping in mind the metaphorical nature of ‘mutual annihilation,’ I see it as mutual self-minimization and acceptance of the will of the Other through a human interaction performed with as much kenotic love as is humanly possible. Dostoevsky’s characters tuned into the feeling of

²⁶⁵ Wyman.

²⁶⁶ Proffer.

personal responsibility often express it in a kenotic stance towards spiritual and civil laws. This voluntary submission to the letter of the law creates, in Dostoevsky's vision, the optimal environment for a thriving social structure, a polyphony of well-expressed individual selves, joined by mutual recognition and affirmation of the other with love.

Delving into Dostoevsky's plots to explore the details of the confessional moments that fail to restore the wholeness of the self burdened by low emotional energies, I aim to formulate a variety of relational deviations from the previously outlined model of a successful healing confession. During an overview of confessional addressees in Dostoevsky's writing, this chapter will pay close attention to the *confessor's* ability to assume a consciously kenotic position towards both the penitent and the transcendent Other. A section of this discussion will be devoted to Myshkin, a seemingly ideal confessor who, nevertheless, demonstrates a complete failure to perform transformative confessions and declines into madness after a short period of serving forgiveness on his community. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky offers several insights on how problems arising within a wrongfully orchestrated confession might culminate in the loss of self, overwhelmed by the weight of the received evil.

Looking further at the faulty confessional communications in Dostoevsky's literary universe, I will explore the role of the *confessant* and their emotional composition during the verbally kenotic act of "pouring one's sins into someone else's ear,"²⁶⁷ literally and metaphorically speaking. One of the goals of this dissertation is to show that for Dostoevsky's characters, confession cannot be a constructive self-healing practice without the acknowledgment of the presence of grace in the moment, and without the humility of an emotionally sincere, repentant deliverance of self-judgment. A close look into the famous unpublished confession of Nikolai

²⁶⁷ An apt metaphor used by Sylvia Sasse in her study of confession in Russian literature.

Stavrogin to Fr. Tikhon in *Demons* will help define the penitent's confessional effort that brings no relief or redemption.

I. Confessional Addressees and Configuration of Confession

In Russian Orthodoxy, the Sacrament of Confession is performed with a priest as a witness and a mediator between God and the penitent. However, confessants are directing their word to the Third who is invisibly present at the event, not to the confessor. The transcendent Other is always present in religious confessional interactions and serves as the ultimate addressee of the confessional utterance, and the only judge. The human confessor acts merely as a representative - the physical addressee of the utterance meant for the Other - requiring the confessor to assume a kenotic stance both towards the transcendent Third and towards the emotionally charged words of the penitent. Temporarily emptying their mind of the personal knowledge of right and wrong and creating space for receiving the confession of the other, the physical addressee of the confession acts as a reservoir for the negative knowledge delivered by the confessant suffering under the weight of guilty conscience. Asking the transcendent Other for the weight to be lifted, the confessor acts as a mediator between the originator of the sin and the ultimate authority whose Word is used to define the committed acts of evil. It is only this ultimate authority that has the power to judge and absolve the penitent of the guilt for their transgressions. The confessor does not pass judgment, but serves as a conduit, passing information through. Once the negative is delivered and redirected to the transcendent Other, the positive, the energy of grace, comes to the confessant through the words of deliverance uttered by the mediator. The ability to "let go" of evil is crucial for restorative healing in confession.

Sacramental confession as a speech act is essentially a form of self-judgment that takes the need for judging away from the other. The pronounced self-judgment originates in the word of the

absolute, transcendent Other. The confessant quotes the Word to show understanding of self in the light of the transcendent ethical ideal. In this configuration, the judgment of the Other is invisibly present through verbal formulations of human wrongdoings. The ultimate judge is also the only authority that has the right to forgive trespasses, possessing the power to lift the burden of guilt. At no offense to human others, solely the absolute Other can be all-forgiving, benevolent, and unconditionally loving. The feeling of trust towards the ideal Other is immanent to self-cognition and self-expression, notices Bakhtin. Trusting in God's goodness allows people to trust in their own goodness as well as recognize and affirm the positive in the other. This stance of self, vis-à-vis the other based in the transcendent Third, is stable and sustainable. It combines the withdrawal of the negative judgment with the subsequent influx of the positive energy emanating from the Ideal and filling up the created space. *Theosis* – the transformative process of approaching the likeness of God through the grace that dwells in a trialogic relationship of two selves with a triune transcendent Other is what Christians call Church:

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.²⁶⁸

Socially speaking, family can be viewed as a Little Church, being the most frequent form of long-term bonding between two humans united by a shared goal and, ideally, by love. Dostoevsky's exploration of family relationships and the state of the Church as a communal body of believers concentrates on the problems of self-development, sin absolution, and the meaning of

²⁶⁸ *The Bible*, NRSV, Matthew 18:19, 20.

“Истинно также говорю вам, что если двое из вас согласятся на земле просить о всяком деле, то, чего бы ни попросили, будет им от Отца Моего Небесного, ибо, где двое или трое собраны во имя Мое, там Я посреди них.” *The Bible*, MRSV.

justice, finding the only working resolution in the confessional, trialogic mode of thinking. For Dostoevsky, it was all about love for God and love for the other: the inherently trialogic structure of human consciousness defines the principles of life without suffering. His literary work prompted further developments of the philosophy of dialogue embracing rational recognition of the transcendent third. In his study of Dostoevsky's discourse, Bakhtin uses the terms "другой как таковой" and "абсолютный Другой" to denote the transcendent Other present in dialogic speech acts of Dostoevsky's characters. Discussing the topic of judgment in 1924, he also terms this third participant "a *possible* judge," and points out that this phenomenon exists only in a religious, trialogic consciousness:

Где для нравственного сознания два человека, там для религиозного сознания есть третий: возможный оценивающий.²⁶⁹

Where the moral consciousness sees two selves, the religious consciousness sees three: including the possible judge.

Later, in 1961, Bakhtin uses the terms "нададресат" and "лазеечный адресат" and describes variations of ideal addressees utilized in different ideological discourses.²⁷⁰ The basic uniting feature of these invariants of the "superaddressee" is being the source of the "just and justifying understanding" of the confessing self. Sasse writes:

Нададресат олицетворяет не закон, окончательность или цель, но правильное ответное понимание вообще.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Bakhtin, *Problema obosnovannogo pokoia*.

²⁷⁰ "... бог, абсолютная истина, суд беспристрастной человеческой совести, народ, суд истории, наука и т. п." Bakhtin, "1961 god. Zametki."

²⁷¹ Sasse, 127.

The superaddressee represents the right reciprocal understanding, not the law, finality or goal.

Belief in the transcendent Other as the superaddressee allows the self to deal with the answerability for the choices made in the freedom of will. The physical absence of the ultimate judge creates relational dynamics that perform real psychological wonders and provide deliverance from the weight of guilt. The therapeutic effect of a confessional utterance hinges on the ideal understanding of the confessed evil, where the addressee recognizes the personal responsibility of the confessant but does it with all-justifying love. Since the confessor cannot justify the evil (it would cause the collapse of the boundaries of self), the only reasonably available reaction is to kenotically accept shared responsibility, recognize the universal nature of human trespasses, co-suffer in empathy, turn to the transcendent Other for alleviation of now shared suffering, accept forgiveness in humility, and return to peace.

Admittedly, a real addressee can rarely provide such an ideal, loving understanding of a willfully committed evil. The self-affirming human psyche does not have much capacity to create space for the other. Dialogically oriented selves can display openness to receiving the other in their truth but afterward, struggle with letting go of the witnessed evil. The undeserved suffering shared in 'living empathy' inevitably poisons and burdens the confessor if there is no outlet for the negative, corrupting energy. A properly kenotic, trialogic confession works as a sustainable liberating process precisely due to the relational structure with the transcendent embedded in its model. The most personally rejuvenating interactions in Dostoevsky's works include an understanding of the shared object of faith that is *possibly* there, in addition to the dialogic communication with the other.

Noticing the crucial role that the moment of address indeterminacy plays in the liberating and purifying effects of confession, Sylvia Sasse is a modern scholar who writes about the psychological necessity of mentally engaging the possibility of the ideal addressee. She points out that the moment of liberation from rational guilt in confession depends not only on the visibly present participants of the ancient purifying ritual but also on the rationally unknowable and undefinable Other. In this relational structure, the confessor's human knowledge of Good and Evil has less significance than their faith in the transcendent ideal, which also happens to be the ideal of forgiveness in the Orthodox Christian tradition. Sasse claims that Bakhtin's cathartic "карнавальный момент исповеди" ("the carnival moment of confession") happens when the guilt voluntarily taken onto oneself and confessed to the other is paradoxically released through the all-forgiving love of the ideal Other who invisibly exists in the dialogic relationship between *I* and *Thou*.²⁷² She concludes:

... к очищению и освобождению ведёт не само признание в грехах, но вписанная в исповедь структура. [...] происходит это [...] в силу освобождающего момента самой незавершённости.²⁷³

... it is not the recognition of sins in itself that leads to purification and redemption, but the structure imbedded into the confession. [...] this happens [...] as a result of the liberating moment of incompleteness.

The topic of releasing guilt dwelt firmly in Dostoevsky's mind after his own political trespasses had been forgiven by the monarch. His death sentence was lifted right when he humbled

²⁷² Ibid., 127-128.

²⁷³ Ibid.

himself to death, and the writer was gifted another chance for a meaningful life. The therapeutic reliving of this traumatic experience might have been one of the reasons why Dostoevsky's characters are so often described in confessional situations that explore human ability to forgive the other and release their own feeling of guilt.

Dostoevsky's exploration of the confessional genre shows his readers a whole range of relational aberrations that disrupt the expectations of a successful guilt-absolving conversation. Only a few kenotically gifted individuals are portrayed capable of serving as true confessors, while most of Dostoevsky's characters behave like ordinary, sinful humans, even if they are cognizant of the transcendent Third. The moment of rebellion against the will of the Other and the conscious choice to place no faith in the trialogic way of thinking captures Dostoevsky's attention throughout his work on the philosophy of renewal and rebirth. *Бунт (rebellion)* as a willful behavior opposed to kenosis is never the right choice in Dostoevsky's literary world, where emotional rebellion against God and the subsequent downshifting of consciousness is shown to bear the fruit of real, material, deadly sin.

Bakhtin was the first one to postulate that Dostoevsky created a number of literary confessions which, instead of affirming the transcendent Other, aim to undermine God's existence, and instead of alleviating human suffering, aim to condemn the sins of the confessing other.²⁷⁴ The reader might remember interactions involving Smerdyakov, Kirillov, Svidrigailov, Nikolai Stavrogin, Totsky to mention just a few unsavory characters. Bakhtin claimed that most of Dostoevsky's characters in their confessional urge create imaginary Others of their own fancy instead of turning their mind in faith to the Christian ideal of forgiveness and kenotic humility.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Bakhtin, "Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo."

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

In the absence of the ultimate judging figure, these characters return to the dialogic communication structure that lacks any final authority, prompting unending self-criticism and attempts of confessing to oneself. Often, in situations of false confession, the reader is forced to assume the position of the polemical third, invisibly present and omniscient, only to investigate their own emotional capacity for the execution of justice in comparison to the ideal of kenotic love.²⁷⁶

Our theory suggests that if the confessor's state of mind is kenotic – vacated of the individual will and open to the will of the Other known from the Scripture – the knowledge and the emotional weight of the confessant's sins, the literal “poison” for the human psyche received from the wrongdoings of the other, is released by accepting the judgment of absolution through the relieving energy of grace and does not cause damage to the individual's consciousness and relationships.

Failure to withhold one's personal judgment constitutes a transgression against the expressed will of the Other, which results in the emotional rejection of the committed evil and its perpetrator, disrupting social relationships and placing an often-unbearable load of co-suffering on the confessor's self-aware and self-judging mind. Confessional act in its due form has the power to restore the wholeness of the guilty conscience and effect a personal transformation (often termed *metanoia*²⁷⁷ in religious thought) of the confessant, all without emotionally damaging the confessor. In practice, only some religious professionals can assume the kenotic position necessary

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 130, 326, 399.

²⁷⁷ Greek, from *metanoiein* to change one's mind, repent, from *meta-* + *noein* to think, from *nous* mind. A transformative change of heart, *especially*: a spiritual conversion. *Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster.

to perform a successful confession, and providing such services to the public is one of the major functions of the Church as a social institution. Certain individuals can be considered “natural” confessors due to their heightened sense of empathy. However, acting as agents of emotional support outside of the Church’s hierarchical structure, they are often unable to bring relief to their confessants and suffer the loss of their own self. Such is Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* – the writer’s attempt to portray a perfectly beautiful human.

II. Prince Myshkin: Kenotic Idiocy and Beauty in Confession

In the letter to his niece, Sofia Ivanova, from January 13, 1868, Dostoevsky shares the main idea behind the creation of *The Idiot*:

The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful person. There’s nothing more difficult than that in the whole world, and especially now. All the writers, and not just ours, but even all the European ones, whoever undertook the depiction of a positively beautiful person, always had to pass. Because it’s a measureless task. The beautiful is an ideal, and the ideal – both ours and that of civilized Europe – is far from having been achieved. There’s only one positively beautiful person in the world – Christ, so that the appearance of this measurelessly, infinitely beautiful person is in fact of course an infinite miracle. [...] Compassion appears for the beautiful that is mocked and does not know its own value, and therefore, sympathy appears in the reader too. [...] The novel is called *The Idiot*...²⁷⁸

In this letter, “the beautiful that does not know its value” is a description of a kenotic disposition which Dostoevsky used as a literary device to evoke sympathy in his readers. The question whether the novelist tried to portray Myshkin as a Christ figure had been extensively disputed, and despite many parallels that can be drawn between Prince Myshkin and Jesus,

²⁷⁸ *Complete Letters*, 3, 20-22.

negative readings of the prince abound.²⁷⁹ The limitations that Dostoevsky placed on his protagonist may be seen to serve several purposes: staying away from the blasphemous attempts to create a secularized Christ, showcasing the beauty of human weakness, and evoking a sense of recognition in the readers expected to empathize with the innocently suffering Myshkin.

In his reactions and stance vis-à-vis the other, Prince Myshkin is potentially an ideal confessional addressee, but Dostoevsky repeatedly shows Myshkin's social engagements end badly for himself. The prince loses his mind and brings no lasting peace to his confessants, several of whom self-destruct under the weight of emotional suffering. One explanation of these tragic outcomes could be that Dostoevsky wanted to explore the functioning of an "ideal" man on a merely "horizontal" level – *I* and *You*, eliminating the transcendent Other, Scriptural Word, and the energy of grace available in the traditional, sacramental confessional exchange. I argue that *The Idiot* can be understood as an exploration of consciousness in a kenotically oriented self who misses the active regular engagement with the transcendent Third through the obligatory rituals of the Church. Does Myshkin go to Confession? Does he receive Holy Communion? Does he pray? Is he in or outside of the Church? These questions are important because they clarify Myshkin's philosophical position and show the places where his humanity dwells.

Interestingly, there is little to no mention of Myshkin's religiosity in the novel, except for his knowledge of the biblical and hagiographical canon in minute details and an understanding of the "religious feeling" that he ascribes to Russians, without specifying what exactly this phenomenon consists of. Encountering characters that are pious (like Nastasya Filippovna), or questioning their faith (like Rogozhin), the prince acts as a dependable supporter of faith.

²⁷⁹ See, for example, Krieger, Murray. "Dostoevsky's *Idiot*: The Curse of Saintliness," 1962, as one of the first such interpretations.

