

“WATER THE EARTH”: DOSTOEVSKY ON TEARS

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As opposed to modern Western culture, in which tears are seen as unmanly, Dostoevsky inherits not only a cultural but also a religious tradition that gives positive significance to tears in the spiritual life, as in the teachings of Isaac the Syrian, which Dostoevsky knew. According to this teaching, tears manifest a dispossession of the ego and an opening of the self to God. This is illustrated by reference to the story of Alyosha's religious experience, recounted in Chapter IV of Book VII of The Brothers Karamazov, which also exemplifies the religious teachings of the Elder Zosima, Alyosha's starets. The potentially morbid aspect of a religious culture of tears is discussed with reference to the abject figure Marya Lebyatkina in The Possessed, whilst its ambiguity is also seen in the too easily flowing tears of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, and in the tears of the convict Fedka, both also in The Possessed. Yet in all these cases Dostoevsky uses these characters' tears both to explore their personalities and to reveal the truth of their God-relationship.

Western readers, possibly predisposed to accept cultural stereotypes relating to the emotionalism of Slavic peoples, are not surprised to find many of Dostoevsky's characters being liable to bouts of plentiful weeping. Even in Western novels of the nineteenth century, tears and weeping come more readily than they do to the perhaps more cynical and hard-bitten characters favoured by twentieth-century fiction. In any case, since Dostoevsky's novels typically deal with extreme situations, involving murder, the sexual abuse of children, suicide, and insanity (to name but a few salient themes), it is even less surprising if his characters lose emotional control from time to time. How, in Dostoevsky's world, could we expect anything but that the floodgates of tears would be thrown open?

But, being the kind of writer he is, Dostoevsky does not have his characters cry simply for the sake of dramatic effect (though that may be there too) or because he has observed that that is what people do in the kinds of situations he

sets up. As I hope to show, tears and weeping have a set of very distinctive functions in Dostoevsky's novels that provide important insight into the relevant characters, their state of mind, and, not least, their religious development. In this essay, I shall focus on two of the major novels, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*,¹ although other relevant examples could be found in many other works.² These novels offer a variety of tears, including false tears, but first I shall begin by making a few comments on tears from (a) a phenomenological and (b) a theological perspective.

I

What happens when we cry? Our eyes fill with tears, and our inner state becomes more than usually visible in the configuration of our faces. Tears are therefore a pre-eminent way in which we *show* our feelings. The inner manifests itself in the outer, and the regular boundaries between inner state and outer appearance are rendered *fluid*. Carefully constructed ego-world boundaries are compromised: the self loses the distance from the world that is needed for negotiating the complex and rapid interactions of daily living. We – we ourselves – are “swept away by” or “dissolve in” tears. More specifically, the proximity of the tear-duct to the eyes means that our very vision of the world is, literally, blurred. When we cry, and the more we cry, we are no longer able to see properly. The world becomes indistinct to the point at which we have to hide our eyes. But, again, the clarity and power of the gaze is, normally, a measure of the power of the ego and, therewith, what we mostly regard as identical with the self as such. The two expressions “boys don't cry” and “the male gaze,” with all their connotations about ego-construction, are not accidentally related. But this relationship between tears and what some might see as the ‘failure’ of the ego to maintain itself in situations of emotional duress is also a clue to the positive meaning of tears. To the extent that the ego-self maintains itself at a distance from the world and reduces its world to the object of its sharp defining gaze, it becomes a self incapable of genuinely relating to others, of seeing the other's point of view, or of humbling itself under the other's needs. Conversely, if tears thus give expression to the *com*-passion that is integral to being truly human, they also reveal the self's potential openness to the divine Other, to God. Christian and other religious traditions therefore offer extensive witness to the ‘gift of tears’ as indicative of the depth of the self's God-relationship.

¹ *The Possessed* is also known in English as *(The) Demons*.

² Think, for example, of the scenes between Raskolnikov and Sonia in *Crime and Punishment*.