Myshkin's stories, responses, and understanding let others believe in their righteousness and in the existence of ultimate justice. Myshkin usually brings peace to interactions, but at what cost? Readers notice that containing and releasing the received evil in order to preserve a loving, open stance towards the other, Myshkin experiences uncontrollable fear, body tremors, and, ultimately, epileptic seizures. The relief that Prince Lev Nikolaevich provides is temporary and shallow, and he is often deemed an idiot unable to take care of himself, let alone the other. Thinking about the ways to rescue Nastasya Filippovna from her miserable social and mental state, Myshkin is only able to produce a plan where he gets her abroad to European doctors. His personal presence, he says, is out of the question:

Ехал же я сюда, имея намерение: я хотел ее, наконец, уговорить за границу поехать для поправления здоровья; она очень расстроена и телом, и душой, головой особенно, и, по-моему, в большом уходе нуждается. Сам я за границу ее сопровождать не хотел, а имел в виду все это без себя устроить. Говорю тебе истинную правду.²⁸⁰

I confess I came here with an object. I wished to persuade Nastasya to go abroad for her health; she requires it. Both mind and body need a change badly. I did not intend to take her abroad myself. I was going to arrange for her to go without me. Now I tell you honestly...²⁸¹

The confessor who failed to deal with the evil of his confessants through love, Prince Myshkin is quietly impressive in his kenotic state of mind. He gave up outward resistance having, lost a lot of love, support, and stability as a child – his mother, family, home, country, and control

²⁸⁰ Dostoevsky, *Idiot*, 236.

²⁸¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*.

over his own body and mind.²⁸² Myshkin's conversation with the Epanchins at the beginning of the novel introduces the state of disruption and depression of self he was going through when he was sent away from his roots to treat his mental problems in Europe. Myshkin describes his trip to the asylum and how he was woken up from his emotional stupor:

Когда меня везли из России, чрез разные немецкие города, я только молча смотрел и, помню, даже ни о чем не расспрашивал. [...] Помню: грусть во мне была нестерпимая; мне даже хотелось плакать; я все удивлялся и беспокоился: ужасно на меня подействовало, что все это чужое; это я понял. Чужое меня убивало. Совершенно пробудился я от этого мрака, помню я, вечером, в Базеле, при въезде в Швейцарию, и меня разбудил крик осла на городском рынке. Осел ужасно поразил меня и необыкновенно почему-то мне понравился, а с тем вместе вдруг в моей голове как бы все прояснело.²⁸³

When they brought me from Russia, through various German towns, I only looked on silently and, I remember, I didn't even ask about anything. [...] I remember a feeling of unbearable sadness; I even wanted to weep; I was surprised and anxious all the time: it affected me terribly that it was all foreign – that much I understood. The foreign was killing me. I was completely awakened from that darkness, I remember, in the evening, in Basel, as we drove into Switzerland, and what roused me was the braying of an ass in the town market. The ass struck me terribly and for some reason I took

²⁸² Brian Johnson summarizes: "In response to General Epanchin's initial questioning, Myshkin reveals the conditions of his upbringing, the effect of his seizures upon his mental condition, and his medical treatment at an asylum in Switzerland: The prince, at his parents' death, was left still a little child; all his life he lived and grew up in the country, since his health also called for village air. Pavlishchev entrusted him to some old lady landowners, his relations; first a governess was hired for him, then a tutor; he said, however, that though he remembered everything, he was hardly capable of giving a satisfactory account of it, because he had been unaware of many things. The frequent attacks of his illness had made almost an idiot of him (The prince actually said 'idiot'). He told, finally, how one day in Berlin, Pavlishchev met Professor Schneider, a Swiss, who studied precisely such illnesses, had an institution in Switzerland, in canton Valais, used his own method of treatment by cold water and gymnastics, treated idiotism, insanity, also provided education, and generally attended to spiritual development." Johnson, *Diagnosing Prince Myshkin*, 382.

²⁸³ *Idiot*.

an extraordinary liking to it, and at the same time it was as if everything cleared up in my head.²⁸⁴

Suffering in emotional pain, Myshkin keeps it contained. He describes the heavy weight of the otherness, the feeling of fear, and inability to comprehend reality outside of the familiar system of coordinates. The sound of the braying donkey reintroduces the familiar system of coordinates in his consciousness by association with the Scriptures, and Myshkin situates his self in a triologic perspective, resolving anxiety about his condition. Joseph Frank also describes this moment through the concept of kenosis:

A sudden shock of awareness woke him to the existence of the world in the form of something as humble as a donkey. The donkey, of course, has obvious Gospel overtones, which blend with the prince's innocence and naïveté, and this patiently laborious animal also emphasizes, in accord with Christian kenoticism, the absence of hierarchy in the prince's ecstatic apprehension of the wonder of life.²⁸⁵

The 'absence of hierarchy' being the only major contradiction in this definition of Christian kenoticism, Frank's formulation is valuable because it acknowledges Myshkin's humility and sense of wonder that he feels towards life. The Prince's behavior has given reasons to draw parallels with holy figures precisely because of his kenotic attributes, even though Myshkin shows little evidence of being a believer or an obedient churchgoer. Demonstrating familiarity with the biblical and hagiographical canon, Myshkin never quotes the Scriptures directly and is never seen practicing religious rituals, but he acts and speaks in a way that demonstrates immaculate moral judgment and a wholeness of ethical vision that extremely impresses his conversational partners.

²⁸⁴ *The Idiot*.

²⁸⁵ Frank, *Dostoevsky. A Writer in His Time*, 577.

Alexandra Epanchina declares “This prince may be a great rogue and not an idiot at all,” and Aglaya agrees with her opinion. Their sister Adelaida tells the prince: “You’re a philosopher and have come to teach us.” Rogozhin tells Myshkin: “you come out as a holy fool.” Ippolit points out the depth of Myshkin’s identity when he proclaims: “He is either a doctor or indeed of an extraordinary intelligence and able to guess many things. (But that he is ultimately an “idiot” there can be no doubt at all.)”

Dostoevsky deliberately uses allusions to the Scriptural events to reinforce the prince’s Christ-like image. The account of Myshkin’s relationship with Marie and the children brings up in the reader’s memory the biblical image of Christ surrounded by children and his defense of the fallen woman; the sound of a braying donkey as Myshkin enters Switzerland recalls Christ’s entry into Jerusalem; the prince’s encounter with merchants, businessmen and money-lenders right on his arrival in Petersburg is suggestive of Christ’s encounter with the money-lenders on the steps of the temple on his arrival in Jerusalem.²⁸⁶

In a dialogue over a copy of Holbein’s *Dead Christ* Myshkin masterfully manages Rogozhin’s crisis of religious doubt that arises out of visualizing the complete kenosis of Jesus Christ, the humiliation until death on the Cross, so starkly pictured in the New Testament.²⁸⁷ The prince alleviates Rogozhin’s worries in a speech that consists of “four anecdotes, grouped in pairs, which illustrate that the human need for faith and for the moral values of conscience based on faith

²⁸⁶ Leatherbarrow, “Misreading Myshkin and Stavrogin: The Presentation of the Hero in Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* and *Besy*.”

²⁸⁷ Meerson, Olga. “Ivolgin and Holbein: Non-Christ Risen vs. Christ Non-Risen.” In *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 39.2 (1995): 200-213. In it she notes how the Holbein painting highlights “God’s voluntary partaking of human suffering and limitations as God’s emptying Himself of divinity, the divine kenosis. So important to look at other studies of the painting too – various ones by Kasatkina and Young, maybe also Kristeva’s recent book, now translated into English, or her earlier studies of the Holbein painting.

transcend both the plane of rational reflection and that of empirical evidence.”²⁸⁸ “The essence of religious feeling,” Myshkin explains, “does not come under any sort of reasoning or atheism, and has nothing to do with any crimes or misdemeanors... But the chief thing is that you will notice it more clearly and quickly in the Russian heart than anywhere else.”²⁸⁹ Myshkin is referring here to the self-humbling, kenotic aspect of love and the feeling of grace it grants. He says about his feelings for Nastasya Filippovna: “...я её не любовью люблю, а жалостью.” (“... I love her not with love, but with pity.”)²⁹⁰ This compassionate, empathetic love lacks self-interest and keeps the needs of the other at the forefront of the connection. This kind of connection is not sexual, can be extended to any human being regardless of gender, and as such, is more powerful than passionate erotic love, because it gives the other a feeling of acceptance and justifying understanding as a human regardless of gender. Recognizing the humanity of the other produces a better emotional tuning than elevating the other as an object of sexual desire. Rogozhin admits that in the situation surrounding Nastasya Filippovna’s hesitation to marry him Myshkin plays a major role exactly because of the greatness of his empathy and his kenotic stance recognizing her goodness:

– Так для чего же ты сломя-то голову сюда теперь прискакал? Из жалости? (И лицо его искривилось в злую насмешку.) Хе-хе!

– Ты думаешь, что я тебя обманываю? – спросил князь.

– Нет, я тебе верю, да только ничего тут не понимаю. Вернее всего то, что жалость твоя, пожалуй, еще пуще моей любви! Что-то злобное и желавшее непременно сейчас же высказаться загорелось в лице его.

– Что же, твою любовь от злости не отличишь, – улыбнулся князь, – а пройдет она, так, может, еще пуще беда будет. Я, брат Парфен, уж это тебе говорю...

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ *The Idiot*.

²⁹⁰ *Idiot*, 236.

– Что зарежу-то?
Князь вздрогнул.²⁹¹

“Besides, why did you come post-haste after us? Out of pity, eh? He, he, he!” His mouth curved in a mocking smile.

“Do you think I am deceiving you?” asked the prince.

“No! I trust you – but I can’t understand. It seems to me that your pity is greater than my love.” A hungry longing to speak his mind out seemed to flash in the man’s eyes, combined with an intense anger.

“Your love is mingled with hatred, and therefore, when your love passes, there will be the greater misery,” said the prince. “I tell you this, Parfen...”

“What! that I’ll cut her throat, you mean?”

The prince shuddered.²⁹²

The reputation of sexual chastity, an “enduring and fundamental characteristic of his enigmatic personality,”²⁹³ emphasizes the charitable, self-giving aspect of Myshkin’s love. The absence of any sexual feeling, stated by Myshkin himself in his story of the poor Marie in Switzerland, places him one step ahead of many on the path to the ideal love according to Dostoevsky’s later views on sexuality. The writer believed that the highest ideal of human love will come into being when “man has by the laws of nature been definitively reborn as another nature that does not marry and is not given in marriage.”²⁹⁴ Frank explains that, in Dostoevsky’s vision,

Only at the end of time – only when the nature of man has been radically transformed into that of an asexual, seraphic being – will the total realization of the Christian ideal of love become possible.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 241.

²⁹² *The Idiot*.

²⁹³ Johnson, “Diagnosing Prince Myshkin”, 389.

²⁹⁴ *PSS*, V. 20, 172-175.

Prince Myshkin approximates the extremest incarnation of this ideal that humanity can reach in its present unregenerate form.²⁹⁵

Interestingly, Dostoevsky connects defects on the physical plane of self with its overall angelic disposition, as if it is Myshkin's illness that makes him think and act in a saintly way. The prince's epileptic fits seem to offer him a personal (if costly) connection with the realm beyond. Myshkin speaks of gleams and flashes of a higher self-perception (самоощущение) and self-consciousness (самосознание), of "higher existence" ("высшего бытия"). There is a feeling of fullness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and unity of life in these moments:

The sensation of life, of self-consciousness multiplied almost tenfold at these moments, flashing by like lightning. His mind and heart were illumined with extraordinary light; all his worries, all his doubts and anxieties were as if allayed at once, resolved in a kind of higher serenity, full of clear, harmonious joy and hope, full of reason and ultimate cause (полное разума и окончательной причины).²⁹⁶

This description resembles the inward illumination and sudden change known as *metanoia*. Integral to Orthodox Christianity, it refers to the inner transformation that brings spiritual knowledge.²⁹⁷ Minimization of Myshkin's rational self reaches its apotheosis in the moments of epileptic fits which often share temporal proximity with the most emotionally tragic moment in his life. Brian Johnson writes:

Myshkin reports that due to the frequency and severity of his attacks, he would lose control of his faculties and would enter a stupor-like state in which he was aware of his surroundings but not entirely able to comprehend what was happening around him. In explaining this

²⁹⁵ Frank, *The Miraculous Years: 1865-1871*, 304.

²⁹⁶ *The Idiot*.

²⁹⁷ Blank, *Dostoevsky's Dialectics and the Problem of Sin*, 11.

state, he says to General Epanchin that his attacks made an “idiot” of him.²⁹⁸

Myshkin’s self deteriorates with time as if being fractured in every encounter with evil, but his epileptic moments function as a short-term connection with the transcendent that purges the darkness from his mind much like the energy of grace that exists between the confessor and God in sacramental religious confessions. Dostoevsky does not show the prince participating in the dogmatically approved religious rituals, but connects Myshkin’s pre-epileptic sensations with the perception and anticipation of evil. Every interaction where Myshkin witnesses negativity from others leaves his head heavy and him feeling unwell: “Право, я чувствую себя не так здоровым, у меня голова тяжела от дороги, что ль, – отвечал князь, нахмурясь” (“I am not very well, and my head aches. Doubtless the effect of the journey,” replied the prince, frowning.”).²⁹⁹ “Я чувствую себя почти вроде того, как бывало со мной пять лет назад, когда ещё припадки приходили” (“I feel just as I did five years ago when my fits were about to come on.”).³⁰⁰ The gradual increase of Myshkin’s fear and premonition of the imminent disaster culminate in the return of the previously controlled epilepsy. In the last chapter of the novel, when the prince follows Rogozhin to the murder scene and creates temporary space for him to be without judgment for the deadly sin just committed, he withdraws so far into himself that later seems unable to return back to normalcy.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Johnson, 383.

²⁹⁹ *Idiot*, 229.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 673.

Max Scheler, in his *The Nature and Form of Sympathy*, distinguishes what he calls “vicarious fellow feeling,” which involves experiencing an understanding and sympathy for the feelings of others without being overcome by them emotively, from a total coalescence leading to the loss of identity and personality.³⁰² This dialogic term can be used to describe Myshkin’s talent to empathize and embrace radical otherness without reverting to religious reasoning or judgment. The underlying plot movement of *The Idiot* can be seen as the prince’s passage from the first kind of feeling to the second. In Part One of the novel, there are scant indications of his loss of identity other than the ones the reader can infer empathizing with Myshkin’s childhood traumas. From the very beginning, Dostoevsky foregrounds the prince’s ability to co-suffer and withhold judgment even under great stress. Particularly vivid are his interactions with Nastasya Filippovna. The most dramatic relationship of Myshkin’s return to Russia, this connection plays a fatal role in the fate of the prince’s self. Dostoevsky leaves it up to the readers to decide whether the prince’s non-theistic ‘active empathy’ is salvational for his confessants and sustainable for his own self. Does Myshkin serve as an agent of healing for the suffering others? Does he benefit their long-term well-being? What does the witnessed evil do to his state of mind? How does he dispose of the dark energy communicated to him by the members of the community? These questions are as relevant for discussing Myshkin as for thinking about anyone alive today.

The readers follow the progression that starts with the striking impression produced on Myshkin by Nastasya Filippovna’s portrait and ends with his vigil over her body in the confessional presence of her murderer, Rogozhin. The scene where Myshkin meets Nastasya Filippovna in person and handles several conflicts in an expressly kenotic manner is the interaction that sets the tone for their mutual recognition, understanding, and emotional connection throughout

³⁰² Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*.

the novel. When Myshkin, quite symbolically, opens the door of the Ivolgin house for Nastasya Filippovna, she instantly positions herself above him, treating him as a servant.

Князь снял запор, отворил дверь и – отступил в изумлении, весь даже вздрогнул: пред ним стояла Настасья Филипповна. Он тотчас узнал ее по портрету. Глаза ее сверкнули взрывом досады, когда она его увидала; она быстро прошла в прихожую, столкнув его с дороги плечом, и гневно сказала, сбрасывая с себя шубу:

– Если лень колокольчик поправить, так по крайней мере в прихожей бы сидел, когда стучатся. Ну, вот теперь шубу уронил, олух!

Шуба действительно лежала на полу; Настасья Филипповна, не дождавшись, пока князь с нее снимет, сбросила ее сама к нему на руки, не глядя, сзади, но князь не успел принять.

– Прогнать тебя надо. Ступай, доложи.

Князь хотел было что-то сказать, но до того потерялся, что ничего не выговорил и с шубой, которую поднял с полу, пошел в гостиную.

– Ну, вот теперь с шубой идет! Шубу-то зачем несешь? Ха, ха, ха! Да ты сумасшедший, что ли?

Князь воротился и глядел на нее как истукан; когда она засмеялась – усмехнулся и он, но языком всё еще не мог пошевелить. В первое мгновение, когда он отворил ей дверь, он был бледен, теперь вдруг краска залила его лицо.

– Да что это за идиот? – в негодовании вскрикнула, топнув на него ногой, Настасья Филипповна.³⁰³

The prince took down the chain and opened the door. He started back in amazement – for there stood Nastasya Filippovna. He knew her at once from her photograph. Her eyes blazed with anger as she looked at him. She quickly pushed by him into the hall, shouldering him out of her way, and said, furiously, as she threw off her fur cloak:

“If you are too lazy to mend your bell, you should at least wait in the hall to let people in when they rattle the bell handle. There, now, you’ve dropped my fur cloak – dummy!”

Sure enough the cloak was lying on the ground. Nastasya had thrown it off her towards the prince, expecting him to catch it, but the prince had missed it.

“Now then – announce me, quick!”

³⁰³ *Idiot*, 117-118.

The prince wanted to say something, but was so confused and astonished that he could not. However, he moved off towards the drawing-room with the cloak over his arm.

“Now then, where are you taking my cloak to? Ha, ha, ha! Are you mad?”

The prince turned and came back, more confused than ever. When she burst out laughing, he smiled, but his tongue could not form a word as yet. At first, when he had opened the door and saw her standing before him, he had become as pale as death; but now the red blood had rushed back to his cheeks in a torrent.

“Why, what an idiot it is!” cried Nastasya, stamping her foot with irritation.³⁰⁴

The contrast between the angered, impatient Nastasya Filippovna, showing the prince her “elevated” position and Myshkin’s silence, petrification, and feeling of being “lost” is foregrounding his kenotic self-minimization. He reflects the positive energy of her laughter, but withdraws himself from the interaction beyond showing obedience to her will. Slave-like, this behavior elicits little other than denigration from Nastasya Filippovna, yet Myshkin abstains from justifying himself and acts in the way she desires, without resistance. The reader notices his flushed face; however, his actions continue to be a display of humility. Later, upon introduction, Nastasya Filippovna is bewildered by the prince’s stance, wondering why he hadn’t refuted her when she was so obviously wrong.

Настасья Филипповна в недоумении смотрела на князя.

– Скажите, почему же вы не разуверили меня давеча, когда я так ужасно... в вас ошиблась? – продолжала Настасья Филипповна, рассматривая князя с ног до головы самым бесцеремонным образом; она в нетерпении ждала ответа, как бы вполне убежденная, что ответ будет непременно так глуп, что нельзя будет не засмеяться.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ *The Idiot*.

³⁰⁵ *Idiot*, 121-122.

“Tell me, why didn’t you put me right when I made such a dreadful mistake just now?” continued the latter, examining the prince from head to foot without the slightest ceremony. She awaited the answer as though convinced that it would be so foolish that she must inevitably fail to restrain her laughter over it.³⁰⁶

Myshkin answers honestly, and his manner effects a noticeable change in Nastasya Filippovna’s disposition:

Князь проговорил свои несколько фраз голосом беспокойным, прерываясь и часто переводя дух. Всё выражало в нем чрезвычайное волнение. Настасья Филипповна смотрела на него с любопытством, но уже не смеялась.³⁰⁷

The prince said all this with manifest effort – in broken sentences, and with many drawings of breath. He was evidently much agitated. Nastasya Filippovna looked at him inquisitively, but did not laugh.³⁰⁸

Like the rest of the company, she notices Myshkin’s innocence and his patient reaction to the undeserved insults and minimization of him by others. The depth of the contact established between the Prince and Nastasya Filippovna is truly impressive. Myshkin claims that he recognized her eyes, possibly from meeting in a dream.

– Я вас тоже будто видел где-то.
 – Где? Где?
 – Я ваши глаза точно где-то видел... да этого быть не может!
 Это я так... Я здесь никогда и не был. Может быть, во сне...

³⁰⁶ *The Idiot*.

³⁰⁷ *Idiot*, 122.

³⁰⁸ *The Idiot*.

– Ай да князь! – закричал Фердыщенко. – [...] Впрочем...
впрочем, ведь это он всё от невинности! – прибавил он с
сожалением.³⁰⁹

“I seemed to have seen you somewhere.”

“Where, where?”

“I seem to have seen your eyes somewhere; but it cannot be! I have
not seen you – I never was here before. I may have dreamed of you,
I don’t know.”

“Bravo, prince!” cried Ferdishenko, delighted. “But... he does it all
out of innocence!” he added with regret.³¹⁰

The prince’s reputation as an innocent man and his knowing recognition of Nastasya Filippovna’s soul appear outside of religion in this episode of Dostoevsky’s novel.³¹¹ Myshkin acts kenotically, but without the framework of explicit references to the transcendent Other, his self-minimization is perceived as a personal weakness or mental illness. Myshkin’s responses during a few erupted conflicts are full of grace, which only some characters recognize fully, the pious Nastasya Filippovna especially. By the end of their first meeting, she realizes that in interactions with the prince, she is seen and favorably received by the man who has the conscious will and strength to be meek and humble in reactions, but steady in his universal love and active empathy. Here, Dostoevsky evokes the readers’ awareness of the Scriptures by Myshkin act according to the recommendations explicated in the New Testament:

У Гани в глазах помутилось, и он, совсем забывшись, изо всей
силы замахнулся на сестру. Удар пришелся бы ей непременно
в лицо. Но вдруг другая рука остановила на лету Ганину руку.
Между ним и сестрой стоял князь.

³⁰⁹ *Idiot*, 122.

³¹⁰ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*.

³¹¹ *Idiot*. Part I, Chapters IX-X.

– Полноте, довольно! – проговорил он настойчиво, но тоже весь дрожа, как от чрезвычайно сильного потрясения.

– Да вечно, что ли, ты мне дорогу переступать будешь! – заревел Ганя, бросив руку Вари, и освободившеюся рукой, в последней степени бешенства, со всего размаха дал князю пощечину.

– Ах! – всплеснул руками Коля: – ах, боже мой! Раздались восклицания со всех сторон. Князь побледнел. Станным и укоряющим взглядом поглядел он Гане прямо в глаза; губы его дрожали и силились что-то проговорить; какая-то странная и совершенно неподходящая улыбка кривила их.

– Ну, это пусть мне... а ее... всё-таки не дам!.. – тихо проговорил он наконец, но вдруг не выдержал, бросил Ганю, закрыл руками лицо, отошел в угол, стал лицом к стене и прерывающимся голосом проговорил:

– О, как вы будете стыдиться своего поступка!³¹²

Ganya lost his head. Forgetful of everything he aimed a blow at Varia, which would inevitably have laid her low, but suddenly another hand caught his. Between him and Varia stood the prince.

“Enough – enough!” said the latter, with insistence, but all of a tremble with excitement.

“Are you going to cross my path for ever, damn you!” cried Ganya; and, loosening his hold on Varia, he slapped the prince’s face with all his force.

Exclamations of horror arose on all sides. The prince grew pale as death; he gazed into Ganya’s eyes with a strange, wild, reproachful look; his lips trembled and vainly endeavored to form some words; then his mouth twisted into an incongruous smile.

“Very well – never mind about me; but I shall not allow you to strike her!” he said, at last, quietly. Then, suddenly, he could bear it no longer, and covering his face with his hands, turned to the wall, and murmured in broken accents:

“Oh! how ashamed you will be of this afterwards!”³¹³

³¹² *Idiot*, 134-35.

³¹³ *The Idiot*.

The image of turning the other cheek comes from the Christian doctrine documented in the Sermon on the Mount. It refers to responding to aggression without evil.³¹⁴ This passage can be interpreted as humility in accepting one's circumstances. Myshkin's kenotic responses include putting himself in harm's way to protect the other, his quiet tone, physically backing off the conflict scene and empathizing with the shame of the wrongdoer. Instead of fighting evil, Myshkin blocks and absorbs it without returning it to the perpetrator. His actions create a safe place for the participants of the conflict that is momentarily extinguished and stopped in its tracks. "Ганя [...] стоял как уничтоженный" ("Ganya certainly did look dreadfully abashed").³¹⁵ And just like the promised grace that follows the self-humiliation of kenosis, Myshkin immediately receives love and support from the people surrounding him:

Коля бросился обнимать и целовать князя; за ним затеснились Рогожин, Варя, Птицын, Нина Александровна, все, даже старик Ардалион Александрович.
 – Ничего, ничего! – бормотал князь на все стороны, с тою же неподходящею улыбкой.
 – И будет каяться! – закричал Рогожин: – будешь стыдиться, Ганька, что такую... овцу (он не мог приискать другого слова) оскорбил!³¹⁶

Kolya rushed up to comfort the prince, and after him crowded Varia, Rogozhin and all, even the general.
 "It's nothing, it's nothing!" said the prince, and again he wore the smile which was so inconsistent with the circumstances.

³¹⁴ 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. Matt. [5:39]

³¹⁵ *Idiot*, 135.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

“Yes, he will be ashamed!” cried Rogozhin. “You will be properly ashamed of yourself for having injured such a – such a sheep” (he could not find a better word).³¹⁷

Even in support and admiration, Rogozhin deems the prince a sheep. For him, Myshkin is recognizably right, but the lack of a passionate and active display of strength is foreign to Parfen, whose self is suffering through the humiliation of being in love with Nastasya Filippovna Barashkina. She seems to enjoy positioning her will above Rogozhin’s, which brings up in him a rage that is both spontaneous and calculated. Eventually, she humbles herself before him, and this proves to be the humbling to death known to the readers from the doctrine of kenosis. The willing self-minimization and yielding to the present predicament as an act of self-judgment and confession of one’s worth, Nastasya’s death could have been prevented by alleviating the guilt and shame pushing her to self-annihilation in the society highly judgmental of her past mistakes. Her first encounter with Myshkin and the loving understanding of each other’s goodness mark the confessional moment that has the potential to restore Nastasya Filippovna’s honor both on the emotional and societal level.

Настасья Филипповна была тоже очень поражена и поступком Гани, и ответом князя. Обыкновенно бледное и задумчивое лицо ее, так всё время не гармонизировавшее с давешним как бы напускным ее смехом, было очевидно взволновано теперь новым чувством; и однако всё-таки ей как будто не хотелось его выказывать, и насмешка словно усиливалась остаться в лице ее. [...]

– А вам и не стыдно! Разве вы такая, какую теперь представлялись. Да может ли это быть! – вскрикнул вдруг князь с глубоким сердечным укором.

Настасья Филипповна удивилась, усмехнулась, но как будто что-то пряча под свою улыбку, несколько смешавшись, взглянула на Ганю и пошла из гостиной. Но не дойдя еще до

³¹⁷ *The Idiot*.

прихожей, вдруг воротилась, быстро подошла к Нине Александровне, взяла ее руку и поднесла ее к губам своим. – Я ведь и в самом деле не такая, он угадал, – прошептала она быстро, горячо, вся вдруг вспыхнув и покрасневшись, и, повернувшись, вышла на этот раз так быстро, что никто и сообразить не успел, зачем это она возвращалась. Видели только, что она пошептала что-то Нине Александровне и, кажется, руку ее поцеловала. Но Варя видела и слышала всё, и с удивлением проводила ее глазами.³¹⁸

Nastasya Filippovna was also much impressed, both with Ganya's action and with the prince's reply. Her usually thoughtful, pale face, which all this while had been so little in harmony with the jests and laughter which she had seemed to put on for the occasion, was now evidently agitated by new feelings, though she tried to conceal the fact and to look as though she were as ready as ever for jesting and irony. [...]

“Oh, aren't you ashamed of yourself – aren't you ashamed? Are you really the sort of woman you are trying to represent yourself to be? Is it possible?” The prince was now addressing Nastasya, in a tone of reproach, which evidently came from his very heart.

Nastasya Filippovna looked surprised, and smiled, but evidently concealed something beneath her smile and with some confusion and a glance at Ganya she left the room.

However, she had not reached the outer hall when she turned round, walked quickly up to Nina Alexandrovna, seized her hand and lifted it to her lips.

“He guessed quite right. I am not that sort of woman,” she whispered hurriedly, flushing red all over. Then she turned again and left the room so quickly that no one could imagine what she had come back for. All they saw was that she said something to Nina Alexandrovna in a hurried whisper, and seemed to kiss her hand. Varia, however, both saw and heard all, and watched Nastasya out of the room with an expression of wonder.³¹⁹

A marked change in behavior; the resurfacing of a new, serious feeling; letting go of pretense and feigned smiles; a humble gesture of reverence and admittance of being wrong are

³¹⁸ *Idiot*, 136.

³¹⁹ *The Idiot*.

only a few of the effects produced by Myshkin's kenotic supposition that Nastasya Filippovna is better than she seems. This meeting allows Nastasya to feel seen and accepted as a decent person, a sentiment that had been long foreign to her. The prince's understanding gaze feels inviting and all-forgiving, an alluring combination that creates trust, and based on it – new opportunities for connection. From this moment forward, Nastasya Filippovna is drawn to Myshkin's goodness in a pull of the force so strong, that she recognizes in him the opportunity of redemption for her own self, suffering from the lack of true love. She finally sees a man who can make decisions in her interest, not in his own, precisely because he shows no intention to aggrandize his self in relation to her. This creates an internal conflict for Nastasya Filippovna, who is used to men buying her affection instead of earning it and sees this fact as an external estimate of her true self. Before Myshkin's appearance, her "honor rescue plan" consists in a marriage. Trapped in a competition between several self-serving suitors, Nastasya Filippovna delegates the decision process to the prince, causing an upheaval of dissatisfied opinions about his ability to make such choices for her.

– Но князь, почему тут князь? И что такое, наконец, князь? – пробормотал генерал, почти уже не в силах сдержать своё негодование на такой обидный даже авторитет князя.

– А князь для меня то, что я в него в первого, во всю мою жизнь, как в истинно преданного человека поверила. Он в меня с одного взгляда поверил, и я ему верю.³²⁰

"The prince! What on earth has the prince got to do with it? Who the deuce is the prince?" cried the general, who could conceal his wrath no longer.

"The prince has this to do with it – that I see in him for the first time in all my life, a man endowed with real truthfulness of spirit, and I trust him. He trusted me at first sight, and I trust him!"³²¹

³²⁰ *Idiot*, 179.