Growing up in an Orthodox society, Dostoevsky is likely to have had a general cultural awareness of tears as an acknowledged manifestation of the religious life. Moreover, we also know that during the composition of *The Brothers Karamazov* (much of which is set in a monastic milieu), he studied a number of spiritual writers, including, notably, Isaac the Syrian, who give extensive and explicit teaching about the role of tears in the religious life.³ In a study of *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, Hilarion Alfeyev devotes a chapter to “tears.” Alfeyev begins by emphasizing the unsurprising connection between tears and repentance. Isaac defines repentance as “continual and mournful supplication which by means of prayer filled with compunction draws nigh to God in order to seek forgiveness of past offenses, and entreaty for preservation from future.”⁴ The repentant person is filled with grief at the revelation of their past sins and this grief naturally moves them to tears. It involves a “grief of the heart” and a “sorrow of mind.”⁵ Closely connected with this is the theme of forgiveness, and, as the repentant person comes to be assured of repentance, the “bitter tears” of grief over past sins become the “sweet tears” of joy over divine grace. Consequently, Isaac describes the monastic life as essentially a life of weeping:

What meditation can a monk have in his cell save weeping? Could he have any time free from weeping to turn his gaze to another thought? And what occupation is better than this? [...] A monk’s consolation is born of his weeping [...]. So let us entreat the Lord with an unrelenting mind to grant us mourning.⁶

“Abundant tears” that overcome a monk “effortlessly” are an “exact token and accurate sign that the fruit which is hidden in the soul has begun to appear.”⁷ And, as I have noted, these are not only the bitter tears of repentance, they are also the joyful tears consequent upon assurance of forgiveness: “There are tears that burn and there are tears that anoint as if with oil;” in Isaac’s terminology, one passes from the first to the second order of tears:

³ See Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008) 302 and references to the work of Salvestroni.

⁴ Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000) 131.

⁵ Alfeyev 133.

⁶ Alfeyev 135.

⁷ Alfeyev 136.

These are the tears that are shed because of insight; they make the body comely and anoint it as if with oil, and they pour forth by themselves without compulsion [...]. While the thinking is silent, these tears are poured forth over the entire countenance. The body receives from them a sort of nourishment, and gladness is imprinted upon the face.⁸

Alfeyev comments: “a sign that a person has attained the love of God is his ability to shed tears every time when he remembers God.”⁹ In other words, tears are not just a transitional phenomenon in which the ego surrenders itself only to receive itself back again, essentially unchanged by the experience. True tears are the manifestation of a permanent opening of the ego, and each new contact with God is a further dispossession of self. Of course, this marks a clear difference between the monastic world and contemporary cultural paradigms in which religion is often perceived as psychologically suspect precisely because it seems to devalue the project of autonomy. Whether or how that circle can be squared is a discussion that goes far beyond the scope of an essay such as this – indeed, it is central to the whole question of religion in the culture of modernity.¹⁰ Dostoevsky’s use of monastic traditions concerning holy weeping in the story of his ‘hero’ Alyosha, the novice monk who is sent out into the world by his Elder and leaves the monastery after an overwhelming experience of both bitter and sweet tears, is one of the ways in which the novelist very deliberately addresses the clash of worlds or value-systems at issue here. Indeed, some readers might conclude that the staging of such a clash is precisely the point, if there is a single ‘point,’ in this great book.¹¹

II

Let us, then, now turn to Dostoevsky and to Alyosha’s experience, as narrated in Chapter IV of Book VII of *The Brothers Karamazov*, entitled Cana of Galilee. The scene comes at a crucial point in the narrative, and Dostoevsky himself seems to

⁸ Alfeyev 138.

⁹ Alfeyev 139.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

¹¹ I have focused here on Dostoevsky’s own Orthodox context. However, other Christian traditions also testify to the “gift of tears.” For a good overview see the extensive article “Larmes” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (Paris; Beauchesne, 1932-95) 9:292ff. More generally, see Tom Lutz, *Crying: A Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999).