³²¹ *The Idiot*.

For people who do not trust their own goodness, such an external affirmation of trust can be the lifeline they need to climb out of the pain of self-hate. Nastasya Filippovna, indeed, feels born again and free of the obligations imposed on her without love: “Завтра – по-новому, а сегодня – я именинница и сама по себе, в первый раз в целой жизни!” (“Tomorrow I shall start afresh – today I am a free agent for the first time in my life!”)³²² Myshkin’s heartfelt reproach directed at her self-deprecation suddenly turns her around towards the possibility of redemption and a new life.

A few chapters later, Dostoevsky writes another conversation where Myshkin demonstrates unconditional love for Nastasya Filippovna, this time in his readiness to marry her honestly. He strives to affirm and bring forward the goodness of the “wanton” woman’s self by letting her honor him. Humbling himself before the suffering of the other, Myshkin creates a field of opportunities that could never be expected in this situation if he employed predictably egotistic social behavior. The eventual discovery of a huge inheritance and his title are merely pleasant bonuses, the prince’s readiness to offer an honorable life to Nastasya Filippovna releases the negativity of her past and opens a future free of shame.

Князь встал и дрожащим, робким голосом, но в то же время с видом глубоко убежденного человека произнес:
 – Я ничего не знаю, Настасья Филипповна, я ничего не видел, вы правы, но я... я сочту, что вы мне, а не я сделаю честь. Я ничто, а вы страдали и из такого ада чистая вышли, а это много. [...] Я вас... Настасья Филипповна... люблю. Я умру за вас, Настасья Филипповна... Я никому не позволю про вас слова сказать, Настасья Филипповна... Если мы будем бедны, я работать буду, Настасья Филипповна...³²³

³²² Ibid.

³²³ *Idiot*, 188-90.

The prince rose and began to speak in a trembling, timid tone, but with the air of a man absolutely sure of the truth of his words.

“I know nothing, Nastasya Filippovna. I have seen nothing. You are right so far; but I consider that you would be honoring me, and not I you. I am a nobody. You have suffered, you have passed through hell and emerged pure, and that is very much. [...] Nastasya Filippovna, I love you! I would die for you. I shall never let any man say one word against you, Nastasya Filippovna! And if we are poor, I can work for both.”³²⁴

The problem arises when Nastasya Filippovna can't feel any guilt relief despite the prince's public confession of love and recognition of her blamelessness. Her self is so traumatized by the past abuses of trust, that she finds it impossible to believe that a man who seems kind, intelligent, noble, and forgiving, would remain in this disposition for the rest of her life. Experience has taught Nastasya that fear, flattery, and guilt are the tools used to dominate the will of the other, and she is unable to escape emotional entrapment in this conviction solely by engaging in a dialogic confessional relationship with the prince. Aware that forgiveness comes only from the transcendent Other, Nastasya Filippovna yearns to engage with Myshkin's kenotic stance in the position of honor as he suggests, but recognizes the limited capacity of a human to forgive fully and fears the return of mistreatment from the one person she would trust in love.

– И не постыдишься, когда потом тебе скажут, что твоя жена у Тоцкого в содержанках жила?

– Нет, не постыжусь... Вы не по своей воле у Тоцкого были.

– И никогда не попрекнешь?

– Не попрекну.

– Ну, смотри, за всю жизнь не ручайся!

– Настасья Филипповна, – сказал князь тихо и как бы с состраданием, – я вам давеча говорил, что за честь приму ваше согласие и что вы мне честь делаете, а не я вам. Вы на эти слова усмехнулись, и кругом, я слышал, тоже смеялись. Я, может быть, смешно очень выразился и был сам смешон, но мне всё

³²⁴ *The Idiot*.

казалось, что я... понимаю, в чем честь, и уверен, что я правду сказал. [...] Вы горды, Настасья Филипповна, но, может быть, вы уже до того несчастны, что и действительно виновною себя считаете. За вами нужно много ходить, Настасья Филипповна. Я буду ходить за вами. [...] Я ... я вас буду всю жизнь уважать, Настасья Филипповна, – заключил вдруг князь, как бы вдруг опомнившись, покраснев и сообразив, пред какими людьми он это говорит.³²⁵

“Won’t you be ashamed, afterwards, to reflect that your wife very nearly ran away with Rogozhin?”

“Oh, you were raving, you were in a fever; you are still half delirious.”

“And won’t you be ashamed when they tell you, afterwards, that your wife lived at Totski’s expense so many years?”

“No; I shall not be ashamed of that. You did not so live by your own will.”

“And you’ll never reproach me with it?”

“Never.”

“Take care, don’t commit yourself for a whole lifetime.”

“Nastasya Filippovna.” said the prince, quietly, and with deep emotion, “I said before that I shall esteem your consent to be my wife as a great honor to myself, and shall consider that it is you who will honor me, not I you, by our marriage. You laughed at these words, and others around us laughed as well; I heard them. Highly likely I expressed myself funnily, and I may have looked funny, but, for all that, I believe I understand where honor lies, and what I said was but the literal truth. [...] You are proud, Nastasya Filippovna, and perhaps you have really suffered so much that you imagine yourself to be a desperately guilty woman. You require a great deal of petting and looking after, Nastasya Filippovna, and I will do this. [...] I – I shall respect you all my life, Nastasya Filippovna,” concluded the prince, as though suddenly recollecting himself, and blushing to think of the sort of company before whom he had said all this.³²⁶

Myshkin recognizes Nastasya’s unhappiness and pride standing in the way of releasing her guilt. He admits to hearing her call for help long before meeting her in person and responds to it

³²⁵ *Idiot*, 194.

³²⁶ *The Idiot*.

with the words expressing understanding, familiarity, closeness and shared suffering. In spite of being ridiculed, the prince acknowledges that his readiness to care for Nastasya Filippovna comes from the desire to alleviate her suffering, which he first recognized seeing the eyes of her portrait. How great must be one's suffering if it translates through a picture, and how perceptive one must be to feel it as Myshkin said he did! Such interaction of two selves, where one feels the pain of the other as acutely as one's own and minimizes self to uplift the other, is precisely the ethical approach promoted through the philosophy of dialogue and the doctrine of kenosis. It is the appropriate and necessary step in response to witnessing the suffering of the other, and the one that has the highest potential to alleviate human suffering simply by the fact of sharing and releasing it. Nastasya Filippovna acknowledges Myshkin's unique honor-granting disposition with gratitude:

– Спасибо, князь, со мной так никто не говорил до сих пор, – проговорила Настасья Филипповна, – меня всё торговали, а замуж никто еще не сватал из порядочных людей.³²⁷

“Thank you, prince; no one has ever spoken to me like that before,” began Nastasya Filippovna. “Men have always bargained for me, before this; and not a single respectable man has ever proposed to marry me.”³²⁸

To be a sustainable mode of communication, a kenotic stance between two selves necessarily presupposes a reciprocal kenotic movement from both, towards God and towards each other. Regardless of the constant self-deprecation, Nastasya Filippovna's position is insufficiently kenotic, as she is unable to empty herself of the feeling of unworthiness tormenting her from the

³²⁷ *Idiot*, 195.

³²⁸ *The Idiot*.

inside and can't trust Myshkin's words about love for her. She allows him no space to exist in his truth. Nastasya feels responsibility for possibly ruining the prince's life through her personal evil and dismisses his kindness as child-like naivety:

– Этакого-то младенца сгубить? [...] Я сама бесстыдница! Я Тоцкого наложницей была... Князь! [...] Ты не боишься, да я буду бояться, что тебя загубила да что потом попрекнешь! А что ты объявляешь, что я честь тебе сделаю, так про то Тоцкий знает. [...] Я, может быть, и сама гордая, нужды нет, что бесстыдница! Ты меня совершенством давеча называл; хорошо совершенство, что из одной похвальбы, что миллион и княжество растоптала, в трущобу идет! Ну, какая я тебе жена после этого?³²⁹

“You thought I should accept this good child's invitation to ruin him, did you?” she cried. [...] “I have no sense of shame left. I tell you I have been Totsky's concubine. Prince! [...] You aren't afraid, I know; but I should always be afraid that I had ruined you, and that you would reproach me for it. As for what you say about my doing you honor by marrying you – well, Totsky can tell you all about that.” [...] “I am very proud, in spite of what I am,” she continued. “You called me ‘perfection’ just now, prince. A nice sort of perfection to throw up a prince and a million and a half of rubles in order to be able to boast of the fact afterwards! What sort of a wife should I make for you, after all I have said?”³³⁰

Nastasya would rather sacrifice herself to Rogozhin, who had confessed his inclination to murder her out of jealousy, than go through the trauma of abandonment and abuse of trust again. Believing that her mistakes had not been forgiven and forgotten, she feels undeserving of the prince's love, generosity, kindness and recognition as a good human. The loving capacity of Myshkin's self alone fails to create a pull strong enough to deliver Nastasya Filippovna from the

³²⁹ *Idiot*, 196.

³³⁰ *The Idiot*.

suffering of guilt. She ends up punishing herself for the sins she had committed, and, in her own eyes, saving prince Myshkin from the misery of having to love her forever. Clearly stating that the prince is the man of her dreams, she is still unable to trust him, or another human, because she ultimately doesn't trust herself.

Да неужто же мне его загубить было? (Она показала на князя). [...] Этак-то лучше, князь, право лучше, потом презирать меня стал бы, и не было бы нам счастья! Не клянись, не верю! Да и как глупо-то было бы!.. Нет, лучше простимся по-доброму, а то ведь я и сама мечтательница, проку бы не было! Разве я сама о тебе не мечтала? Это ты прав, давно мечтала, еще в деревне у него, пять лет прожила одна-одинехонька; думаешь-думаешь, бывало-то, мечтаешь-мечтаешь, – и вот всё такого, как ты, воображала, доброго, честного, хорошего и такого же глупенького, что вдруг придёт да и скажет: “Вы не виноваты, Настасья Филипповна, а я вас обожаю!” Да так, бывало, размечтаешься, что с ума сойдёшь... ну, а теперь... Рогожин, готов?³³¹

“You surely did not expect me to ruin *him*? (indicating the prince). It’s better so, prince, it is indeed. You’d begin to despise me afterwards – we should never be happy. Oh! you needn’t swear, prince, I shan’t believe you, you know. How foolish it would be, too! No, no; we’d better say good-bye and part friends. I am a bit of a dreamer myself, and I used to dream of you once. Very often during those five years down at his estate I used to dream and think, and I always imagined just such a good, honest, foolish fellow as you, one who should come and say to me: ‘You are an innocent woman, Nastasya Filippovna, and I adore you.’ I dreamt of you often. I used to think so much down there that I nearly went mad; and then this fellow here would come down. He would stay a couple of months out of the twelve, and disgrace and insult and deprave me, and then go; so that I longed to drown myself in the pond a thousand times over; but I did not dare do it. I hadn’t the heart, and now – well, are you ready, Rogozhin?”³³²

³³¹ *Idiot*, 197.

³³² *The Idiot*.

After Myshkin's offer of his hand in marriage, Nastasya Filippovna accepts and refuses it several times over the course of the novel. Her final escape minutes before the church wedding with Prince Myshkin is placed at the end of the novel. And again, her actions leave Myshkin in silence, in tears of co-suffering, in stoic calmness, but never in judgment, anger or frustration at her antics. He understands them as they are – displays of pain, fear, uncertainty and the heavy weight of personal shame and public humiliation that Nastasya Filippovna had been carrying for about a decade before Myshkin's arrival. The prince offers her a kenotic, mutually self-emptying union, thinking that it would only take an act of reciprocal will to choose the course of healing and make it work. A proper sacramental confession – a requirement before the Church wedding in Orthodoxy, a humble repentance for her wrongs before a priest, and then loving her lawful husband for the rest of her life – was all required from Nastasya Filippovna to start on the path of improvement. Yet she makes the choice to run away to her death with Rogozhin, essentially disbelieving her own goodness and God's capacity to forgive, destroying her own life and the lives of the two men who loved her.

The failure of Myshkin as a confessor comes through in his relationship with Rogozhin as well. The prince's "anticipation of evil," which, in its essence, is the evil communicated to him by Rogozhin that dwells now in his mind, poisoning him with fear and bringing up the urge to prevent a tragedy from happening, finds no release until it becomes reality. In his kenotic desire to justify the other, Myshkin tries to fight this evil as his own demon, denying and ignoring the fact that it belongs to someone else.

С ним произошла опять, и как бы в одно мгновение, необыкновенная перемена: он опять шел бледный, слабый, страдающий, взволнованный; колена его дрожали, и смутная, потерянная улыбка бродила на посинелых губах его: "внезапная идея" его вдруг подтвердилась и оправдалась, и –

он опять верил своему демону! Но подтвердилась ли? Но оправдалась ли? Почему с ним опять эта дрожь, этот пот холодный, этот мрак и холод душевный?³³³

A great change had suddenly come over him. He went blindly forward; his knees shook under him; he was tormented by “ideas;” his lips were blue, and trembled with a feeble, meaningless smile. His demon was upon him once more. What had happened to him? Why was his brow clammy with drops of moisture, his knees shaking beneath him, and his soul oppressed with a cold gloom?³³⁴

The prince dislikes passing negative judgment on the other to the degree that prevents him from recognizing that his premonition of evil is a clear sign of the objective truth: evil does exist in the other. Despite the obvious, Myshkin fights his own self to keep faith in the goodness of others until it is no longer possible. It is what gives him joy.

Ведь отрекся же он сам от своего демона, еще идя туда, на половине дороги, когда радость вдруг наполнила его душу? Или в самом деле было что-то такое в Рогожине, то есть в целом сегодняшнем образе этого человека, во всей совокупности его слов, движений, поступков, взглядов, что могло оправдывать ужасные предчувствия князя и возмущающие нашептывания его демона? Нечто такое, что видится само собой, но что трудно анализировать и рассказать, невозможно оправдать достаточными причинами, но что однако же производит, несмотря на всю эту трудность и невозможность, совершенно цельное и неотразимое впечатление, невольно переходящее в полнейшее убеждение?.. Убеждение в чем? (О, как мучила князя чудовищность, “унизительность” этого убеждения, “этого низкого предчувствия”, и как обвинял он себя самого!) Скажи же, если смеешь, в чем? – говорил он беспрерывно себе, с упреком и с вызовом, – формулируй, осмелся выразить всю свою мысль, ясно, точно, без колебания! О, я бесчестен! –

³³³ *Idiot*, 262.

³³⁴ *The Idiot*.

повторял он с негодованием и с краской в лице, – какими же глазами буду я смотреть теперь всю жизнь на этого человека!³³⁵

He had repudiated the demon as he walked to the house, and his heart had been full of joy. Was there something in the whole aspect of the man, today, sufficient to justify the prince's terror, and the awful suspicions of his demon? Something seen, but indescribable, which filled him with dreadful presentiments? Yes, he was convinced of it – convinced of what? (Oh, how mean and hideous of him to feel this conviction, this presentiment! How he blamed himself for it!) “Speak if you dare, and tell me, what is the presentiment?” he repeated to himself, over and over again. “Put it into words, speak out clearly and distinctly. Oh, miserable coward that I am!” The prince flushed with shame for his own baseness. “How shall I ever look this man in the face again?”³³⁶

As he witnesses the evil in action and can no longer deny that it is real, his mind proceeds to the mode that floods his soul with inner light and provides a release of tension of an extreme and dangerous kind – his epileptic fit. The first major return of his ailment happens right as he sees Rogozhin attack him with a knife in a dark staircase. And even then, the prince cries out in denial of Rogozhin's evil:

Глаза Рогожина засверкали, и бешеная улыбка исказила его лицо. Правая рука его поднялась, и что-то блеснуло в ней; князь не думал ее останавливать. Он помнил только, что, кажется, крикнул:

– Парфен, не верю!..