have regarded it as a high-point of the novel. Alyosha, the youngest of the Karamazov brothers, is a novice-monk under the tutelage of the saintly Elder Zosima. However, he is challenged by two converging catastrophes. On the one hand, are the family relationships that involve sexual rivalry, debt, and, ultimately, the murder of his father; on the other, is the death of Zosima himself. This last event is made all the more traumatic by the fact that instead of being miraculously preserved, as his admirers had hoped, the Elder’s body begins to decompose prior to burial – a clear sign to his opponents that he was a fake all along. The chapter heading Cana of Galilee refers to the reading from John’s Gospel, Chapter 2, which narrates the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding at Cana, a village in Galilee. This is, in fact, the text being read over the body of the Elder, as part of the monastic vigil preceding the burial. During the reading, Alyosha, understandably overwrought, falls asleep and, in his sleep, dreams (or has a vision?) of the wedding at Cana and sees Zosima amongst the guests, full of radiant joy. And, as the Zosima he sees in his vision tells him, “He” too, “our Sun” is present:

Do not fear Him. He is terrible in His greatness, awful in His sublimity, but infinitely merciful. He has made Himself like unto us from love and rejoices with us. He is changing the water into wine that the gladness of the guests may not be cut short. He is expecting new guests, He is calling new ones unceasingly for ever and ever...¹²

Waking up, Alyosha rushes from the cell where the vigil is being held:

his soul, overflowing with rapture, yearned for freedom, space, openness. The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless above him. The Milky Way ran in two pale streams from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the cathedral gleamed out against the sapphire sky. The gorgeous autumn flowers, in the beds round the house, were slumbering till morning. The silence of the earth seemed to melt into the silence of the heavens. The mystery of earth was one with the mystery of the stars [...].

(BK 378)

¹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London, Heinemann, 1955) 378. Subsequent page references marked BK are given in parentheses in the text.

Dostoevsky is rarely as lyrical as he is in this in evocation of stars, earth, and flowers, and this lyricism has suggested to some readers that the experience that is to come is a case of nature-mysticism, a revelation of the cosmic unity of “the mystery of earth” and the “mystery of the stars.” That debate cannot be fully addressed here, but we note also the presence of the cathedral and, for those who have read through the novel, the passage will recall the teaching of Zosima himself about contact with “other worlds”:

God took seeds from different worlds and sowed them on this earth, and His garden grew up and everything came up that could come up, but what grows and lives is alive only through its feeling of contact with other mysterious worlds. If that feeling grows weak or is destroyed in you, the heavenly growth will die away in you.

(BK 334)

In the continuation of Alyosha’s experience, it becomes clear that the stars represent such “other worlds,” since, we are told: “There seemed to be threads from all those innumerable worlds of God, linking his soul to them, and it was trembling all over ‘in contact with other worlds.’” (BK 379) The last phrase, in quotation marks, refers precisely back to Zosima’s teaching, previously cited. Surrounded, then, by the silent beauty of the early autumn night

Alyosha stood, gazed, and suddenly threw himself down on the earth. He did not know why he embraced it. He could not have told why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss it all. But he kissed it, weeping, sobbing and watering it with his tears and vowed passionately to love it, to love it for ever and ever.

(BK 378)

And, again, if we think that this suggests some kind of Nietzschean-Dionysiac worship of the earth, Alyosha’s experience is immediately glossed with another quotation from Zosima’s teachings, echoing in Alyosha’s own mind: “Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears.” (BK 378) The narrator himself asks what, exactly, Alyosha was weeping over. The answer is complex. Firstly, he is weeping over the stars, these lights that, as we have just seen, gave him a sense of connectedness to other worlds. That is to say that, contrary to the promptings of the ego-self, he is not alone in the universe. But, secondly, his tears are related to forgiveness: “He longed to forgive everyone and for everything and to beg forgiveness. Oh, not for himself but for all men,

for all and for everything." (BK 379) This too reminds readers of an earlier visionary moment, related by Zosima, concerning his own brother, Markel. Markel, a student, is dying and, in the last days of his life, is converted from his previous atheism to a vision of divine love and beauty. We see him shedding "tears of joy," as he explains to his mother:

it's for joy, not for grief I am crying. Though I can't explain it to you, I like to humble myself before them [God's creatures], for I don't know how to love them enough. If I have sinned against everyone, yet all forgive me too, and that's heaven. Am I not in heaven now?