Затем вдруг как бы что-то разверзлось пред ним: необычайный внутренний свет озарил его душу. Это мгновение продолжалось, может быть, полсекунды; но он однако же ясно и сознательно помнил начало, самый первый звук своего страшного вопля, который вырвался из груди его сам собой и который никакою силой он не мог бы остановить. Затем сознание его угасло мгновенно, и наступил полный мрак. С ним

³³⁵ *Idiot*, 264.

³³⁶ *The Idiot*.

случился припадок эпилепсии, уже очень давно оставившей его.³³⁷

Rogozhin's eyes flashed, and a smile of insanity distorted his countenance. His right hand was raised, and something glittered in it. The prince did not think of trying to stop it. All he could remember afterwards was that he seemed to have called out: "Parfyon! I won't believe it." Next moment something appeared to burst open before him: a wonderful inner light illuminated his soul. This lasted perhaps half a second, yet he distinctly remembered hearing the beginning of the wail, the strange, dreadful wail, which burst from his lips of its own accord, and which no effort of will on his part could suppress. Next moment he was absolutely unconscious; black darkness blotted out everything. He had fallen in an epileptic fit.³³⁸

Myshkin's final encounter with both of his confessants happens at the time when the tragedy can no longer be prevented. In the last chapters of the novel, the reader witnesses the excessive tension that reverberates through the prince's body as he is forced to acknowledge the fact of evil realized, the victory of the demons he feared, and still preserve his kenotic, loving disposition towards the other who had committed a crime.

– Рогожин! Где Настасья Филипповна? – прошептал вдруг князь и встал, дрожа всеми членами. [...] Князь дрожал все сильнее и сильнее и не спускал своего вопросительного взгляда с лица Рогожина.

– Ты вот, я замечаю, Лев Николаевич, дрожишь, – проговорил наконец Рогожин, – почти так, как когда с тобой бывает твое расстройство, помнишь, в Москве было? Или как раз было перед припадком. И не придумаю, что теперь с тобой буду делать...

Князь вслушивался, напрягая все силы, чтобы понять, и все спрашивая взглядом.

– Это ты? – выговорил он наконец, кивнув головой на портьеру.

– Это... я ... – прошептал Рогожин и потупился.

³³⁷ *Idiot*, 266.

³³⁸ *The Idiot*.

Помолчали минут пять.³³⁹

“Rogozhin, *where* is Nastasya Filippovna?” said the prince, suddenly rising from his seat. He was quaking in all his limbs, and his words came in a scarcely audible whisper. [...]

“I see you are shuddering, Lev Nikolaevich,” said the latter, at length, “almost as you did once in Moscow, before your fit; don’t you remember? I don’t know what I shall do with you...”

The prince bent forward to listen, putting all the strain he could muster upon his understanding in order to take in what Rogozhin said, and continuing to gaze at the latter’s face.

“Was it you?” he muttered, at last, motioning with his head towards the curtain.

“Yes, it was I,” whispered Rogozhin, looking down.

Neither spoke for five minutes.³⁴⁰

In this final confessional moment, the culmination of emotional tension of the novel, the verbal interaction is minimal, and understanding comes from seeing. The prince’s kenotic silence is punctuated by his body shivering. Brief phrases surround the expansion of his mind trying to encompass death and remain alive with love. Myshkin’s self has to contract and retreat making space for both good and evil that came into contact with him. The entirety of his strength is needed to form the right understanding of the other at the moment when he feels the depth of pain connected to the loss of life. We see that even in this tragic situation, he fears not for himself, but for the safety of the murderer. Witnessing Rogozhin’s feverish ramblings, the prince reacts with compassion and reaches out to console the suffering human with his own failing body, his mind drowning in a completely new feeling of unlimited anguish. Nothing Myshkin has done warrants these feelings, it is the evil committed by Rogozhin and the loss of another human self, Nastasya

³³⁹ *Idiot*, 686-687.

³⁴⁰ *The Idiot*.

Filippovna, that pain him through his ability to empathize fully with the other. This emotion is so strong that it dims the prince's ability to form coherent thoughts.

Рогожин изредка и вдруг начинал иногда бормотать, громко, резко и бессвязно; начинал вскрикивать и смеяться; князь протягивал к нему тогда свою дрожащую руку и тихо дотрогивался до его головы, до его волос, гладил их и гладил его щеки... больше он ничего не мог сделать! Он сам опять начал дрожать, и опять как бы вдруг отнялись его ноги. Какое-то совсем новое ощущение томило его сердце бесконечною тоской. Между тем совсем рассвело; наконец он прилег на подушку, как бы совсем уже в бессилии и в отчаянии, и прижался своим лицом к бледному и неподвижному лицу Рогожина; слезы текли из его глаз на щеки Рогожина, но, может быть, он уж и не слышал тогда своих собственных слез и уже не знал ничего о них...³⁴¹

Rogozhin began to mutter disconnectedly; then he took to shouting and laughing. The prince stretched out a trembling hand and gently stroked his hair and his cheeks – he could do nothing more. His legs trembled again, and he seemed to have lost the use of them. A new sensation came over him, filling his heart and soul with infinite anguish. Meanwhile the daylight grew full and strong; and at last the prince lay down, as though overcome by despair, and laid his face against the white, motionless face of Rogozhin. His tears flowed on to Rogozhin's cheek, though he was perhaps not aware of them himself.³⁴²

Myshkin's extreme self-minimization effectively becomes self-annihilation, as he loses the ability to comprehend his surroundings and interact meaningfully with others, returning to a child-like state.

По крайней мере, когда, уже после многих часов, отворилась дверь и вошли люди, то они застали убийцу в полном беспомоществе и горячке. Князь сидел подле него неподвижно на

³⁴¹ *Idiot*, 691.

³⁴² *The Idiot*.

подстилке и тихо, каждый раз при взрывах крика или бреда больного, спешил провести дрожащею рукой по его волосам и щекам, как бы лаская и унимая его. Но он уже ничего не понимал, о чем его спрашивали, и не узнавал вошедших и окруживших его людей. И если бы сам Шнейдер явился теперь из Швейцарии взглянуть на своего бывшего ученика и пациента, то и он, припомнив то состояние, в котором бывал иногда князь в первый год лечения своего в Швейцарии, махнул бы теперь рукой и сказал бы, как тогда: “Идиот!”³⁴³

At all events when, after many hours, the door was opened and people thronged in, they found the murderer unconscious and in a raging fever. The prince was sitting by him, motionless, and each time that the sick man gave a laugh, or a shout, he hastened to pass his own trembling hand over his companion's hair and cheeks, as though trying to soothe and quiet him. But alas! he understood nothing of what was said to him, and recognized none of those who surrounded him. If Schneider himself had arrived then and seen his former pupil and patient, remembering the prince's condition during the first year in Switzerland, he would have flung up his hands, despairingly, and cried, as he did then: “An idiot!”³⁴⁴

And maybe it is in this minimized state of Myshkin's self, that he finds his own salvation, avoiding the further disproportionate impact of pain on his psyche. As Lebedev commented on Myshkin's kenotic character after the failed wedding with Nastasya Filippovna:

Утаил от премудрых и разумных и открыл младенцам, я это говорил еще и прежде про него, но теперь прибавляю, что и самого младенца бог сохранил, спас от бездны, он и все святые его!³⁴⁵

“Things are hidden from the wise and prudent, and revealed unto babes. I have applied those words to him before, but now I add that

³⁴³ *Idiot*, 692.

³⁴⁴ *The Idiot*.

³⁴⁵ *Idiot*.

God has preserved the babe himself from the abyss, He and all His saints.”³⁴⁶

Guardini views Myshkin’s breakdown at the end of the novel as “the image of the Redeemer himself. It is an image of that love which is so perfectly forgetful of itself that no consciousness can grasp it anymore.”³⁴⁷ And even though Cassedy doesn’t directly deal with Myshkin either as imitation Christi or in terms of kenotic surrender, he does link *The Idiot* to Dostoevsky’s 1864 “Masha on the Table” entry. For Cassedy, “Myshkin is no doubt the clearest concretization” of the annihilation of the self from Dostoevsky’s diary, but he concludes that “in one important respect the diary entry does not really describe the epileptic hero,” for Myshkin never makes dissolution of the self his goal.³⁴⁸

It is worth noting that during the course of the novel, Myshkin makes no *conscious* attempts to empty out his feeling of dread and let go of the darkness he saw in Rogozhin, Nastasya Filippovna, and others. Dostoevsky doesn’t show him making any contact with religious institutions or figures of religious authority. Assuming personal responsibility for the fate of suffering humans, Myshkin forgets about the energy of grace available through the connection with the transcendent Other. Whether in hubris or in conceptual denial of God’s role in resistance to evil, the prince struggles with preserving the boundaries of his self and eventually succumbs to the onslaught of darkness and pain he receives from the outside world. We can’t but agree with Leatherbarrow who claims that Dostoevsky’s fears for the success of *Idiot* suggest that the final

³⁴⁶ *The Idiot*.

³⁴⁷ Guardini, Romano. “Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*, A Symbol of Christ.”

³⁴⁸ Cassedy, 138.

return of Myshkin to inarticulacy represented the novel's inability to affirm another.³⁴⁹ In addition to the prince's personal limitations, in my view, it is the lack of the explicit dialogic structure that sets the conditions for the ultimate failure of Myshkin's ability to properly communicate and respond to the other, despite his immaculate ethics.

III. The Censored Confession in Dostoevsky's *Demons*

The Sacrament of Confession in the Orthodox Christian tradition is a self-disciplinary practice that aims at healing the fractures that happen with time and restores the wholeness of self through the mysterious energy of the Divine grace. A false confession is a confessional exchange that has no positive effect on the participants and breeds negativity or leads to the eventual disintegration of self. One of the most prominent false confessions written by Dostoevsky was so reprehensible that it was deemed too dangerous for publication, and the chapter containing it was banned from print. The writer made several adjustments to the chapter "*At Tikhon's*" in *Demons* to appease the Russian state censors. However, the sin at the center of Stavrogin's confession, despite being the same sin alluded to in *Crime and Punishment* and in *Humiliated and Insulted*, was pronounced too heinous to be the topic of the confessional interaction drawn out for a whole chapter as the ideological focus of the novel. Stavrogin himself recognizes that violating an innocent child's faith and soul is the biggest sin in the Scripture: "По Евангелию больше преступления и нет..." ("There is no bigger crime in the Gospel...").³⁵⁰ The censorship, apprehensive of the effect such travesty would have on the readers, decided to keep the poison of Nikolai Stavrogin's evil away from the minds of the reading public. For Dostoevsky, deleting this chapter meant changing the structure and concept of the whole novel.

³⁴⁹ Leatherbarrow, 19.

³⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, *U Tikhona*.

Leatherbarrow sums up “*At Tikhon’s*” as a chapter,

... in which Stavrogin does assume the mantle of a confessing impostor. ‘*At Tikhon’s*’ consists of a written document in which Stavrogin confesses to the violation of a twelve-year-old girl, framed by a discussion with the monk Tikhon in which he announces his intention to purge his guilt by publishing his confession. The significance of this document lies in the fact that it is the only place in the novel where Stavrogin attempts a sustained ‘reading’ of himself, and this alone is enough to explain Dostoevsky’s initial despair at its exclusion.³⁵¹

In view of Dostoevsky’s focus on confession, it is well within the realm of reason he would be burdened by the inability to show the effects of a confessional attempt on an unrepentant sinner of the worst possible kind. When Stavrogin’s confession was cut out, certain lines of plot development became lost, including the only chance for Stavrogin’s salvation. Instead, without the miracle of confession, in Dostoevsky’s mind, Stavrogin was logic-bound to finish by self-destruction, and committed suicide like Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*.

Katkov’s adamant denial to publish Stavrogin’s confession meant the novel could not touch upon a particular type of Russian people that was visible to Dostoevsky’s mind. These were not nihilists, but something completely different, and in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic vision, these people also deserved to see the light. In the letter to N.A. Lubimov, Dostoevsky writes in 1872, describing his struggles with editing *Demons* for publication:

Это целый социальный тип (в моём убеждении), *наш* тип, русский, человека праздного, не по желанию быть праздным, а потерявшего связи со всем родным и, главное, веру, развратного из тоски, но совестливого и употребляющего страдальческие судорожные усилия, чтобы обновиться и вновь начать верить. Рядом с нигилистами это явление серьёзное. Клянусь, что оно существует в действительности. Это человек

³⁵¹ Leatherbarrow, 18.

не верующий вере наших верующих и требующий веры полной совершенно иначе...³⁵²

This is a whole social type (in my conviction), our type, Russian, of a man idle not due to the desire to be idle, but due to having lost connections to everything native, and, most importantly, faith; lecherous out of anguish, but conscientious and making pained spastic efforts to renew himself and start believing again. Next to the nihilists, it is a serious phenomenon. I swear that it exists in reality. This is a person who doesn't believe the faith of our believers and who demands an absolute faith of a completely different kind...

The last sentence applies fully to Nikolai Stavrogin, who discounts the faith of traditional believers and desires an absolute faith of a non-traditional kind. We see Dostoevsky's attempt to document his understanding of the man who challenges the traditional triologic confessional dynamic between the transcendent Other and another human self. This social archetype, in Dostoevsky's view, attempts to renew and affirm their faith in the transcendent without having true kenotic faith in God.

Stavrogin's confession in "*At Tikhon's*" subverts the parameters of a true sacramental confession in more ways than one. The chapter presents Stavrogin's endeavor at self-revelation by alluding at first to the reading of him by others. These early exchanges implicitly warn of the nature of the confession that is to follow and how the reader should approach it.

It was as though [Stavrogin] had decided on something extraordinary and incontestable, but at the same time almost impossible for him.³⁵³

³⁵² Dostoevsky, *Pisma*, V. IV, 296-297.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Stavrogin's visit to the archpriest Tikhon's abode at the monastery, premeditated for years, included three sheets of postal paper, collated into a brochure of confession, printed abroad.³⁵⁴ Returning to Russia, Stavrogin brought with him three hundred copies of this literary work in the hopes of making it public upon discussion with Father Tikhon, who, he knew, was a true believer. The elder's response was significant for him as a confessant precisely because of the faith in the all-forgiving Other that Tikhon affirmed in himself and others. Stavrogin knew that a confessor outside of the Church could never pronounce a forgiving judgment for the sins he had committed. At the same time, he knew that Tikhon had to kenotically leave all judgment to God and offer him a way to redeem his fallen self – the perspective that was tickling Stavrogin's imagination both by contradicting all human logic and reason, and by the power to force evil on the other and remain blameless. Dostoevsky suggests that there also was a naturally human desire to be forgiven, even in the man who knew he was unforgivable.³⁵⁵ Whether everyone can be forgiven in Dostoevsky's literary universe, is a different question. Are there sins that inevitably cause the death of the soul, or can any dead soul be saved through the right kind of redemption? Can one atone for crimes that cannot be undone? And what is the role of kenotic humility in true repentance? Stavrogin's confession, had it been published as an integral part of the novel's structure, could be an example of what happens in confession to an unforgivable sinner. But even in its unpublished form, the chapter "*At Tikhon's*" allows the reader to try on the position of the judging Other, and decide for themselves whether Stavrogin deserved to be seen as anything other than evil.

³⁵⁴ "...печать тонкая, заграничная." Ibid., 44.

³⁵⁵ Легче, – ответил Ставрогин вполголоса, – если бы вы меня простили, мне было бы гораздо легче, – прибавил он, быстро и полупшепотом... Ibid., 75.

As a man aware of the proper ritual of confession, Stavrogin knows that the presence of a confessor who is a true believer is essential for the right reception and absolution of sin. This is why one of the most urgent questions Stavrogin asks Father Tikhon is: “Do you believe in God?” Satisfied with his answer, Stavrogin calls him “a holy fool” and gives him the printed pages to read. Dostoevsky’s narrator prefaces Stavrogin’s text with a few comments on the possible motivation for the creation of this document.

Документ этот, по-моему, – дело болезненное, дело беса, овладевшего этим господином. Похоже на то, когда страдающий острую болью мечется в постели, желая найти положение чтобы хотя на миг облегчить себя. Даже и не облегчить, а лишь бы только заменить, хотя на минуту, прежнее страдание другим. И тут уже, разумеется, не до красоты или разумности положения. Основная мысль документа – страшная, непритворная потребность кары, потребность креста, всенародной казни. А между тем эта потребность креста всё-таки в человеке неверующем в крест, – “а уж это одно составляет идею.” [...] Да, больной мечется в постели и хочет заменить одно страдание другим – и вот борьба с обществом показалась ему положением легчайшим, и он бросает ему вызов.³⁵⁶

I shall allow myself one more remark, although I am straying in advance of my story. This document is, in my opinion, a morbid work, a work of the devil who took hold of that gentleman. It is like this: as if a man were suffering from acute pain and tossing about in bed, trying to find a position to relieve his pain even for a moment. Not even to relieve the pain, but only to change it, momentarily, for another. In a situation like that, one of course does not bother about the becomingness or good sense of the position. The fundamental idea of the document is a terrible, undisguised craving for self-punishment, the need for the cross, for immolation in the eyes of all. And yet this need for the cross in a man who does not believe in the cross, does not this in itself form ‘an idea...’ [...] Yes, the sick man tosses about in his bed and wishes to exchange one pain for another,

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 44-45.

and now the struggle with society appears to him the easiest position, and he throws out a challenge to it.³⁵⁷

Here, the narrator states that the written exposition of Stavrogin's dark self is just another instrument of boosting his pride by challenging others to confront him upon the planned exposure to his heinous sin. Stavrogin envisions the mutual gaze of the dialogic relationship based on the polyphony of hatred as the goal of his self-exposition in published form. He is ready to face and dismiss the judgment of others as an affirmation of the strength of his own self even in the absence of the forgiving, understanding gaze from the transcendent Other. Sch point out that

Stavrogin's confession, for all its shocking detail, turns out to be as opaque and elusive as the man himself. It is in fact a travesty of a confession, an exercise in self-evasion rather than self-revelation. Its motivation is also inverted: it is driven not by contrition, but by scorn for those who might condemn him. It is crafted not out of the desire for confessional openness, but from an implicitly dialogical sensitivity to what others might think, and in this respect, it is reminiscent of the confessional game played by Nastasya Filippovna's guests in *The Idiot*, in a scene where Dostoevsky also implicitly exposes the shortcomings of the confessional genre. It is mannered, rhetorical, and as devoid of real content as Stavrogin himself.³⁵⁸

Tikhon recognizes that Stavrogin presents himself with the eye on his audience, not on the transcendent Other, and his suggestion that work might be done on the style of the document is an oblique comment on the wrong choice of words and addressees of confession. Stavrogin understands that his sin is mortal and cannot be forgiven by any earthly authority, and with this

³⁵⁷ In the text of the opening of Chapter I., published as a Supplement to Vol. VIII. of the Jubilee Edition of 1906 of Dostoevsky's Works, there is the following passage, which is not in the proofs of Dostoevsky, *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

³⁵⁸ Leatherbarrow, 18.

understanding he shows the lack of contrition and his pride in being the worst of the worst. Rhetorically, he counts on Tikhon's forgiveness, but taunts the archpriest, attempting to elicit his negative judgment:

Слушайте, я не люблю шпионов и психологов, по крайней мере таких, которые в мою душу лезут. [...] я вам ничего не открою, никакой тайны, потому что совершенно могу без вас обойтись...³⁵⁹

Listen, I do not like spies and thought-readers, at any rate those who creep into my soul. [...] I will confide nothing to you, no secret, because I can perfectly well do without you...³⁶⁰

From the beginning of its use, the practice of confession presupposes sincere repentance in the form of audible oral speech. Purification and restoration of self is directly connected to the act of speaking out the evil in a manner that allows one to be heard by the other. Successful confessions are commonly characterized by oral deliverance of sins and the grace of absolution (благодать отпущения). It is essential that evil must be verbally purged. Reminiscent of the ancient rituals that involve physical purging amongst other cultural traditions of purification and restoration of clarity, the emotional expulsion of the negative energy from a human body in form of the words of penance during a sacramental confession has the power to alleviate guilt. According to Stavrogin's confessional text, his conscience is suffering from a "tiny red spider" of guilt that lives deep in his memory and reveals its presence with invariable persistence.

...и вдруг мне явственно представился крошечный красенький паучок. Мне сразу припомнился он на листке

³⁵⁹ *U Tikhona*, 42.

³⁶⁰ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

герани, когда также лились косые лучи заходящего солнца. Что-то как будто вонзилось в меня, я приподнялся и сел на постель. И вот всё как это тогда случилось!

Я увидел перед собою [...] Матрешу исхудавшую, и с лихорадочными глазами, точь-в-точь как тогда, когда она стояла у меня на пороге и, кивая мне головой, подняла на меня свой крошечный кулачок. И никогда ничего не являлось мне столь мучительным! Жалкое отчаяние беспомощного существа с несложившимся рассудком, мне грозившего (чем? Что могло оно мне сделать, о боже!), но обвинявшего конечно одну себя!³⁶¹

... all of a sudden, I distinctly pictured to myself a tiny reddish spider. At once I remembered it on the leaf of the geranium, upon which, too, had poured the rays of the setting sun. It was as though something were plunged through me; I raised myself and sat on my bed. That's all how it happened then!

I saw before me [...] Matryosha, emaciated, with feverish eyes, in every point exactly as she was when she stood on the threshold of my room and, shaking her head at me, threatened me with her tiny fist. Nothing has ever been so agonizing to me! The pitiable despair of a helpless creature with an unformed mind, threatening me (with what? what could she do to me, O Lord?), but blaming, of course, herself alone! Nothing like that has ever happened to me. I sat, till night came, without moving, having lost count of time. Is this what they call remorse or repentance? I do not know, and even now cannot say. But it was intolerable to me...³⁶²

The burning feeling of pity that hits Stavrogin for a few moments is so powerful that it remains embedded in his self for years, and the image of the violated girl's indignation at him "killing God" brings tangible pain to his otherwise desensitized existence. Curiously, Stavrogin returns to this moment of suffering over and over again, through the years, grasping onto it like the last proof of being able to feel bad for having committed evil. The "tiny red spider" becomes

³⁶¹ *U Tikhona*, 57-59.

³⁶² *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

the symbol of remorse – the closest Stavrogin had been to true repentance – and therefore his last chance of salvation. Father Tikhon recognizes it later too, noticing:

– Да, это есть покаяние и натуральная потребность его, вас поборовшая. [...] вы попали на великий путь, путь из неслыханных...³⁶³

Yes, it is repentance and natural need of repentance that has overcome you, [...] and you have taken the great way, the rarest way...³⁶⁴

Dostoevsky's dismay at the omission of the whole chapter can be explained by the fact that in it, the reader also witnesses a real confessional moment between Stavrogin and Tikhon. It takes place before the Bishop's reading of Stavrogin's literary opus. This instance of an interpersonal connection in the trialogic relationship with God contains Stavrogin's only unpremeditated affirmation of the other in love, and as such shows a real potential for healing:

Он быстро опустил глаза, упер обе ладони в колени и нетерпеливо приготовился слушать. Тихон прочел, припоминая слово в слово: «И ангелу Лаодикийской церкви напиши [...]»
 – Довольно, – оборвал Ставрогин, – Знаете, я вас очень люблю.
 – И я вас, – отозвался вполголоса Тихон. Ставрогин замолк и вдруг впал опять в давешнюю задумчивость. Это происходило точно припадками, уже в третий раз. Да и Тихону сказал он «люблю» тоже чуть не в припадке, по крайней мере неожиданно для себя самого.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ *U Tikhona*, 70.

³⁶⁴ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

³⁶⁵ *U Tikhona*, 40-41.

He at once looked at the ground, rested both his hands on his knees, and impatiently prepared to listen. Tikhon repeated word for word: “Write to the Angel of the Laodicean Church [...]”
 “Enough,” Stavrogin cut him short. “Do you know, I love you very much.”
 “I love you too,” Tikhon replied in a low voice.
 Stavrogin fell silent and suddenly lapsed again into his old reverie. This came as though in fits and now for the third time. And the “I love” he said to Tikhon was also said almost in an impulse, at any rate unexpectedly to himself.³⁶⁶

Affirming each other in love through the Word of the Scripture, two human selves create here the space needed for the existence of the transcendent Third, invisibly present in the conversation between them. This moment of mutual recognition creates the spark of Logos that has the potential to banish all evil in the kenotically oriented human consciousness. Tikhon understands this possibility when he offers Stavrogin a real chance to repent and redeem his damaged self. However, in his apathy and boredom, Stavrogin feels no difference between good and evil. For him, they are no more than the prejudice that he rises above. He also understands that the freedom from these “prejudices” necessarily means that his self will be destroyed, losing its boundaries in the endless process of aggrandizement.

Тогда, сидя за чаем и что-то болтая с ними, строго формулировал про себя в первый раз в жизни: что не знаю и не чувствую зла и добра и что не только потерял ощущение, но что и нет зла и добра (и это было мне приятно), а один предрассудок; что я могу быть свободен от всякого предрассудка, но что если я достигну той свободы, то я погиб.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

³⁶⁷ *U Tikhona*, 58-59.

It is then, chatting with them at tea, for the first time in my life I formulated accurately for myself that I do not know and do not feel the difference between good and evil; and that not only had I lost that feeling, but that there is no good and evil (and the thought was pleasant to me), only prejudice. I realized that I could be free from any prejudice, but I am dead if I achieve that freedom.

Stavrogin's goal in this confession, he says, is to forgive himself. Tikhon replies that it is only possible through kenotic humility and suffering of self in obedience to the law of the Other.

– Слушайте меня: я хочу простить сам себе, и вот моя главная цель, вся моя цель! – сказал вдруг Ставрогин с мрачным восторгом в глазах. – Вот вам вся моя исповедь, вся правда, а всё прочее ложь. Я знаю, что только тогда исчезнет видение. Вот почему я и ищу страдания безмерного, сам ищу... Не пугайте же меня, не то погибну в злобе. [...]

– Если веруете, что можете простить сами себе и токмо сего прощения и ищите достигнуть, страданием своим, то вы уже во всё веруете! – восторженно воскликнул он [Тихон]. – Как же сказали вы, что в Бога не веруете? [...]

– Мне нет прощения, – мрачно сказал Ставрогин, – в вашей книге сказано, что выше преступления нет, если оскорбить “единого от малых сих” и не может.³⁶⁸

“Listen, Father Tikhon: I want to forgive myself, and that is my object, my whole object!” Stavrogin suddenly said with gloomy ecstasy in his eyes. “Then only, I know, that vision will disappear. That is why I seek boundless suffering. I seek it myself. Don't make me afraid, or I shall die in anger.” [...]

“If you believe that you can forgive yourself and attain that forgiveness in this world through your suffering; if you set that object before you with faith, then you already believe completely!” Tikhon exclaimed rapturously. “Why did you say, then, that you did not believe in God?”

[...] “It says in the Book: ‘And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones,’ you remember. According to the Gospel there is no greater crime....”³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 81.

³⁶⁹ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

Stavrogin's deepest need is to feel relief from the burden of guilt haunting his life. He is instinctively looking for redemptive suffering to draw away the visions that continue torturing him. Concurrently, he understands that his sin is unforgivable, therefore there can be no amount of suffering that would give him the feeling of redemption. The only suffering he knows he deserves for his crimes, is eternal. The social humiliation of a public confession is Stavrogin's last hope, he says:

Но для меня останутся те, которые будут знать всё и на меня глядеть, а я на них. Я хочу, чтоб на меня все глядели. Облегчит ли это меня – не знаю. Прибегаю как к последнему средству.³⁷⁰

But there will remain those who will know everything and will look at me, and I at them. I want everyone to look at me. Will it relieve me? I don't know. I come to this as to my last resource.³⁷¹

However, he envisions the potential level of public hatred directed at him as the test of his ability to oppose, ignore and dominate others, not as an opportunity to minimize his self. This desire for a confessional revelation stems from the suffering pride and an illusion of personal power. It lacks real contrition, which is readily apparent for Bishop Tikhon, who starts exposing Stavrogin's true motivation step by step. First, he refutes the confession as non-Christian and lacking repentance:

Мысль ваша – высокая мысль, и полнее не может выразиться христианская мысль. Дальше подобного удивительного

³⁷⁰ *U Tikhona*, 67.

³⁷¹ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

подвига, казни над самим собой, который вы замыслили, идти покаяние не может, если бы только...

– Если?

– Если б это действительно было покаяние и действительно христианская мысль.

– Тонкости, – пробормотал Ставрогин задумчиво и рассеянно...³⁷²

“I shall not argue with you, still less coax you, to give up your intention, nor could I do it either. Your idea is a great idea, and it would be impossible to express more perfectly a Christian idea. Repentance cannot go further than the wonderful deed which you have conceived, if only...”

“If only what?”

“If it were indeed repentance and indeed a Christian idea.”

“Nuances,” muttered Stavrogin absentmindedly...³⁷³

Stavrogin dismisses his words as ‘subtleties,’ but bites the hook when Father Tikhon calls him out on cowardice:

– Не постыдившись признаться в преступлении, зачем постыдились вы покаяния?

– Я? Стыжусь?

– Стыдитесь и боитесь.

– Боюсь?

– Пусть глядят на меня, говорите вы; ну, а вы сами как будете глядеть на них? Вы уже ждете их злобы, чтоб ответить еще более злобою.³⁷⁴

You were not ashamed of admitting your crime; why are you ashamed of repentance?”

“Ashamed?”

“You are ashamed and afraid!”

“Afraid?”

³⁷² *U Tikhona*, 69.

³⁷³ *Stavrogin’s Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

³⁷⁴ *U Tikhona*, 71.

“Let them look at me, you say; well, and you, how will you look at them? You are expecting their evil to respond with even more evil.”³⁷⁵

He admits that the goal of his confession is to bring out anger and evil in people, because “they deserve it.” Father Tikhon notices that Stavrogin is seeking relief from his internal pain in mutual hatred, not in forgiveness and compassion.

– Впрочем, что же, что я их вызываю грубостью моей исповеди, если вы уже так заметили вызов? Так и надо. Они стоят того.
– То-есть ненависть их вам станет легче, чем если приняв от них сожаление?³⁷⁶

“Well, what does it matter that I challenge them by the coarseness of my confession, if you noticed the challenge? I shall make them hate me still more, that’s all. Surely that will make it easier for me.”
“That is, anger in you will rouse responsive anger in them, and, in hating, you will feel easier than if you accepted their pity.”³⁷⁷

Suffering public shame and pity is beyond the abilities of Stavrogin’s bloated ego and requires humility that is glaringly absent in Tikhon’s confessant.