(BK 298)

And this, in turn is the concrete expression of the view he has arrived at in these last days of his life that "everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything" (BK 297), words that will reverberate in Alyosha's own visionary thoughts. As Alyosha lies, weeping, on the ground, "something," "some idea" or even "someone" enters or visits his soul – and, the narrator adds, "it was for all his life and for ever and ever": "He had fallen on the earth a weak boy, but he rose up a resolute champion, and he knew it and felt it suddenly at the very moment of his ecstasy." (BK 379) Alyosha's tears are not just indicative of his openness to the vast, boundless cosmos (as the start of the passage emphasizes), but his readiness for forgiving and being forgiven, surrendering the rights of the ego to the claim of others and, perhaps, of 'the Other,' the "someone" who visited his soul in that ecstasy.

Strikingly, it is at the end of the chapter in which this experience is narrated that we are told that "within three days he left the monastery in accordance with the words of his elder, who had bidden him 'sojourn in the world.'" (BK 379) Where, for Isaac, tears are precisely an initiation into the monastic life and characterize the continuation of that life, Alyosha's tears mark his passage from the monastery to the world. But what is revealed in his tears is that so far from being an abandonment of the moral ideal of the monastic life he is attempting to carry that ideal – a life of ego-less forgiveness and openness to others – out into the world. The whole passage is, once more, an enactment of another of Zosima's teachings, coming at the end of a discourse on not judging our fellow creatures, in which the Elder says:

Love to throw yourself on the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth and love it with an unceasing, consuming love. Love all men, love everything. Seek that rapture and ecstasy. Water the earth with the tears of your joy and

love those tears. Don't be ashamed of that ecstasy, prize it, for it is a gift of God and a great one; it is not given to many but only to the elect.

(BK 336)

The earth is not the object of Alyosha's devotion so much as the common ground on which human solidarity is, literally, grounded and out of which common humanity springs. In giving himself to the earth, Alyosha therefore symbolically and effectively opens himself to the possibility of unlimited love for all humanity. Thus this passage focuses the novel's motto – strangely omitted in the Garnett translation and bizarrely hidden in the bibliographical detail of the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation – from John's gospel, chapter 12, verse 24. It consists of Jesus's words: "Verily, verily, I say unto 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." In the imagery of the gospels, this has further associations with the seed of the gospel teaching that, when sown in good ground, grows to bear fruit "a hundredfold," and, as Jesus explains in Mark's gospel, the seed is "the word of God" (Mark 4:1-20), which, for John, is Christ himself, the Word Incarnate (John 1:1-18). Christ's death, burial, and resurrection is thus the ultimate pattern for each act of authentic self-surrender and rebirth and in Alyosha's fall and rise, it is just this pattern that we see. Where the ground is good and well-prepared, as in the case of Alyosha, tears serve as life-giving water, nourishing the spirit and word of life, so that it can grow and bear fruit.

III

Yet Dostoevsky himself was certainly aware that, like much else in his novels, such experiences are potentially ambiguous, and that there are dangers as well as rewards in ecstatic self-abandonment. This emerges clearly in *The Possessed*, which gives several examples of what we might call pathological tears. One extreme case is presented in a conversation between Shatov (sometimes seen as a character especially close to Dostoevsky himself) and the schizophrenically deranged Marya Timofyevna Lebyadkin. Marya Timofyevna has fallen in love with and been secretly married to Nicolai Stavrogin, a Satanic figure whose boredom with life and contempt for others lead him to commit a series of crimes, including the rape of a twelve-year old girl. Marya Timofyevna lives with her alcoholic brother, who beats her physically and uses her to blackmail Stavrogin. She is, in short, the epitome of those whom Dostoevsky elsewhere calls "the insulted and the injured." We are introduced to her, sitting alone in their kitchen, telling her fortune with cards, which, it seems, is how she spends most of her time,

when not staring vacantly into space. The narrator, who accompanies Shatov, tells us that

At some time, perhaps in early youth, that wasted face may have been pretty; but her soft, gentle grey eyes were remarkable even now. There was something dreamy and sincere in her gentle, almost joyful expression [...]. Strange to say, instead of the oppressive repulsion and almost dread one usually feels in the presence of these creatures afflicted by God, I felt it almost pleasant to look at her from the first moment, and my heart was filled afterwards with pity in which there was no trace of aversion.¹³

In an earlier phase of her life, Marya Timofevnya had been sent to live in a convent, and she tells her guests about “the Mother Lizaveta the Blessed,” an ascetic who lived

enshrined in the nunnery wall, in a cage seven feet long and five feet high, and she had been sitting there for seventeen years in nothing but a hempen shift, summer and winter, and she always kept pecking at the hempen cloth with a straw or a twig of some sort, and she never said a word, and never combed her hair, or washed, for seventeen years.

(P 129)

Also, at that time, another old woman who was living in the convent, a penitent, who was being punished for prophesying the future, told Marya Timofyevna

that the mother of God is the great mother – the damp earth, and therein lies great joy for men. And every earthly woe and every earthly tear is a joy for us; and when you water the earth with your tears a foot deep, you will rejoice at everything at once, and your sorrow will be no more, such is the prophecy. That word sank into my heart at that time. Since then when I bow down to the ground at my prayers, I’ve taken to kissing the earth. I kiss it and weep. And let me tell you [...] there’s no harm in those tears; and even if one has no grief, one’s tears flow from joy.

(P 130)

¹³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1946) 127. Subsequent page references marked *P* are in parentheses in the text.

Yet, if we have not been put on alert by the strange atmosphere of the convent and its resident holy ascetic “mother” Lizaveta, or by the curious and overly scrupulous emphasis on the tears needing to go “a foot deep” (the sort of detail alien to the open and expansive teaching of Zosima), the afflicted nature of Marya Timofeyevna’s religiosity comes to the fore in the continuation of her story. She describes how she used to go up a mountain in the vicinity of the convent, and fall to the ground, facing east, and stay there, weeping, till sunset. Then, getting up, she would see the shadow cast by the mountain over the lake,

and suddenly all would be darkness. And then I used to be quite miserable, suddenly I used to remember, I’m afraid of the dark, Shatushka. And what I wept for most was my baby [...]. I took him away through the forest, and I was afraid of the forest, and I was frightened, and what I weep for most is that I had a baby and I never had a husband.

(P 130)

Yet, as Shatov shortly afterwards suggests, the “baby” she believes she has drowned is a hysterical false memory, and, in this false memory, we are given a glimpse into the terrible abyss of misery concealed behind Marya Timofeyevna’s quiet grey eyes. Far from her outpourings of tears being able to empty that abyss, they are rather a sign of how hopelessly she is lost in it. She weeps neither for sins committed nor for the joy of forgiveness and restitution, but for a life she never had and never can have. For those who have never achieved a sense of self in the first place, the surrender of self that is manifest in genuine tears of repentance and forgiveness is a dangerous stratagem, and something quite different from what we see in the strengthening and life-affirming tears of Alyosha and his teacher. Rather than expressing a self willing to plunge selflessly into life, Marya Timofeyevna’s tears express her exclusion from life. Violently mistreated by her brother, ignored by her legal husband Stavrogin, and fated to be murdered by the escaped convict Fedka, she drifts in a wretched fog of confused memories and illusions, unable to distinguish reality from dream. This is not the pattern of the seed sown in good ground, dying, and rising up to bear fruit “a hundredfold.” It is the image of a self that has been terribly and dreadfully annihilated.

The ambiguity of tears is also explored in *The Possessed* through the character of Stepan Trofimovitch Verhovensky. The novel opens with a resumé of Stepan Trofimovitch’s career, towards the end of which we are told that, with regard to making up his mind whether to propose marriage to his long-standing patron, Varvara Petrovna Stavrogin (mother of Nicolai, Marya Lebyatkin’s husband),

"he positively shed tears of indecision once or twice (he wept not infrequently)." (P 11) As the novel progresses we are given plenty of evidence of this trait. When Mme Stavrogin proposes that he should marry her ward, Shatov's sister Darya, he sends for his confidant, the anonymous narrator of the novel. "He cried, of course, talked well and talked a great deal, made a casual pun, and was much pleased with it." (P 67) Later, after having recounted to the narrator the story of a police raid and his fears of being arrested and sent to Siberia "he suddenly broke into bitter weepings. His tears positively streamed. He covered his face with his red silk handkerchief and sobbed, sobbed convulsively for five minutes." (P 389)