– Слушайте, я вам всю правду скажу: я желаю, чтобы вы меня простили, вместе с вами другой и третий, но все – все непременно пусть ненавидят!
Глаза его засверкали.
– А всеобщего сожаления о вас вы не могли бы смирением перенести?

³⁷⁵ *Stavrogin’s Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

³⁷⁶ *U Tikhona*, 74.

³⁷⁷ *Stavrogin’s Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

– Не мог бы. Я не хочу всеобщего сожаления, да и не может быть всеобщего сожаления, пустой вопрос.³⁷⁸

I will tell you the whole truth: I want you to forgive me. And besides you – one or two more, but as for the rest – let the rest rather hate me. But I want this, so that I may bear it with humility...”

“And universal pity for you – could you not bear it with the same humility?”

“Perhaps I could not. Why do you...”³⁷⁹

It is at this point that Father Tikhon realizes that Stavrogin is not aiming at salvation of his self, and his confession is another act of rebellion against the Other. Still having hope for the fallen sinner, he attempts to convey the message of the ultimate victory over the darkness contained in the doctrine of kenosis. The only suffering required for the salvation of the soul, he says, is the suffering of a humiliated self, minimized in obedience to the transcendent Other.

...даже сия форма победит (он указал на листки), если только искренно примете заушение и заплевание... если выдержите! Всегда кончалось тем, что наипозорнейший крест становился великою славой и величайшею силой, если искренно было смирение подвига. Но есть ли, есть ли смирение подвига? Будет ли? О, вам нужен не вызов, а непомерное смирение и принижение! Нужно, чтобы вы не презирали судей своих, а искренне уверовали в них, как в великую церковь, тогда вы и их победите и обратите к себе примером и сольетесь в любви... О, если бы выдержали!³⁸⁰

“Even this form will conquer” (he pointed to the pages), “if only you sincerely accept the blows and the spitting. It always ended in the most ignominious cross becoming a great glory and a great strength, if the humility of the deed was sincere. But is there any humility in this deed? Will there be? Oh, you need not a challenge, but

³⁷⁸ *U Tikhona*, 76.

³⁷⁹ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes*.

³⁸⁰ *U Tikhona*, 79.

immeasurable humility and belittling! You need not to disdain your judges, but believe in them sincerely, as in a great church, then you will win over them, and turn them over to you with your example, and unite in love... Oh, if only you could stand it!"³⁸¹

Tikhon stresses the need to have faith in others as members of one great Church and win those who judge with the personal example of humility. This, he says, will allow them to share in the communal love. Further, he offers Stavrogin a 'heroic deed' of emptying all desires for public judgment, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice, and minimizing himself in humility and obedience before the Word. This is the only way to conquer demons and pride and to come out as a victor who attained freedom.

Вы мое мнение знаете: подвиг ваш, если от смирения, был бы величайшим христианским подвигом, если бы выдержали. Даже если б и не выдержали, всё равно вам первоначальную жертву сочтет Господь. Всё сочтется; ни одно слово, ни одно движение душевное, ни одна полумысль не пропадут даром. Но я вам предлагаю взамен сего подвига другой еще величайший того, нечто уже несомненно великое [...] Вас борет желание мученичества и жертвы собою; поборите и сие желание ваше, отложите листки и намерение ваше, и тогда уже всё поборете. Всю гордость свою и беса вашего посрамите! Победителем кончите, свободы достигнете...³⁸²

You know my opinion: your tale, if it was motivated by humility, could be the greatest Christian act of bravery, if you could endure. Even if you couldn't, God would still accept your initial sacrifice. Everything will be taken into account; not one word, not one movement of the soul, not even a half-thought will be wasted. But instead of that tale, I offer you another, an even bigger one, something even greater [...] You are tortured by the desire for martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Conquer that desire of yours, put away your pages and your intention, and then you will conquer all.

³⁸¹ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

³⁸² *U Tikhona*, 83.

Putting your entire pride and your demon to shame! You will end up a winner and attain victory...

Father Tikhon suggests that Stavrogin joins an elder in a monastery as a postulant for several years. An exercise in obedience, self-minimization, and sacrifice, it would bring unforeseen benefits, says Tikhon:

Я знаю одного старца не здесь, но и недалеко отсюда, отшельника и схимника, и такой христианской премудрости, что нам с вами и не понять того. Он послушает моих просьб. Я скажу ему о вас всё. Позвольте? Подите к нему в послушание, под начало его лет на пять, на семь, сколько сами найдете потребным впоследствии. Дайте себе обет и сею великою жертвой купите всё, чего жаждете и даже чего не ожидаете, ибо и понять теперь не можете, что получите!³⁸³

I know an old man, a hermit and ascetic, not here, but not far from here, of such great Christian wisdom that he is even beyond your and my understanding. He will listen to my request. I will tell him about you. Go to him, into retreat, as a novice under his guidance, for five years, for seven, for as many as you find necessary. Make a vow to yourself, and by this great sacrifice you will acquire all that you long for and don't even expect, for you cannot possibly realize now what you will obtain.³⁸⁴

Stavrogin listens to Tikhon seriously and dismisses him squeamishly as if repelled by the very thought of humbling himself in a holy place before a holy man. This answer means only one thing for Father Tikhon: the confessant's guilt will eventually crush him. Instead of humbling himself before the life-giving God, Stavrogin will inevitably succumb to the urge of death.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ *Stavrogin's Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

– Я вижу... я вижу как наяву, – воскликнул Тихон пронзающим душу голосом и с выражением сильнейшей горести, – что никогда вы, бедный погибший юноша, не стояли так близко к новому и еще сильнейшему преступлению, как в сию минуту! [...] Нет, не после обнародования, а еще до обнародования за день, за час может быть до великого шага, ты бросишься в новое преступление, как в исход, и совершишь его единственно, чтобы только избежать сего обнародования листов, на котором теперь настаиваешь.³⁸⁵

“I see ... I see, as if it stood before me,” Tikhon exclaimed in a voice which penetrated the soul and with an expression of the most violent grief, “that you, poor, lost youth, have never been so near another and a still greater crime than you are at this moment. [...] No, not after the publication, but before it, a day, an hour, perhaps, before the great step, you will throw yourself on a new crime, as a way out, and you will commit it solely in order to avoid the publication of these pages.”³⁸⁶

Stavrogin’s response of anger and fear betrays his awe of the ‘holy fool’s’ psychological insight and recognition of Father Tikhon’s rightness:

Ставрогин даже задрожал от гнева и почти от испуга.
– Проклятый психолог! – оборвал он вдруг в бешенстве и не оглядываясь вышел из комнаты.³⁸⁷

Stavrogin shuddered with anger and almost with fear. “You cursed psychologist!” – he suddenly cut him short in fury and, without looking round, left the cell.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵ *U Tikhona.*, 85.

³⁸⁶ *Stavrogin’s Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

³⁸⁷ *U Tikhona.*, 85.

³⁸⁸ *Stavrogin’s Confession and the Plan of The Life of a Great Sinner: With Introductory and Explanatory Notes.*

Stavrogin's suicide, foretold by Tikhon, was inevitable, as he lost his life to evil long before his body stopped breathing. Choosing to step away from God's redeeming grace and exercising his own will against the advice of an ordained priest, Stavrogin accepts the judgment of unforgivable guilt and executes his own ultimate punishment.

Stavrogin's only other attempt at a reading of himself is found in his final letter to Dasha, written before the suicide. In it he finally confronts his life:

My desires are too weak; they cannot be a guide to me. You can cross a river on a log, but not on a chip of wood [...] Only negation has flowed from me, without magnanimity and without force. Not even negation. Everything is always so petty and stale.³⁸⁹

These few lines written by Stavrogin seem to echo the words from the Apocalypses quoted in the moment of his true confession.³⁹⁰ Here again, Dostoevsky draws attention to the document's expressive shortcomings: "Here is the letter, word for word, without correcting the smallest mistake in the style of this Russian son of the nobility, who never quite mastered Russian grammar for all his European education."³⁹¹ Paying attention to the style instead of the message of self-judgment, Dostoevsky's narrator places this note in the same category as Stavrogin's false confession – an expression of untamed pride. In the end, taking one's own life is the last act of rebellion against the law of the Other. Instead of kenotically waiting for God to claim back the gift of life given at birth, Stavrogin makes this decision himself, usurping the power to control his life with his own will. Defiant till the last moment, he fails completely at the imitation of Christ's

³⁸⁹ *The Possessed Or, The Devils: A Novel in Three Parts.*

³⁹⁰ So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

³⁹¹ Leatherbarrow, 19.

kenosis. Multiplied and magnified, his lack of repentance creates the space within his self that is filled with negativity and the energy of destruction. Without a true healing confession, Stavrogin still has the ultimate responsibility for the choices he willfully makes. Eventually, he becomes his own unforgiving judge, knowing too well that the destructive force living in him needs to be stopped. Unable to stop it by peaceful means of kenotic humility, Stavrogin stays on the path of violence and chooses the final act against his own self – suicide.

IV. Conclusion

Even though the confessional efforts examined in this chapter should be regarded as failed confessions, understanding their deviations from a true, successful confession allows the reader to grasp the essential role of the kenotic state of mind in restoring the wholeness of self. In *Demons*, much like in his other prominent works, Dostoevsky maintains that the responsibility for the choice of a belief system belongs to the individual self. His characters demonstrate that the choice to align one's will with the will of the ultimate Other and minimize the movements of self that contradict the humility of kenosis can produce the optimal outcomes for all, while the rebellion of self against the other and disregard of the hierarchical limitations of creation is shown to invariably end in tragedy. Dostoevsky maintains that the self-minimizing, humble stance in view of the superior Other initiates the movement of grace in the dialogic interaction between the confessor, confessant and the commonly shared Truth. In the absence of kenosis, the transgressions of self against the other disrupt the metaphorical 'flow of love' during the communication, resulting in relational aberrations and communal suffering. Resisting kenotic principles, in Dostoevsky, culminates in the destruction of self and, frequently, the other.

In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky shows Myshkin's sickness caused by the poison received from the outside world. The prince's visionary experiences during the epileptic episodes allow him

access to the plane of the transcendent awareness where he is cognizant of the unifying, primary consciousness beyond the self. We can say that Myshkin takes on the emotional weight of carrying the sins of others and releases it during his epileptic fits, during the moments of inward illumination, or metanoia.³⁹² Myshkin's suffering allows him a way to repent for the sins of others without connecting to the transcendent Other through codified Church rituals. However, he regards epilepsy as a sickness and not a healthy way to deal with the evils of the world. Dostoevsky recognizes this fact when he shows Myshkin's self minimized into absence due to the unlimited willing surrender of personal boundaries. The prince's ability for empathy runs so deep, that he literally collapses into the pain of the other without any means to get out. From this we understand that in Dostoevsky's mind, the shared being between two selves can only be temporary, and one needs to return to "radical otherness" in order to preserve the boundaries of self. Myshkin cannot return to this position of extralocality in a healthy way because he had found it in his sickness and not in Church. He feels connected to the transcendent through his epilepsy, and his awareness of the unifying conscience comes from experiencing many near-death moments during epileptic fits.

For Myshkin feels the miracle and wonder of life so strongly precisely because he lives "counting each moment" as if it were the last. Both his joyous discovery of life and his profound intuition of death combine to make him feel each moment as one of absolute and immeasurable ethical choice and responsibility. The prince, in other words, lives in the eschatological tension that was (and is) the soul of the primitive Christian ethic, whose doctrine of totally selfless agape was conceived in the same perspective of the imminent end of time.³⁹³

³⁹² "...inward illumination and sudden change known as metanoia is integral to Orthodox Christianity, where it refers to repentance in a narrow sense, but more broadly, transformation that brings spiritual knowledge." Blank, 11.

³⁹³ Frank, "The Idiot," 580.

While Myshkin might be a “primitive Christian,” Dostoevsky’s Tikhon is a true, practicing Christian believer. In *Demons*, the reader is given the opportunity to see Father Tikhon professionally stand his ground in the confessional encounter with evil. During it, Tikhon honestly admits to the offended religious feeling in his own self, indicating that his personal ethical boundaries have been violated. This feeling arises in him from the understanding of the shared responsibility that the confessor normally assumes in a sacramental confession. Without giving up his own core beliefs for the benefit of the other, Tikhon still offers his confessant a way to restore the wholeness of self through humility and kenotic surrender of will. For support, he quotes the word of the Other directly from the Scriptures. Engaging his opponent in the framework of trialogic thinking, Tikhon taps into the endless source of favorable judgment and forgiveness. Though the sin of the other brings him pain, he knows that his role is to connect his confessant with God without surrendering to the darkness. By seeing and requesting the option of atonement for the sinner, Tikhon creates the space of possibility where even the worst transgressions can be forgiven. Importantly, he also leaves space for the will of the other while directing him towards atonement through kenotic obedience and humility. The censored *Demons*’ chapter, the missing focus of the whole novel, concentrates on confession as the opportunity to humble oneself regardless of the life situation, even though Stavrogin’s confession can’t be considered transformative as he resisted the offered way to connect with the all-forgiving Third. Meanwhile, Myshkin’s confessants never had a chance for transformation altogether, despite the prince’s selfless desire to help: simply because Myshkin’s interactions with others lacked the expressly trialogic hierarchical structure of a true confession, the energy of saving grace was unavailable for them.

These observations are important in recognizing the significance of the appropriate energy movement between the participants of a confessional dialogue. We can claim that for Dostoevsky,

the kenotic connection between the three hypostases of God in Christianity served as the primary inspirational model for outlining the optimal conditions of interactions between humans. Dostoevsky's failed literary confessions demonstrate a variety of disruptions in the relational dynamic of self-emptying, all resulting in the gradual disintegration of the human self. Oppositely, his literary vision of successful confessions affirms the decisive role of kenosis in the experience of personal transformation.

Conclusion

The last few decades have seen a resurgence in the use of the term *kenosis*, which indicates a growth in the relevance of this originally theological concept. Outside of the religious context, kenosis can be noticed in discussions of cultural and national identities, in ecology and consumer science, in politics, in gender and art studies, in minority discourse, and increasingly – in literary criticism. Dirk Uffelmann’s recent monumental volume, for example, follows the use of kenotic tropes in Russian literature and culture for a period of time that spans over two hundred years: from the late 18th century to the end of the 20th.³⁹⁴ A part of the global conversation, this dissertation is a focused study of the Christian doctrine of kenosis refracted through Dostoevsky, a representative of Russian 19th-century secular literature.

The original message of Christ’s kenosis seen in the New Testament had its own historical target audience. The rhetoric of kenotic humility was chosen by Paul the Apostle in the particular socio-historical conditions of the Macedonian city of Philippi, where a number of citizens formed one of the earliest Christian communities. In his writings, kenosis of the incarnate Word functions as a metaphor for the ideal personal relationship to alterity. In addition, Paul addresses the message of kenosis to a whole community of believers, convincing them to imitate Christ’s abdication of absolute power for subsequent glorification. Doctrinally speaking, together the believers constitute the Church or the body of Christ. Within this context, God’s kenosis is used by the Apostle as an appeal to regulate social interactions within larger human societies. The example of the triune ideal Other who is postulated to exist in three hypostases (три лица), but without the duality of human nature (одна природа), which excludes evil from the flow of divine energies between the Three

³⁹⁴ Uffelmann, *Samounichizhenie Christa. Metafori i metonimii v russkoi kulture i literature*.