But who is Stepan Trofimovitch? As the narrator continues "This was the man who had been a prophet among us for twenty years, a leader, a patriarch, the Kukolnik who had borne himself so loftily and majestically before all of us, before whom we bowed down with genuine reverence, feeling proud of doing so [...]" (P 389). More precisely, he is a representative of the mid-nineteenth century Russian type of "the superfluous man," whose gifts and abilities were unable to find expression in any concrete or tangible work. In the remote provincial town where the action is set, he has carefully built up a reputation as a former university professor who had to leave the capital and come into a kind of internal exile for his political liberalism. Perhaps, he lets his associates believe, he is still under surveillance. Being tutor to Mme Stavrogin's son Nicolai has been his only 'work' in the twenty years and, since Nicolai left home some years before, he has been effectively kept in self-indulgent idleness by Mme Stavrogin. Although he is owner of a small estate, he has squandered the revenues that should have been held in trust for his son, the product of a brief marriage and whom he has scarcely seen since the boy's early childhood. An expositor – in vague, general terms – of Schillerian ideals, Stepan Trofimovitch has constructed an image as a great intellectual and victim of Russia's political repression in the years of Nicholas I. But although there may be a grain of truth in one or other of his fantasies, his 'image' is essentially fake – and, when his son, Pyotr, an associate of Stavrogin's and a nihilistic conspirator, arrives in town, the masks are one by one torn off. Perhaps, then, his vulnerability to tears is indicative, in this case, of the instability of the self he has constructed and he weeps in order to stop this fragile fantasy self from being swept away entirely. Tears remain his one pledge – to himself and to others – that his life and its various intrigues and experiences are really meaningful.

Yet Stepan Trofimovitch appears to undergo a kind of regeneration. In a climactic scene he stands up to speak at a local literary festival, following on from a badly received speech by the writer Karmazinov (generally seen as a rather malevolent caricature by Dostoevsky of his literary rival Turgenev). He begins by denouncing

the politically subversive leaflets distributed by his own son's revolutionary cell (whose supporters have surreptitiously infiltrated the audience). Instead of their rational materialist egoism, he offers a restatement of the idealism of the 1840s. "The whole difficulty," he declares, "lies in the question which is more beautiful, Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum?" (P 439) To which he gives the expected answer:

I maintain that Shakespeare and Raphael are more precious than the emancipation of the serfs, more precious than Nationalism, more precious than Socialism, more precious than the young generation, more precious than chemistry, more precious than almost all humanity because they are the fruit of all humanity and perhaps the highest fruit that can be. A form of beauty is already attained, but for the attaining of which I would not perhaps consent to live...

(P 439)

As the nihilists in the audience started to jeer, "he burst into hysterical sobs. He wiped away his dropping tears with his fingers. His shoulders and breast were heaving with sobs. He was lost to everything in the world" (P 440). But perhaps these are no longer Stepan Trofimovitch's customary self-regarding crocodile tears. Perhaps, now, weeping not for himself but for the world's becoming alienated from ideals of beauty, he evinces a concern that is more than the concern invested in maintaining the façade of his phony identity. Going home, he refuses to receive his confidant, declaring through the door that all is over. Later he sets out to leave home, to undertake a vagabond life, living amongst the people and searching for the genuine Russia – even though he is a man of the most pampered tastes and comforts. As he is leaving, he encounters Liza, another woman who has let herself be seduced by Stavrogin and frustrated in her desire to marry him by his apparent indifference, as well as his marriage to Marya Timofyevna. Liza is herself in an overemotional state, having spent the night with Stavrogin, only subsequently to renounce him forever and now rushing to see the scene where, she has been told, Marya Timofyevna has been murdered – perhaps because of her. Suddenly she sees Stepan Trofimovich approaching with his travelling gear – a stick, an umbrella, and a bag.

"Lise," cried Stepan Trofimovitch, rushing to her almost in delirium too. "Chère, chère . . . Can you be out too . . . in such a fog? You see the glow of fire. *Vous êtes malheureuse, n'est-ce pas?* I see, I see. Don't tell me, but don't question me either. *Nous sommes tous malheureux, mais il faut les pardonner*

tous. Pardonnons, Lise, and let us be free for ever. To be quit of the world and completely free. Il faut pardonner, pardonner, et pardonner!"