Personae of one God, is a unique metaphysical relationship that models the ways of communal being in complete harmony. The reciprocal kenosis of the divine persons in relation to one another is God's trinitarian nature in Christianity, and Paul's audience is encouraged to follow the model of kenotic self-surrender for the best results in such processes as reconciliation, redemption, and creation. Modeled after Christ's willing and *loving* self-sacrifice, the dual kenotic love towards the other and towards God imparts the obedient subject with the trialogic relationship of giving and receiving. Bound by the energy of grace, the participants of such a triologue willingly conform to the hierarchy that reinforces the transcendent Ideal and recognizes the reasonable limits of the human self.

My research demonstrates that in his most prominent novels, as well as in personal correspondence and diaries, Dostoevsky widely utilized kenotic rhetoric, reimagined for the historical audience of 19th-century Imperial Russia. Dostoevsky's literary efforts – a personal reaction to the political, philosophical, and religious polemics of his time – recover and foreground the Scriptural kenosis metaphorically and metonymically as the philosophical stance beneficial for personal and communal happiness. The trialogic structure with a foundation in gratitude is promoted in Dostoevsky's texts as a source of strength for people facing a multitude of life's ethical choices. It is significant that instead of advancing the idea of domination by force, Dostoevsky adapts the message of kenosis and calls for the return of power to the transcendent Other as the best course of action for the "God chosen people." Renouncing the philosophy of protest, the writer artistically reinterprets the self-emptying of Christ to offer his readership a viable alternative to crime, violence, wars, and revolutions.

A brief historical overview of the kenotic idea offered in Chapter One allows us to place Dostoevsky's authorial choices in a larger, multi-century context of religious and secular thought

on the voluntary minimization of self. Many philosophers observed that kenosis plays a significant role in the dialogic relationship between people. Being made present by the other is a mutual process, and the joint presence creates something significant in the space of contact. When both participants of a dialogue are of one mind, have the same love, and “in humility regard the other as better than themselves,”³⁹⁵ they give more space to the other, minimizing their own. This shared reality, impossible without kenotic withdrawal, is essential for healthy human growth. Looking for the likeness of the ideal in the other is a prerequisite of mutually fulfilling, loving relationships, and it is this conceptual operation that I see promoted in Dostoevsky’s literary work.

Dostoevsky’s worldview is undeniably theistic despite the many fluctuations of faith he went through in his life. Like other theistic thinkers, he imagines access to the world of another self exclusively through the presence of the transcendent Third, affirmed in a genuinely heartfelt, honest confessional moment. It is important to note that in his vision, God exists not *between* two human selves, but clearly *above*, as the subject *elevated beyond* the scope of anything material in the world. It is from this equidistant transcendent position that the relative equality of human selves is affirmed by Dostoevsky as a theistic thinker. Bringing God out from the linear *I and Thou* communication into the vertex of His own is for him the metaphysical move that underscores the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the Creator and the creation.

The analysis presented in Chapter Two indicates that Dostoevsky’s use of the confessional discourse as a performative kenotic action is deliberate, and aims to reiterate the significance of non-judgmental witnessing of the other in combination with the faith in the transcendent and a critical view of one’s own ethical transgressions. A regular confession is an indispensable cognitive ritual developed by the Church to practice the inner movement of humility that

³⁹⁵ *The Bible*, NRSV, Phil. 2:1-4.

counteracts despondency and despair. Psychologically speaking, confession is a verbal speech act of emptying out the knowledge of personal transgressions which facilitates the emotional management of guilt, fear, and subsequent rage in a human self. It is the basis of secular behavioral therapy. The proven constructive significance of confession consists in an increased sense of well-being and inner peace, a better-balanced behavior, and a more positive outlook on life. The metamorphosis of the confessant serves as an indicator of a successful confession, even though the changes in the make-up of the self might be noticeable only to the confessing individual. Dostoevsky uses confessional situations in his literary oeuvre to demonstrate that a properly performed, sincere, authentic act of repentance can heal and redeem even the unhappiest of souls.

An examination of transformative confessions in *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Demons* in Chapter Two reveals that in order to picture successful confessional interactions, Dostoevsky employs the dialogic discourse model with clear references to the Scriptural word and kenotic love (agape). Dostoevsky's confessional exchanges that follow the traditional dialogic model reveal a high level of trust between the participants along with the lack of fear to fully be oneself. This state of being seen and accepted is the feeling humanity is trying to achieve for all people by foregrounding the role of empathy, which is regrettably a limited human ability. Unlike the understanding gaze of the boundless God figure, human capacity to embrace difference or to even simply back out of the conflict scene to create space for the alterity is contained within the boundaries of a single self. Upholding these boundaries is necessary for the very existence of discrete selves. Dostoevsky views the sacrifice of the ego for the sake of loving acceptance of the other as the only viable way forward towards a mutually sustaining existence of multiple selves, towards the life of minimized suffering in polyphony, not in discord. Suffering is the feeling he ascribes to the state of sin, associating happiness with the process of active loving

that strives to transform the self-aggrandizing, individualistic human nature into the ideal that is beyond the limits of a human self. Dostoevsky utilizes confessional dialogue as a specific type of discourse revealing the moment of grace which restores, transforms, and saves damaged individuals.

Dostoevsky's novels suggest that the state of innocent love for the other in complete self-abnegation is not easily achievable for any human with a developed sense of self-awareness. The problem lies in the fact that the maturation of reason presupposes critical judgment that is naturally applied not only to oneself but to others as well. The act of kenotic will required to make space for others to exist in their own right implies a certain abdication of the inner need to pass judgment on the actions of the other coupled with full, honest responsibility for the actions of one's own self. Confession in this regard is an extremely helpful kenotic practice that combines the act of active recognition of personal answerability with the delegation of judgment to the ideal Other. By means of kenotic self-surrender, confession brings the subject closer to the ontological state of childlike purity. Dostoevsky is fascinated with the state of human (lost) innocence, and in his works, the biblical commandment to "be like children" is the underlying personality model for the characters that convey the strongest sense of goodness. Prince Myshkin, Alyosha Karamazov, Sonya Marmeladova, Sofya Matveevna, Father Zosima, and Father Tikhon are outstanding examples of acting kenotically: with empathy, conscious self-minimization, and deliberate withholding of judgment. In these characters, the reader recognizes the mode of thought and the emotional composure that facilitate the return of the human self to the state of pure infancy of soul. Dostoevsky's kenotic characters bring to the fore the verbal and behavioral models with the potential to heal emotional traumas based on the admission of mistakes and selfless love between the participants of a confessional conversation. Be it the unspoiled naivety of children, Alyosha's

kindness, Myshkin's self-sacrifice, Sonya's humility, Tikhon's knowledge, Zosima's wisdom or Sofya's pity – all these traits signify something to be grateful for in the world of oppositional stances and forceful domination by fear and untruth. These characters embody the ethical message of kenosis and affirm it through their personal trialogic consciousness, giving readers a glimpse into Dostoevsky's philosophy. Trialogic consciousness means that subjectivity is never alone or enclosed within the limits of one's self. Self-identity as a separate entity simply does not exist. Even in the absence of the human other, one is always in the presence of the transcendent Third, omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal.

Observing Dostoevsky's characters in confessional exchanges we can claim that in a confessant, kenosis creates space for the divine Logos to enter the self and regenerate it internally. The evil that burdens the self can be emptied out in words willingly, but can't be expunged by any external influence. This understanding of kenotic energy exchange explains why an inner conflict can't be resolved by the outside force, and is evident both in Stavrogin's false confession and in Myshkin's failed efforts to save Rogozhin from committing a crime.

Kenosis in the confessor, the human other receiving the knowledge of the wrong, is essential for relinquishing the position of the judge and joining the penitent in the plea for forgiveness directed to the ultimate judging Other. The concept of shared responsibility is significant in this discussion because one cannot be responsible for the other if they are not responsible for their own self. Holding oneself accountable for the same transgressions as one sees in the other redirects the process of judgment away from the other and onto the self. Personal responsibility for the choices one makes exists not only in the relationship with the other, but primarily in the relation to the hierarchical commandments of the ideal Other. Dostoevsky's kenotic characters show that following the doctrine of kenosis, one leaves the judgment up to the

transcendent Third. Instead of suffering under the weight of negative emotions that accompany the condemnation of the penitent's actions, one is encouraged to join the other in the plea for relief from the pain. Relying on the judgment of the ideal Other is the step that should not be skipped, as one simply cannot give psychological approval to everything that happens around them. Dostoevsky shows that the inner capacity to withdraw one's judgment and make space for the understanding of the other that is based on empathy and justification is either extremely limited or absent in most people. Those who rely solely on the resources of their own self to relate to the otherness inevitably come to the point of negation, rejection and reasonable hostility towards the witnessed evil. It is only the ideal, transcendent God that theoretically has unlimited capacity for justification and validation. Referring to that Third is a way to preserve healthy boundaries for every human self, creating and protecting the place where subjectivity truly dwells.

The importance of fitting into a hierarchy to avoid chaos within one's mind or within a society is one of the main messages of Dostoevsky's work. For him, this hierarchy culminates in Christ as the ideal of Man. Humility and humiliation, a willing acceptance of suffering, self-sacrifice motivated by the dual love – towards God and towards the human other – and submission to the law of the Scriptures were all necessary kenotic values in Dostoevsky's mind. It is curious to see how Dostoevsky's personal conversation with God – his self in negotiation with the Other – changes over time. The miracle of the unexpected pardon of his death sentence visibly restores his faith in the kind and benevolent Father – the feeling that his own father was not able to give him. Confession becomes for him the preferred mode of speech: if one is constantly speaking to God as one of the interlocutors, a high degree of honesty transpires. Authorial honesty might be one of the reasons Dostoevsky is loved by many despite his often-controversial opinions. We notice that his writing is not kenotic in spirit: it attacks and judges, it draws the lines, and shows

the limits of what he considers right and wrong. The entirety of his oeuvre, however, is one life-long act of self-emptying and creation.

The need for a hierarchical structure required to maintain the ethical core and the boundaries of self is seen very clearly in Dostoevsky's examples of failed confessions explored in Chapter Three. Myshkin, for instance, takes all responsibility for the evil he sees in the other. He internalizes the negative and goes out of his way to see the other as good no matter what, thereby hoping to exterminate evil on the level of perception. Failing to admit that evil exists as an objective reality and can't be dealt with by the power of the human mind and love alone, he rejects the divine hierarchy that could have given him support in his dealing with the vices of society. Had Myshkin not accepted into himself the demons he saw in others but rather named them as such without harboring negative feelings towards their hosts, he might not have suffered the collapse of self. Had he admitted that the other is also responsible for their thoughts, words, and actions, he would have acted differently to prevent Rogozhin's crime against Nastasya Filippovna. Instead, he merges his self with the other in absolute empathy, abandoning any personal boundaries and assuming all responsibility for himself. Crushed by the weight of the other's sin, Myshkin is a warning to those who imagine themselves having unlimited capacity for forgiveness, forgetting about the hierarchy that places humans below the divine capacity to release from guilt, obligation or punishment.

Dostoevsky's literary confessions demonstrate that a good confessor does not lose their self, but rather reinforces it by holding themselves accountable and acting in a way that supports their ideal. One of the important ways in which a confessor participates in the recognition and abdication of sin is by sharing the weight of responsibility for what has been confessed by the penitent. Dostoevsky indicates that the measure to which the confessor takes on the judgement of

wrongdoings can define the outcome of a confession. One might wonder what would have happened to Stavrogin if Tikhon had accepted his confession unconditionally, without passing judgment or assigning punishment. If Tikhon had taken on complete responsibility for the absolution and forgiveness of Stavrogin's crimes, would it have relieved Stavrogin's guilt? Would it have made his evil disappear? Instead, by leaving to Stavrogin the ultimate choice to claim responsibility for the sins and to redeem the burdened soul through spiritual service, Tikhon acts kenotically, preserving thereby his own integrity and not passing the judgment of forgiveness in place of God. As a confessor, Alyosha Karamazov also firmly stands his ground, albeit in kindness and in love for the penitent. He sees the wrongs of the other, but chooses to respond in the spirit of kenosis – either in silence or in affirmation of God's power to forgive even the worst sinner.

One of the questions raised in this dissertation concerns what the doctrine of kenosis can add to our understanding of the ethical message of Dostoevsky's works. I find that in his eyes, self-judgment contributes to people's peaceful coexistence by allowing space for the other to live without judgment from (equally wrong) humans. In Dostoevsky, even a rationally justified judgment of the other is often seen as humiliation and insult, causing trauma and emotional pain that perpetuate the cycle of wrongdoing. I believe that the concept of self-emptying allows the discussion of ways for verbally dealing with guilt and fear of retribution. As presented in Dostoevsky's novels, kenosis is a unique and functional approach to resolving personal conflicts without dominating the other. It can help a multitude of selves coexist in a positive manner and gives hope that harmonious human relations are possible. Dostoevsky's literary models of dialogic consciousness based on the triune loving connection between self, the other and the transcendent Third are visionary examples of the next step in human consciousness development that escapes

the limitations of the individualistic, or the merely dialogic, understanding of the subject's relation to alterity.

The monologic nature of secular humanist thought centered on the notion of the autonomous self sometimes simplifies a few significant areas of human experience, especially the aspects of self which are rooted in the personal development that takes place in interactions with the other. Importantly, these are the parts of self that ensure the possibility of positive, mutually enriching connections with others – different but initially equally dignified selves. Thanks to the mirror mechanisms of the human mind, one invariably defines the self in relation to alterity. This configuration is essentially the structure suggested by Levinas, where “subjectivity is structured as the other in the same.” Contemporary neuroscientists noticed that cognitive models of imitation and psychological notions of empathy and mirroring come together in the neuron-based processes in the human brain that facilitate the functioning of the framework of human actions, both motor and ideological. Our mind is biologically wired to make imitation easy and desirable. Physiological mechanisms of mirroring have been noticed at single-cell and neural-system levels. These mechanisms are deeply ingrained in humans and make empathy possible. It is through these automatic processes that we learn and form our selves. Recent Harvard studies claim that “experience-based learning forms links between sensory processing of the actions of others and motor plans.”³⁹⁶ This means that behavior of the self is influenced by how the other is perceived, highlighting the importance of positive interactions with alterity. Seeing the other as a reflection of oneself is not just an abstract philosophical theory, but a neural mechanism that has been biologically selected because it allows humans adaptive advantages in life. Society is the main area where a common representational format benefits humanity.

³⁹⁶ Iacoboni, “Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons,” *Annual Review of Psychology*.

Neural mirroring solves the “problem of other minds” (how we can access and understand the minds of others) and makes intersubjectivity possible, thus facilitating social behavior.³⁹⁷

The biological structure of the human self that mirrors the other on the subconscious level determines the need for acceptance in the dialogue with the other as someone distinctly alien, and often opposite, to the self. The philosophy of polyphony is an existential necessity for communication with others in the limited physical space meant for habitation by a multitude of human selves. As we continue to witness historical conflicts growing in scale, frequency and irreparable damage, exploring the ways of thinking that promote agreement between two and more selves is reasonably given a high priority in the humanities. Kenosis as a concept can be a valuable approach to articulating and protecting the needs and rights of minorities and disadvantaged groups of the human population. The principle of human equality in relation to the transcendent arranges the hierarchy of human values in the way that allows to view difference without domination and provides space for meaningful encounters on personal and societal levels. Beyond the philosophy of dialogue, the philosophy of triaology is the next step towards developing a functional philosophy of polyphony.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

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