"But why are you kneeling down?"

"Because, taking leave of the world, I want to take leave of all my past in your person!" He wept and raised both her hands to his tear-stained eyes. "I kneel to all that was beautiful in my life. I kiss and give thanks! Now I've torn myself in half: left behind a mad visionary who dreamed of soaring to the sky. Vingt-deux ans here. A shattered frozen old man. A tutor chez ce marchand, s'il existe pourtant ce marchand . . . But how drenched you are, Lise!" he cried, jumping on to his feet, feeling that his knees too were soaked by the wet earth. "And how is it possible . . . you are in such a dress . . . and on foot, and in these fields? . . . You are crying! Vous êtes malheureuse."

(P 488)

This passage painstakingly reveals the ambiguities of Stepan Trofimovitch's situation. He speaks of renunciation and forgiveness, so are these, then, the tears of repentance described and commended by Isaac? Yet he constantly slips into French (also addressing Liza by the French form of her name), a tendency used by Dostoevsky throughout the novel to highlight Stepan Trofimovitch's pretentiousness, which suggests that this is one more piece of play-acting, a new role to try out. For a moment he is observant also of Liza's suffering (he is normally rarely if ever aware of others' problems), but then, in the continuation of his speech, he reverts to his own needs. He kneels on the earth, but, unlike Alyosha, he is uncomfortable when he feels his knees being soaked by its wetness.

As his journey continues, he encounters a bible-seller, and resolves to travel with her, so that they may preach the gospel to the people together, even though he hasn't read it for ten years (and then, it turns out, it was not the Bible as such but only Renan's secular, and extremely sentimental, life of Jesus). Again, the conversations with the bible-seller are generously laced with French, although she is not of the class that could be presumed to understand it. However, the upheavals he has been through take their toll. He falls fatally ill, and it is while he is ill that, at his request, the bible-seller reads the story of the swine into which Jesus cast the demons of the possessed man, causing them to run wild and throw themselves into the lake (Luke 8:32-35). It is this story that gives the book its title and, implicitly, gives the clearest statement of its ideological message: the devils infesting the possessed persona of Russia itself are

we, we and those . . . and Petrusha [his son, Pyotr] 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.

(P 596)

On his death bed, this penitent ‘demon’ receives the sacrament and makes a profession of faith in God and immortal life – although, even here, the narrator drily registers a doubt as to “[w]hether 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” (P 603).

Stepan Trofimovitch’s many tears, then, are potentially susceptible to a range of interpretations. As I have suggested, they may indicate the fragility of his projected ego, but this very fragility may also point to the possibility that he might repent, might renounce his former life and lies, and give himself over to faith in forgiveness and eternal life. Yet Dostoevsky keeps the uncertainty in play right up to the end. We can never really penetrate through the veil of Stepan Trofimovitch’s tears to the man himself.

A very different character is the escaped convict Fedka, Marya Timofyevna’s murderer. He is a tough and brutal man of the people, without breeding or learning. As well as a hired murderer, he is also an iconoclast, having taken part in robbing the pearls from a much-venerated local icon of the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless when Pyotr Stepanovitch sarcastically comments on Fedka’s denunciation of Pyotr’s atheism by alluding to the theft, the killer responds with what we might call an apology for the kind of faith that Dostoevsky himself had observed amongst some of his fellow convicts in Siberia:

D’you see Pyotr Stepanovitch, I tell you truly that I have stripped the ikons, but I only took out the pearls; and how do you know? Perhaps my own tear was transformed into a pearl in the furnace of the Most High to make up for my sufferings, seeing I am just that very orphan, having no daily refuge. Do you know from the books that once, in ancient times, a merchant with just such tearful sighs and prayers stole a pearl from the halo of the Mother of God, and afterwards, in the face of all the people, laid the whole price of it at her feet, and the Holy Mother sheltered him with her mantle before all the people...

(P 509)

This is the faith of those, who, though guilty of sometimes heinous crimes, are as they are as a result of brutal and dehumanizing conditions and a complete lack of human rights and dignity. Not only Dostoevsky, but popular usage, described the prisoners as “the unfortunates,” and it was socially acceptable to express pity for them as well as horror and revulsion at their crimes.¹⁴ Fedka may have done terrible things, but he remains capable of tears – entirely alien to Stepan Trofimovitch’s nihilistic son – and because he remains capable of tears, his tear, as he says, may be transformed into a pearl and be accepted by the Mother of God, effectively the symbol of divine mercy and compassion in Dostoevsky’s religious world. Though they can deceive, tears remain for Dostoevsky, as for his spiritual sources, a pledge of a human being’s capacity for being saved and a testimony against the increasingly dominant rational egoism of his day.

IV

And there is one more kind of weeping that should briefly – perhaps too briefly, given its importance in Dostoevsky’s work – be mentioned: the weeping of sufferers, weeping that cries out for justice. In the chapter Rebellion in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov lists a series of atrocities and crimes that, to his view, demonstrate the irredeemable injustice that characterizes human life on earth, injustice so great that even a final heavenly harmony cannot recompense for it. The climax of his account is a story (actually taken by Dostoevsky from a contemporary press account) of a five-year old child beaten, locked up in the privy, and smeared with excrement, for having wet the bed. This is how Ivan presents his case:

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 why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he would 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.”

(BK 248)

¹⁴ See, for instance, F.M. Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, trans. Costance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1915) 18.

Such a child's tears are different from those of the monk sorrowing over his sins, since the child, as Ivan goes on to assert, has not eaten the apple in the way that adults all have. A similar sentiment is expressed by his otherwise very different brother, Dmitri. Where Ivan is the aloof, doubt-ridden intellectual, Dmitri is a brawling, drinking, womanizing soldier, but, after his arrest on suspicion of the murder of their father, he has a powerful and transformative dream. In his dream he sees a village in the steppe that has been half-burned down. Women line the streets, sickly and pale. One is

A tall, bony woman, who looked forty but might have been only twenty, with a long thin face. And in her arms was a little baby crying. And her breasts seemed so dried up that there was not a drop of milk in them. And the child cried and cried, and held out its little bare arms, with its little fists blue from cold.

"Why are they crying? Why are they crying?" Mitya asked [his cart-driver], as they dashed gaily by.

"It's the babe," answered the driver, "the babe's weeping."

And Mitya was struck by his saying, in his peasant way, "the babe." There seemed more pity in it.

(BK 536)

And Mitya himself

felt that a passion of pity, such as he had never known before, was rising in his heart, that he wanted to cry, that he wanted to do something for them all, so that the babe should weep no more, so that the dark-faced, dried-up mother should not weep, that not one should shed tears again from that moment, and he wanted to do it at once, at once, regardless of obstacles, with all the recklessness of the Karamazovs.

(BK 537)

Tears, here, then, are the tears of extreme sufferers, the innocent, or those whose suffering is disproportionate to any possible guilt, and they are also tears that cry out for justice and, even more profoundly, for pity and mercy. Such tears – both those of the sufferers and those who cry out for them ('hungering and thirsting for righteousness,' we might say) are the bonds that bind us to the common human task. And even Dmitri, despite – or perhaps because of – his sensuous Karamazov nature, is not beyond the reach of such tears. His dream therefore proves to be a decisive moment in the beginning of his regeneration.

V

I am not aware of any discussion in the vast secondary literature on Dostoevsky that expressly thematizes tears as a topic worth addressing in its own right. This essay has limited itself to only two of Dostoevsky's major novels and has perhaps not even done justice to his rich exploration of the meaning of tears in them. Nevertheless, I hope that I have offered enough to show that Dostoevsky uses his characters' tears in subtle and complex ways to show both key elements of their personalities and, especially, to reveal the nature of their God-relationship. An examination of other novels and short stories would surely extend and deepen this account, but would also confirm the basic argument offered here, namely, that tears are not merely a means by which Dostoevsky heightens the emotional drama of his novels but reveal the struggle at the heart of his fiction: how to be the selves that we are, and how to give ourselves away in unconditional forgiving love to God and to others.

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